



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2383

May 1, 2020 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

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### VICTORY DAY PARADE DEFERRED

Moscow's 75th annual Victory Day parade, the Red Square commemoration of the defeat of Nazi Germany, has been called off due to coronavirus fears. After much deliberation, President Vladimir Putin finally made the decision to postpone the event, which occurs every year on May 9th, for an unspecified period while developments relating to the pandemic unfold in the Russian capital. Until the decision, an estimated 15,000 soldiers had been rehearsing for the event in a field outside Moscow at a time when public gatherings were restricted to a maximum of 50 people. All troops were subsequently returned to their bases to serve 15-day quarantine periods, although no cases among them have yet been reported. (London *Guardian*, April 20, 2020)

### PROVOCATION IN THE BALTICS

The airspace over the Baltic Sea got tense as a pair of Russian fighter jets needed to be intercepted by a Belgian-operated F-16 when they were spotted flying over the *USS Donald Cook* destroyer. The Belgian F-16, the American vessel, and its companion, a Romanian frigate named the *Regina Maria*, are all representatives of NATO's continued maritime military presence off the coast of the three Baltic republics. The incident was the latest provocation in what has been a busy month; earlier in April, a U.S. Navy aircraft was buzzed by a Russian Su-35 fighter while flying over the Mediterranean, and two Russian IL-38 patrol aircraft were spotted flying over the Bering Sea near Alaskan airspace. (*Business Insider*, April 20, 2020)

### COVID DISINFO BEING COORDINATED, SAYS EU

European media monitors have concluded that a "convergence of disinformation" around coronavirus is currently taking place between media narratives and propaganda produced by Russia, China, and Iran. The campaign appears to be two pronged – on the one hand blaming the virus' outbreak on a U.S. bioweapon, and on the other appealing to the international community for the lifting of sanctions. The EU had previously reported on the individual disinformation efforts being carried out by the three countries, but similarities in messaging has led experts to the conclusion that the narratives are being coordinated and multiplied by the group as a whole. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are some of the platforms being used to spread the disinformation. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 22, 2020)

### KREMLIN LOSING GROUND IN THE BALKANS

Russia's efforts to keep Balkan countries out of Europe's economic and security orbit hit a snag during the early months of 2020. Northern Macedonia became NATO's newest member at the end of March, increasing the bloc's presence in formerly Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, Russian gas giant GAZPROM was forced to cut fees charged to Bulgaria after the European Commission sided against the state-run energy firm in an antitrust ruling. Serbia and Kosovo, meanwhile, are set to hold talks in an effort to normalize their bilateral relations, potentially opening the door for EU membership for both countries. Each of these developments runs counter to Russia's goal of halting the expansion of European influence in its neighboring countries. (Institute for the Study of War, April 23, 2020)

### NEW MOSCOW MEGACHURCH LIONIZES PUTIN'S PEOPLE AND POLICIES

Completion of Russia's newest Orthodox megachurch, dedicated to the country's armed forces, is wrapping up in time for its planned opening on Victory Day. Publicity photos show the blending of old and new in the cathedral's many mosaics. Contemporary figures like President Putin, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov are prominently featured next to images of Josef Stalin, Georgy Zhukov, and precessions from the first Victory Day parade in 1945. Another mosaic features the phrase "OUR CRIMEA," a reference to Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian territory back in 2014. To date, \$41 million worth of donations has been collected to finance the cathedral's construction. (*The Moscow Times*, April 24, 2020)

## **MOSCOW'S EMBATTLED POLICE FORCE**

A recent interview with the Chairman of the Moscow Police Union has painted a grim picture of the conditions endured by the department tasked with keeping the Russian capital safe during the coronavirus crisis. According to his statements, Moscow police don't have adequate protective equipment, despite claims to the contrary from the Mayor's Office. Additionally, due to demands on staff, only those who fall ill will enter quarantine; individuals known to have been in contact with the sick, however, must work on, thereby risking the spread of the disease by asymptomatic carriers.

Meanwhile, although quarantine and isolation have led to rises in alcohol consumption and domestic violence in the city, officers have not been given arrest quotas and are encouraged to make as few arrests as possible while patrolling the streets. Lastly, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the governing body that oversees Russia's police forces, is not reporting coronavirus cases accurately, even though up to 30% of its staff are now ill with "acute respiratory infections." (*Meduza*, April 24, 2020)