



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2395

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### NEARLY 500 MEDICAL WORKERS DIE OF COVID-19

The coronavirus death toll among medical professionals in Russia is high - and climbing. Nearly 500 health workers in the country are estimated to have lost their lives since the start of the pandemic. Alla Samoilova, the head of Russia's healthcare regulation service, known as ROSZDRAVNADZOR, recently disclosed the death count to be 489, before her agency retracted the figure and claimed it had been based on unofficial data. As recently as May 26th, the Russian Ministry of Health had claimed that only 101 professionals had perished, while an independent database compiled by health professionals on the front line recorded 444 deaths. Despite the discrepancy, regulators, health professionals, and politicians all agree that the deaths were caused by shortages in personal protective equipment, inadequate hospital facilities, and other factors. (*The Moscow Times*, June 18, 2020)

### RUSSIA STEPS BACK IN CHINA-INDIA BORDER DISPUTE

The next meeting of Russia-India-China (RIC) Foreign Ministers will be held in late June, and Moscow has already ruled out discussing any bilateral matters at the summit. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told reporters that the agenda for the gathering had already been agreed upon - and that it "does not involve discussing issues that relate to bilateral relations of a country with another member of this format." The signal is a significant one, because China and India are currently engaged in escalating clashes along their common 2,500 mile border. At least 20 Indian soldiers were killed in the most recent round of border tensions between the militaries of the two countries.

Russia, for its part, is trying to sit out the hostilities. Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov has declared that, "We consider that the two countries are capable of taking necessary steps to prevent such situations in the future and to ensure that there is predictability and stability in the region and that this is a safe region for nations, first of all, China and India." (*The Economic Times*, June 18, 2020)

### EU PLANS TO EXTEND RUSSIA SANCTIONS

The European Union has decided to extend its sanctions on Russia over the Kremlin's 2014 annexation of Crimea for another year. The sanctions include prohibitions on the import of products originating in Crimea into the EU, as well as bans on infrastructure or financial investments and tourism services on the peninsula. Goods and technologies relating to transportation, telecommunications, and energy also cannot be exported to Crimean companies or used on the peninsula. Separately, the EU has imposed economic sanctions on Russia over its support for separatists in eastern Ukraine. EU leaders on June 19th voted in support of another six-month extension of the penalties, which are set to expire on July 31st. A formal decision to prolong the sanctions is to be taken by EU ambassadors in the coming weeks. (*Radio Free Europe*, June 18, 2020; *Radio Free Europe*, June 19, 2020)

### EKHO MOSKVY FINED FOR "FAKE NEWS"

*Ekho Moskvy*, the influential Russian opposition radio station, and its website editor have been fined the equivalent of \$3,745 for posting online the comments of a political analyst who questioned Russia's coronavirus statistics. On March 16th, Valery Solovei had alleged in an interview with *Ekho Moskvy* that the government was lying when it said no one had died in the country from the coronavirus, and that at least 1,600 people might have died since mid-January. At that time, Russian health officials hadn't yet reported a single coronavirus death. The demand to delete the interview was part of a widespread government campaign against what authorities called "fake news" about the pandemic. On March 31st, Russian lawmakers approved fines of up to \$25,000 and prison terms of up to five years for anyone who spreads what is deemed to be false information. Media outlets were to be fined up to \$127,000 if they disseminate disinformation about the outbreak. Any information that differs from what officials report is considered false by authorities. (Associated Press, June 19, 2020)

## **PUTIN MULLS ANOTHER TERM**

As Russians prepare to head to the polls and voice their preference on proposed constitutional changes, President Putin already has his eyes on his next political step. In a televised address to the nation, Putin said that if the reform package passes, he has not ruled out the possibility of running again in 2024. Among the proposed reforms is a reset of his presidential terms, potentially allowing him to retain his current position until 2036. Putin further clarified by saying the search for a political successor is a distraction that interrupts the work of government, and Russia does not need such a diversion. Citizens will be able to cast their ballots regarding the proposed changes between June 25th and July 1st of this year. (Reuters, June 21, 2020)