



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2387

May 19, 2020 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

**Related Categories:** Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Resource Security; Global Health; Europe; Russia

### GRU TIED TO GERMAN HACK

New evidence has emerged regarding a 2015 cyber attack that crippled the German parliament and stole the personal data of Chancellor Angela Merkel. According to German press outlets, the country's counterintelligence authorities have determined that Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU, was responsible for the hack. Those same authorities believe the unit responsible to be the same one that also hacked email accounts associated with the Democratic Party in the United States during the 2016 election cycle, leaking party secrets to the public. (London *Guardian*, May 13, 2020)

### AEROFLOT GETS SPECIAL BAILOUT TREATMENT

Like those of other countries, Russia's airlines have experienced a dramatic decrease in traffic due to coronavirus travel restrictions, and now need to be bailed out by the state. Russian passenger traffic fell by 28% in the month of March as compared to previous years, and declined by a whopping 92% in April after heightened restrictions took effect in some of Russia's biggest cities.

But the Kremlin is now riding to the rescue. In total, just under \$320 million have been appropriated by the Russian government for airline bailouts, with nearly a third of the funds going to the Aeroflot Group. The parameters for the fund disbursements give special allotments to airlines that are at least 50% owned by the state and which transported 20 million or more people in 2019. Only Aeroflot Group fits these criteria, forcing Russia's other airlines to split the remaining funds. (Reuters, May 14, 2020)

### AMBULANCE WORKERS THREATEN HUNGER STRIKE

Poor working conditions, low pay and broken promises have driven Russian ambulance workers to the brink. One group working in the Western Siberian city of Kemerovo has threatened to begin a hunger strike in a video posted to YouTube. The group's demands are both practical and financial. In addition to being forced to reuse protective equipment due to shortages, few of its personnel have been paid their promised \$1,100 bonuses for working during the pandemic.

The Kemerovo group is hardly unique. In all, just \$57 million of the federally-allocated \$343 million for front-line workers has been paid out nationwide. Regional authorities, however, are toeing the Kremlin line; according to the Kemerovo regional government, for instance, those who have not received their bonuses thus far do not qualify for them because none of the patients they have transported ended up testing positive for the coronavirus. (*The Moscow Times*, May 15, 2020)

### RUSSIA'S CENSORS STRIKE BACK

Russia's Foreign Ministry has lashed out at reporting by the *Financial Times* and *New York Times* concerning the undercounting of coronavirus deaths in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, terming the articles to be fake news and demanding the outlets retract them. The broadside was issued despite the Moscow city health department's release of a statement that 60% of coronavirus deaths in the Russian capital have officially been attributed to other patient conditions that ultimately made them susceptible to the virus.

Additionally, ROSKOMNADZOR, Russia's state censor, has officially requested that tech giant Google block access to a news article published by Russian outlet *MBKh Media* that utilizes data and analysis from the same *Financial Times* article that has been targeted by the Foreign Ministry. According to *MBKh Media*, Google has complied with the request and has contacted the outlet to remove the article. (CBS News, May 15, 2020; *Voice of America*, May 15, 2020)

## **AMERICA ASSISTS BELARUS WITH ENERGY**

American oil is on its way to Belarus at a time when the former Soviet Republic is seeking greater energy independence from its larger Russian neighbor. The 80,000-ton shipment is arriving by sea, with the American vessel carrying the load expected to arrive in Lithuania next month, from where the crude will make its way to Belarus by rail. The delivery follows months of tensions between Minsk and Moscow, with President Alexander Lukashenko accusing the Russian government of leveraging energy shipments to force economic integration between the two countries. After negotiations broke down and Russian oil shipments mostly ceased in January, Belarus began shopping for alternative energy partners, buying oil from Norway, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, and now the United States. In the meantime, Minsk also reached a compromise deal with Moscow to resume oil shipments - albeit only at half the volume of previous years. (Associated Press, May 15, 2020)