



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of  
Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2372

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### **CORONAVIRUS IMPACTS SIBERIA...**

The spread of the novel coronavirus across the globe has brought it to Russia, facilitated by the country's common border with China, which measures over 2,500-miles in length. In the weeks since Russia first detected the disease in two Chinese nationals residing along the border, significant steps have been taken by the Russian government to minimize the spread of the virus. Among them, the entire Sino-Russian border has been closed and visa-free travel between the two countries has been halted for the moment. Additionally, direct flights from northern China to Siberian cities have been cancelled, forcing the limited travelers who are able to still enter Russia to transit via either Moscow or South Korea. The economic consequences, however, are projected to be steep, because China represents Russia's largest trading partner. This can already be felt in places like the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk, where the prices for produce and other goods that would normally come over the border have skyrocketed. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 27, 2020)

### **...AND MOSCOW**

The Russian capital, meanwhile, is experiencing a surge of xenophobia in response to the spread of the virus. Moscow city authorities have been utilizing tools normally reserved for cracking down on political dissidents, including police raids and facial recognition, to identify and track Chinese nationals. Chinese are being stopped and questioned regarding their health levels, quarantine status, and purpose for being in Russia while trying to ride the Moscow Metro. Tram and bus drivers have been instructed to do the same. Even Chinese workers with legal residency in Russia have been targeted; police reportedly told a group of Chinese workers to wear masks and quarantine themselves for fourteen days due simply to their country of origin. Human rights groups have opposed the moves as an attack on privacy that has little effect on stopping the spread of the disease. (Associated Press, February 21, 2020)

### **RUSSIANS CHARGED IN BULGARIAN POISONING**

In Sofia, the Bulgarian prosecutor's office has charged three Russian nationals believed to have perpetrated the 2015 attempted poisoning of Emilian Gebrev, a powerful Bulgarian arms dealer. Named in the complaint were Sergei Fedotov, Sergei Pavlov and Georgi Gorshkov, three suspected members of Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU. Moscow has not confirmed the identities of any of the men, and denies any involvement in the attack. However, Sergei Fedotov is believed to be the alias of Denis Sergeev, a known GRU official who is believed to have been involved in the 2018 Salisbury poisoning of Sergei Skripal, the Russian double-agent living in the UK. In October of 2019, Bulgaria expelled three Russian diplomats suspected of espionage as a belated response to the Skripal poisoning. (London *Guardian*, February 21, 2020)

### **MEXICAN SCIENTIST SWEEPED UP IN RUSSIAN SPY GAME**

Hector Cabrera Fuentes, a Mexican microbiologist and professor, was detained by the FBI in Miami as he was trying to leave the country. He had reportedly been attempting to obtain information on an unnamed U.S. government informant living in the United States on behalf of the Kremlin, and was videotaped tailgating a vehicle through a security gate at a Miami-area apartment complex. Cabrera Fuentes' relationship with Russian security services seems to have begun when his Russian wife and two daughters were barred from leaving Russia on a recent trip - and the scientist was conscripted by Russian intelligence to carry out operations in the United States as a result. (Associated Press, February 21, 2020)

### **SERBIA BUYS RUSSIAN MISSILES**

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has publicly announced his government's decision to purchase six units of the Russian *Pantsir* S1 advanced missile system. President Putin is said to have personally advocated for the weapons sale in his meetings with the Serbian leader. But the step could end up being a costly one for Belgrade; the U.S. has threatened sanctions against Serbia for its decision, and action from Europe - where the Balkan country currently seeks membership - could also be forthcoming.

The decision eloquently underscores Belgrade's problematic geopolitical position. Despite its European aspirations, the country sees itself as a Russian ally; it has pledged never to join NATO, and has refused to sanction Russia over the annexation of Crimea. For their part, U.S. officials are uneasy with the prospect of a Russian-armed Serbia in close proximity to NATO allies in the region, such as Croatia, Albania, and Montenegro. (Associated Press, February 23, 2020)