



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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VLADIVOSTOK TWEET CAUSES COMPLICATIONS WITH BEIJING

A recent tweet by the Russian Embassy in Beijing has sparked a controversy over the history of the Russian Far East, much of which was once under Chinese control. The tweet was intended to commemorate the 160-year anniversary of the founding of Vladivostok, Russia's largest port on the Pacific. Chinese diplomats and journalists were quick to respond, however, unleashing a flurry of tweets reminding the Russians that Vladivostok, then known as Haishenwai, once belonged to China before being surrendered to the Russian Empire by the Qin Dynasty in 1860. In addition to losing the city and much of what now comprises Russia's Primorsky Krai region, the Qin Dynasty also surrendered land to the British Empire during this same period after losing the Second Opium War. (*South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2020)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The issue remains a sensitive one between the two countries, despite their contemporary strategic closeness. Border disputes nearly led to war between the USSR and Communist China in 1969, and have prompted talks between the two powers as recently as 2008. Moreover, while the 2001 *Treaty of Friendship and Good-Neighborliness* signed by Moscow and Beijing formally demarcated their shared border, that agreement is only valid for a period of two decades, and expires next year - prompting some to speculate that the PRC might soon seek a revision of national boundaries in the area that is more in its favor.]

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MH17 TRAGEDY

Dutch judges have ruled that defense lawyers will be allowed to inspect the recovered wreckage from Malaysian Airlines flight 17, which was brought down in July 2014 over Ukrainian territory controlled by pro-Moscow separatists. Three Russians and one Ukrainian national have been charged with murder by Dutch prosecutors for their role in causing the crash, which prosecutors and international investigators say was caused by a Russian-made BUK surface-to-air missile that took down the civilian craft, killing all 298 people on board. Lawyers for one of the suspects, Oleg Pulatov, have indicated that they want to probe alternative theories for the crash, and have asserted that some with knowledge of the case indicated that "the damage pattern of MH17 shows traces of one or more other weapons."

Prosecutors have protested the assertion, saying that investigators in the case examined radar data that showed no military aircraft in the area at the time. They have argued that the four men on trial were instrumental in bringing a missile system responsible for the tragedy to Ukraine from its original base in Russia — even if they did not pull the trigger. Nevertheless, it appears that the court is willing to allow a further examination of the defense's latest theory. (*The Moscow Times*, July 3, 2020)

HOW PUTIN GOT HIS CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

Last week, Vladimir Putin claimed victory in a referendum package containing provisions on pension protection, a gay marriage ban, and most importantly, a reset of presidential terms. The results clear the way for Russia's president to hold office until 2036. The official electoral tally shows 78% of votes cast were in favor of the lump set of proposed constitutional amendments. However experts and citizens alike suspect falsification of the results - fraud made possible by a dubious election format. Citing coronavirus concerns, voting had been conducted over the course of seven days, making the entire procedure difficult to observe. Additionally, voters were incentivized to participate with raffles and drawings that promised prizes ranging from cash to a new apartment. Lastly, the question of the presidential reset was omitted from official "vote-yes" campaign materials, because organizers knew that the proposal was opposed by three-quarters of Russians that had previously been surveyed. (*The Economist*, July 4, 2020)

SPACE ADVISOR FACES TREASON CHARGES

Ivan Safronov, a former journalist with the *Kommersant* and *Vedomosti* newspapers who now serves as an advisor to the head of Russia's space agency, has been arrested by the FSB and charged with high treason for conducting foreign espionage. If convicted, Safronov faces 12 to 20 years in prison and a nearly \$7,000 fine. According to a press release put out by the FSB, Safronov is accused of passing information on Russian military technology to the security services of an unnamed NATO member nation. Details and evidence in the case are considered a state secret, so proceedings will be conducted behind closed doors. The division of the FSB that conducted the arrest, Directorate P, handles industrial counter-intelligence and security. (*BBC*, July 7, 2020)