



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2382

April 27, 2020 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

**Related Categories:** Arms Control and Proliferation; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Global Health; Middle East ; Russia

### **RUSSIANS HOARDING CASH DURING PANDEMIC**

Fear over bank accessibility during quarantine has resulted in a rush to withdraw and hoard cash from ATMs across Russia. Over \$13.6 billion has been dispensed since the beginning of March, matching the grand total withdrawn in all of 2019. The push coincides with President Vladimir Putin's announcement of social-distancing efforts that have effectively shuttered the national economy and kept people indoors under penalty of a fine. Russian authorities have urged citizens to utilize cashless transactions for the duration of the pandemic in order to reduce the spread of coronavirus via paper bills. (*Newsweek*, April 19, 2020)

### **NEW NUCLEAR TALKS COMMENCE**

Negotiations between the U.S. Department of State and the Russian Foreign Ministry over the extension of the New START treaty are now underway. The treaty, signed in 2010 by then-presidents Barack Obama and Dmitri Medvedev, places a cap on the signatories' stockpiles of warheads, missiles, and bombers. With the treaty set to expire in February of 2021, Russia is pushing for its extension, and simultaneously negotiating for its newest generation of weapons, including the hypersonic *Avangard* missile, to be included under any renewal. Russia designed the *Avangard* and other next generation weapons as a response to U.S. advances in missile defense and space tech, which the Kremlin views as threats to its global standing. The Trump administration is still evaluating whether it wants to extend the deal, but President Trump has made it clear he wants any future or extended agreement to be expanded to include China as a signatory. (Associated Press, April 17, 2020)

### **SYRIA AS MILITARY LABORATORY**

The Russian military's newest tank, the T-14 *Armata*, arrived in Syria this month for field testing, the country's top trade official has said. Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov disclosed the information in a recent interview on Russia's state-owned *Rossiya-1* channel. The T-14 is the newest installment in the T-series of Russian tanks, which includes the T-34 model used by the Red Army in World War II. Production of the armored vehicle was hampered by high costs in recent years, but the tank is now seeing action in support of the regime of Russian ally Bashar al-Assad. Nor is the T-14 the only piece of military hardware being tested by Russia in Syria; tracked vehicles, cruise missiles, and aircraft have all been deployed in defense of the Assad regime over the past couple of years. (*The Drive*, April 20, 2020)

### **A SYMPATHETIC VOICE AT VEDOMOSTI**

Andrei Sharov, the interim Editor-in-Chief of Russian newspaper *Vedomosti*, has emerged as a Putin ally since assuming his position this March. Journalists at the outlet have reported that Shmarov threatened employees with expulsion if they write stories critical of the President's proposed constitutional changes. Additionally, journalists at the paper have been barred from using data from the Levada Center, Russia's only independent polling agency, in any of their stories. Shmarov has gone further as well, removing a story critical of Igor Sechin, the CEO of ROSNEFT and key Kremlin ally, last month. According to accounts from journalists employed by the newspaper, Shmarov has framed self-censorship as necessary to ensure the print outlet's survival. (*The Moscow Times*, April 21, 2020)

### **A RUSSIAN DEMONSTRATION AGAINST THE LOCKDOWN**

Singer and activist Vadim Cheldiev was fined and jailed in the southern region of North Ossetia for organizing an anti-lockdown demonstration in the Russian republic. Cheldiev's stated goals were political; he and his group demanded the resignation of local and regional politicians, in addition to the reopening of the region's economy. He also warned that the coronavirus crisis is being used by state authorities to tighten their grip over the Russian citizenry. Cheldiev has been officially charged with misleading the public with false information. He is also reportedly being investigated for violence on the part of his group, a claim the jailed activist and his lawyer both refute. (Reuters, April 21, 2020)

## **FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE MOTHERLAND**

Reports of medical supply and hospital bed shortages in Russia have residents increasingly questioning the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Opposition politician Aleksei Navalny and others have publicly chastised President Putin for his decision to deliver masks and other equipment to the U.S. and Italy while Russian doctors find themselves with little protection in hospitals at home. Private groups such as the Alliance of Doctors have been fundraising independently to ensure hospitals stay stocked with essentials. Others have criticized the president's lack of a coherent strategy or ability to reassure the public. Russia's head of state has only addressed the public on the matter twice so far, and has cut down on his public appearances. The growing discontent is visible in recent polling conducted by the independent Levada Center last month, which found Putin's approval rating at 63% - down from 69% in February. (*Fox News*, April 22, 2020)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Given the effect of Russia's increasingly authoritarian political climate on pollsters and respondents alike, the results of public opinion surveys in Russia should be viewed with some caution.]