



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Resource Security; Africa; Russia

CONFEDERACY WITH BELARUS INCHES FORWARD

The long-rumored economic union between Russia and Belarus may finally be starting to take shape. According to Russian business daily *Kommersant*, a plan for an integrated economic confederacy comparable to the European Union has been drafted by the two governments and is currently under discussion. The draft calls for "the creation of a single tax code, civil code, and list of foreign trade rules, in addition to unified oil, gas, and electricity market regulators" by 2022, but otherwise provides few details. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the plan "preliminary," but both he and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have corroborated its existence. If it is actually implemented, some analysts have speculated that the union would also include another element: a constitutional loophole allowing Vladimir Putin to run once more for president in 2024. (*The Moscow Times*, September 16, 2019)

RUSSIAN OIL RISING

The September 14th drone attack on Saudi oil facilities that rocked global markets may turn out to be an unexpected boon for the Russian oil industry. Not only did the reduced supply volume force up global oil prices – driving an estimated extra \$65 million to Russian government coffers in the first day after the attack – but state-owned giant ROSNEFT saw its stock prices rise as well. Market analysts say that Russia will continue to accrue benefits from the incident in the long run, since it demonstrated the vulnerability of Saudi producers to external attack and positioned Russian suppliers as a safer, more reliable alternative. Some analysts have predicted, however, that Moscow's efforts to bolster other elements of the Russian-Saudi relationship – or attempts to balance relations with Iran, which is believed to be responsible for the drone attacks – may limit the financial windfall that the Kremlin could otherwise reap from the turbulence. (*The Moscow Times*, September 17, 2019)

RUSSIA'S "HOT ZONE" HIT BY EXPLOSION

After a month of deadly accidents at Russian military and government facilities, yet another has taken place at a Siberian research lab. State-run news agency TASS reported that an explosion occurred at the Vector State Research Center of Virology and Biotechnology in mid-September, when a gas tank exploded in a sanitation inspection room. During the Cold War, Vector provided cover for secret bioweapons programs; now, the Koltsovo laboratory carries out other research on deadly pathogens like Ebola and is one of only two facilities in the world to store a live smallpox virus sample. Lab officials issued an immediate statement assuring the public that no biological materials were present or released during the explosion. (*The Moscow Times*, September 17, 2019)

DETERRENCE AGAINST RUSSIA ERODING, U.S. MILITARY CHIEF WARNS

When it comes to competition with Russia, U.S. General Joseph Dunford believes NATO is losing its edge. Dunford made his remarks during his last weeks as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declaring in an interview with *Newsweek* that "the NATO advantage over a resurgent Russia has eroded." According to Dunford, this is in part due to post-Cold War campaigns by both Russia and China to develop strategies and technologies that target U.S. and allied military vulnerabilities and contest the alliance's long-standing military superiority. (Itar-TASS, September 18, 2019)

UNFAIR SENTENCING FEEDS NEW PROTEST

The ongoing sentencing of those detained during the recent Moscow protests has spurred a campaign from Russia's entertainment community in support of one of its own. Actor Pavel Ustinov received a three-and-a-half-year sentence for insulting and assaulting an officer during the protest – despite Ustinov's insistence that he was not actually participating in the protest and was swept in off the sidelines. After Ustinov's sentencing, one hundred actors gathered in Moscow for a "single-picket protest," with each participant taking turns holding a placard in minute-long shifts in order to bypass restrictions on public demonstrations. Placards called for Ustinov's release, while also warning "Who is next? I, you, and the whole country." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 18, 2019)

MOSCOW SCORES AN ENERGY WIN IN UGANDA

Russia and Uganda have signed an agreement formalizing their cooperation on nuclear energy. According to the Ugandan Energy Ministry, Russian state nuclear agency ROSATOM has committed to assisting the development of infrastructure for future nuclear power plants in the sub-Saharan African nation, as well as the production and use of radioisotopes from the country's relatively untapped deposits of uranium. The Ugandan government anticipates using nuclear power to meet its growing energy needs as it expands crude oil production, and it has sought assistance from both Moscow and Beijing on this front: last year, the Ugandan government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China's state nuclear agency as well. (Reuters, September 18, 2019)