



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Science and Technology; Russia

RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN AGAINST JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES EXPANDS TO BELARUS

Russia's campaign of persecution against Jehovah's Witnesses has spread to other countries, something made apparent by Belarus's recent detention of a member of the group at Moscow's request. Labelled an extremist group under Russian law back in 2017, Jehovah's Witnesses have reportedly endured raids, arrests, and other maltreatment for practicing a "banned religion." The 2017 law has led to over 300 people being charged or convicted to date, with others put on an interstate wanted list for arrest in other countries and extradition to Russia. Sentences for organizing or engaging in extremist activity carry prison terms of 6–10 years under Russian law. (Associated Press, March 5, 2020)

MOSCOW STREETS SWELL WITH PROTESTORS (AGAIN)

Demonstrators gathered in Moscow and other Russian cities at the end of February to commemorate a key anniversary and protest recent developments across the country. The time period marked the five-year anniversary of the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, the former Prime Minister and opposition politician who was gunned down on a Moscow bridge in 2015. Family and supporters to this day do not believe the true perpetrators of the murder were ever brought to justice. Demonstrators also used the occasion to express their disapproval of Russian President Vladimir Putin's proposed constitutional changes, which many view as a ploy to keep him in power beyond his scheduled 2024 departure from office. Lastly, people showed their support for members of an antifascist group who had recently been sentenced to prison terms ranging from 6 to 18 years for what authorities are describing as the organization of terrorist plots - something their supporters say is politically motivated. (*The Moscow Times*, February 29, 2020)

MOSCOW'S HIGH-TECH DETERRENCE

Russian President Vladimir Putin used a recent interview with state news agency TASS to lay out his outlook for the Russian military - whose future, the Russian leader said, lies in the exploitation of increasingly advanced technology. According to Putin, one of the key pillars of the country's contemporary deterrence posture is its recent development of hypersonic weapons. Additionally, although the Russian military has shrunk slightly - from 1.3 million men under arms in the year 2000 to just over a million today - this constriction has been compensated for by the rise and availability of advanced military equipment in recent years, Putin said. (Itar-TASS, March 2, 2020)

BEHIND THE KREMLIN'S PLAN TO POPULATE THE RUSSIAN ARCTIC

Even as the world becomes more and more concerned about the effects of climate change on the Arctic, the Kremlin is actively trying to lure citizens to its northern latitudes with promises of cash payments. The initiative, formally unveiled by President Putin in recent days, lays out a 15-year-plan to stimulate the economy of one of Russia's most underdeveloped regions. It involves, among other things, rejuvenating the northern territory's economic vitality and population base by providing payouts to citizens who resettle there. Under the plan, these grants will be mirrored by major federal investments in energy, infrastructure and technology in the region as a way of capitalizing on its growing accessibility. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 6, 2020)

NAVALNY ORG FINED AS FOREIGN AGENT

The pressure campaign against Alexei Navalny, the current face of the Russian political opposition and former political candidate, entered a new phase this month when his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) was targeted by authorities for failing to register as a "foreign agent" under Russian law. The designation came with a fine of \$7,500, courtesy of a Moscow court. The first iteration of the "Foreign Agent" law was passed in 2012. It stipulates that all NGOs operating in Russia that receive funding from foreign sources must disclose the information and register with the state. In 2019, the law was amended to expand the designation to reporters who work for organizations identified under the law. They, too, must now register as foreign agents on an individual basis. Despite Navalny's repeated denials of ever receiving foreign funding, FBK was declared a foreign agent in October of 2019. In the months since, the organization's attempts to appeal the designation have not been successful. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 5, 2020)

HOARDING HITS RUSSIA

Fears of global pandemic can be seen on the shelves of Russian supermarkets and grocery stores, as COVID-19 drives people to stock up on supplies for an increasingly uncertain future. The demand for sanitation products like wipes and toilet paper is up over 160% compared to comparable figures from last year. Similarly, the demand for nonperishable items, such as canned foods and pasta, has increased on average by 60%. Retailers, however, remain largely in denial; companies such as Auchin and Lenta attribute their depleted stocks to recent holiday spree associated with International Women's Day and Defender of the Fatherland Day, both of which occurred within the past few weeks. Tellingly, however, soaring demand for facemasks - and a resulting shortage of available product - prompted the Russian government to ban their export from the country at the beginning of March. (*The Moscow Times*, March 11, 2020)