



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2396

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### NUCLEAR NEGOTIATORS MEET IN AUSTRIA

U.S. and Russian negotiators are meeting in Vienna in an attempt to renegotiate a successor to the NEW START nuclear treaty, which is set to expire early next year. NEW START, signed in 2010 by President Obama and then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, capped American and Russian nuclear arsenals at 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads apiece, requiring cuts from both sides. This most recent round of negotiations comes at a time when President Trump has signaled his impatience with Russia, recently withdrawing the U.S. from the Open Skies Treaty on mutual surveillance. President Trump has also insisted that China participate in the talks, but Beijing has so far declined, claiming that it is not yet ready for disarmament negotiations. (*Voice of America*, June 22, 2020)

### FRONTLINE DOCTORS ORDERED TO VOTE

Russian health workers treating coronavirus patients say they are being pressured by their superiors to vote in an upcoming referendum on constitutional amendments that would allow President Vladimir Putin to stay in power through 2036. A doctor at the Syktivkar Republic Infectious Diseases hospital said that staff were called in for a meeting where it was "made clear" that voting was "obligatory." In Vladivostok, medical personnel are being urged via text messages sent through WhatsApp to sign up for early voting. Others in the Arkhangelsk region near the Arctic and the Urals region of Chelyabinsk said their management is also placing pressure on them to vote. Though Russian law forbids companies from actively mobilizing employees to vote, the Kremlin has asked at least three major private Russian companies to distribute internal information campaigns to boost turnout in the nationwide poll on constitutional reforms. (*The Moscow Times*, June 23, 2020)

### WHELAN WON'T APPEAL, AWAITS EXCHANGE

Paul Whelan, the former Marine recently convicted of espionage and sentenced to 16 years in a Russian prison, will not appeal the ruling. Initially, Whelan told journalists that he would appeal the decision, which was handed down in mid-June by a Moscow court. Whelan's lawyer, Vladimir Zherebenkov, has made it clear that Whelan has reversed his decision because he "does not believe in Russian justice," and instead hopes for a prisoner swap between the United States and Russia. Zherebenkov said that swapping Whelan for one or two Russians currently serving prison sentences in the U.S. was already being discussed. According to him, Whelan was told by Russian security service agents he would be part of an exchange shortly after his arrest. However, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told reporters last week that a prisoner swap with the U.S. had not in fact been discussed. Shortly after Whelan's sentencing, the U.S. ambassador to Russia, John Sullivan, said: "What we're looking for is not an exchange. We're looking for justice for Paul Whelan." (*Washington Post*, June 23, 2020)

### PUTIN RAISES TAXES, BOOSTS AID ON EVE OF REFERENDUM

President Putin raised the income tax for wealthy Russians and offered new state handouts to families with children just days before the country votes on reforms that could keep him in power until 2036. In a televised speech, Putin ordered the extension of several support measures to cushion the economic fallout of the country's current economic troubles. Putin said the wealthy would henceforth pay 15% on annual income over 5 million rubles (\$72,833), an increase from the flat 13% tax he introduced almost two decades ago. He stated that the additional cash would go toward helping sick children. Putin also promised to expand a program to help families with mortgages and to offer a one-off payment next month of 10,000 roubles for each child they have up to 16 years of age - measures the Russian president said would help families weather the fallout from the coronavirus crisis. (*Al Arabiya*, June 23, 2020)

### MILITARY TECH ON PARADE IN MOSCOW

The Russian military has hosted its annual Victory Day parade in Moscow. The event was six weeks delayed, but teemed with some of the country's newest military technology. Included in the display were T-90M and T-14 *Armata* tank models, the former of which has recently seen action in Syria in the defense of the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Among the wheeled vehicles debuted was the new TOS-2 "Heavy Flamethrower Vehicle," a missile launcher whose predecessor was used to set entire city blocks ablaze in urban combat during the wars in Chechnya. Noticeably absent from the parade, however, were unmanned vehicles and equipment, such as the *Uran-9* Robot Tank, which is already being utilized in combat and was previously displayed at the 2018 and 2019 editions of the event. (*Forbes*, June 24, 2020)

## **RUSSIAN HACKERS TARGET AMERICANS WORKING FROM HOME**

Russian hacking group "Evil Corp.," whose leaders were indicted by the Justice Department in December, is retaliating against the U.S. government by identifying and targeting employees and attempting to get inside their networks with malware. The attack's methodology suggests it was intended for the work-at-home era. The sophisticated new attacks by "Evil Corp." — which the Treasury Department claims has at times worked for Russian intelligence — were identified recently by Symantec, one of the many firms that monitors corporate and government networks. Symantec declined to name the companies that were the targets of the Russian hackers, but said it had already identified 31, including major American brands and Fortune 500 firms, that have been targeted by hacks and ransomware attacks in the past month. Though currently the group's deployment of ransomware is primarily aimed at making money, Eric Chien, Symantec's technical director, stated that "the infrastructure they are deploying could be used to wipe out a lot of data — and not just at corporations." (*Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 2020)