



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2392

June 15, 2020 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor**

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### A NEW DISASTER IN NORILSK

The ecological and environmental problems in Norilsk, Russia's most polluted city, are being exacerbated by climate change. In late May, diesel fuel began leaking from tanks at a thermal fuel plant run by the Norilsk Nickel Mining Company. 20,000 tons of fuel are estimated to have seeped into the nearby Daldykan and Ambarnaya rivers, turning the water a shade of dark red that is so pronounced it can be seen from space. The leak began when pillars holding up the plant's fuel tanks began sinking into the ground. The entire city of Norilsk, located north of the Arctic Circle and built on permafrost, is seeing many of its structures sink into the soil as the region warms and the terrain changes due to climate change. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 3, 2020)

### PUTIN'S NUMBERS HIT NEW LOW

According to surveys conducted by the Levada Center polling agency, Russian President Vladimir Putin's public approval ratings have continued to decline. When asked to identify which politicians they trust the most, only one-quarter of respondents named Putin - three percent less than did in April. Twenty-eight percent of those polled also voiced their readiness to take part in protests over falling living standards, the highest such figure since November 2018, after Putin signed a controversial law raising the national retirement age. When combined with the 16 percent who said they mistrust all politicians, Levada concluded that "half of Russians either don't trust anyone or don't know who to trust at all." (*The Moscow Times*, June 1, 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.]

### RUSSIA STRENGTHENS ITS WESTERN FLANK

The Russian military is strengthening its forces and defense capabilities on its western border, near Europe. The move is being viewed as an official response to increased NATO activity in the region. According to Russia's Defense Ministry, the bloc has been engaging in military activity that displays "a distinct anti-Russian character," necessitating a buildup on the Russian side. Among the augmented units mobilized to defend western Russia is the "Separate Guard Motorized Rifle Sevastopol Red Banner Brigade," which was originally based on the Crimean Peninsula and is now charged with defending one of the twelve districts of Moscow. The brigade is armed and equipped with some of Russia's most advanced military technology, including BTR-82A armored transports, 9A34 *Strela-10* missile systems, and T-90 tanks, recently used by the Russian military in Syria. (TASS, June 5, 2020)

### PRAGUE PLOT A HOAX

Allegations of a Russian intelligence plot to assassinate the Mayor of Prague were fabricated to stir controversy, according to Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis. In April of this year, Czech magazine *Respekt* reported that a member of the Russian security services had entered the country with the intent of assassinating Mayor Zdenek Hrib with ricin. Hrib had run afoul of Moscow in recent months by renaming public areas near the Russian Embassy after slain dissidents Boris Nemtsov and Anna Politkovskaya, as well as by removing a statue to Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev. In response to the scandal, two Russian diplomats have been expelled from Prague, and Czech authorities are now expecting a tit-for-tat response from Moscow. (London *Guardian*, June 5, 2020)

### BACK TO THE NUCLEAR NEGOTIATING TABLE?

U.S. and Russian officials have agreed on a time and place to start nuclear arms negotiations anew in late June. Currently, the Trump administration is standing firm in its refusal to simply extend the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty, and instead hopes to strike a trilateral treaty with both Russia and China. Though Beijing has previously dismissed calls to participate in trilateral talks, Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea has stated that China has been invited to this month's discussions. Billingslea reiterated last month that it is the Administration's expectation that a future arms control agreement will be multilateral in nature, and that China will be part of a trilateral framework going forward. (*CNN*, June 8, 2020)