



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2394

June 23, 2020 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues

PUTIN FOLLOWS THROUGH ON PASSPORT PROMISE

President Vladimir Putin is making good on his promise to provide residents of Ukraine's self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples' Republics with Russian passports. Since announcing the move last year, some 180,000 Ukrainian citizens living in the restive Donbass region have applied for and received Russian passports, with an additional 98,000 set to receive theirs in coming weeks. The move is a contentious one, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has launched negotiations with Putin over the Donbass since coming into office. In Zelensky's view, the issuance of Russian passports to Ukrainian citizens is not only an obstacle to peace, but a possible precursor to further military aggression on the part of the Kremlin. (*Times of London*, June 11, 2020)

DONBASS COAL LAUNDERED IN RUSSIA

The recent decline in energy demand around the world has led to a fall in coal prices, threatening the illicit energy trade that keeps the separatist enclaves of Ukraine's Donbass region afloat. The Donbass is known for an efficient form of coal called anthracite, but the region has not been able to freely sell its resources to other countries since the start of separatist tendencies there. According to U.S. and European analyses, after being harvested from mines seized from Ukrainian companies, Donbass coal is sent east to Russia where it is marketed and traded as a Russian product, effectively laundering the resource. Ukrainian scientists can prove the coal's origin forensically, but that has not stopped Turkey, Poland, Belgium, and other countries from purchasing the commodity. In recent months, falling revenues have led to labor unrest in mining towns throughout the Donbass, as Russia accepts less and less anthracite due to the falling demand. (*Washington Post*, June 12, 2020)

VEDOMOSTI EDITORS QUIT IN PROTEST

In another blow to press freedom in Russia, five deputy editors of *Vedomosti*, a financial newspaper known for its journalistic independence, have announced their departure over growing Kremlin influence over the publication's work. Tensions began in March of this year when, during the sale of the publication, then-owner Demyan Kudryavtsev appointed Andrei Shmarov - the founder of the Kremlin-linked *Expert* magazine - as acting editor-in-chief over an internal candidate who enjoyed wide support among the staff. In the weeks since Shmarov's appointment, newspaper staff have reported restrictions on covering negative press related to state-run oil company ROSNEFT and declining opinion polls of President Putin. (*The Moscow Times*, June 15, 2020)

NEW CONSTITUTION HITS SHELVES BEFORE VOTE

Although the vote over Russia's amended constitution won't take place until July 1st, Russian bookstores have already begun selling official copies of the yet-to-be-passed law. The proposed constitutional amendments, in addition to adding social guarantees to Russia's basic law, would reset Putin's four previous terms as president, allowing him two additional six-year terms from 2024-2036. Public polls have indicated that close to a majority of Russians plan to vote in favor of the amendments. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has minimized news of the preemptive sales, saying: "I don't see anything that's a big deal here, especially since it clearly states that [the amended Constitution] comes into force only after a vote. We need to publish what people will be voting for." (*The Moscow Times*, June 16, 2020)

LEADING ARCTIC RESEARCHER CHARGED WITH TREASON

New details have emerged in the case of Valery Mitko, President of the St. Petersburg Arctic Social Sciences Academy and lead Arctic researcher, who was charged with treason and put under house arrest in February of 2020. Investigators allege that Mitko provided a document containing state secrets to Chinese intelligence in early 2018 at China's Dalian Maritime University, where he was a visiting professor. The document in question dealt with hydroacoustics, the study of sound in water commonly applied in underwater navigation, communications and monitoring submarine activity. For his part, Mitko has denied any wrongdoing and maintains that all information brought from Russia to China for his lectures was openly available.

The spying allegations highlight the burgeoning competition taking place between China and Russia in the Arctic. China has proclaimed itself "a near-Arctic state" and significantly stepped up efforts to increase its presence there. Moscow and Beijing have built a strategic partnership in the Arctic amid rising tensions with the West, but Russia has been careful about engaging in military cooperation with the PRC in that area. (*CNN*, June 17, 2020)

