



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Corruption; Global Health; Europe; Russia

NAVALNY TURNS A CORNER

Nearly three weeks after his alleged poisoning with a Soviet nerve agent in Siberia, Russian opposition leader and dissident Alexei Navalny is waking up from a medically induced coma in Berlin. According to his doctors, Navalny is "responding to verbal stimuli" and is slowly being transitioned off a ventilator. The long-term effects of his poisoning are still unknown, however. (BBC, September 8, 2020)

COSSACKS POLICE PRIDE PARADE IN THE URALS

At least one youth was detained by forces dressed in Cossack military uniforms on the opening day of LGBTQ Pride Week in the city of Yekaterinburg. The issue of LGBTQ rights and expression in Russia has been raised many times since the 2013 passage of the country's controversial anti-LGBTQ propaganda law, which public displays that can be seen by minors. The crackdown comes at a time when the Cossack tradition is experiencing a revival in the country. During the Tsarist era, Cossack police and military forces often played an enforcer role, inflicting violence against minority groups such as Jews. In an attempt to drown out the demonstrations, the city of Yekaterinburg is simultaneously holding an alternative "traditional values week" that incorporates the themes of family and orthodoxy. (*The Moscow Times*, September 8, 2020)

BIDEN TEAM TARGETED BY HACKERS

FancyBear, a cyberespionage group associated with Russian military intelligence, is believed to have unsuccessfully targeted a political advisory firm associated with former Vice President Joe Biden's presidential campaign. Microsoft spotted the attempted breach and alerted SKDKnickerbocker (SKDK), the firm in question. But Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, called Microsoft's assessment of the incident "nonsense" and denied any Russian involvement. The incident comes amid warnings from U.S. intelligence agencies that several countries, Russia included, are expected to conduct influence activities related to the upcoming 2020 election cycle. (Reuters, September 10, 2020)

VACCINE DATA ALREADY SUSPECT

In an open letter to a leading medical journal, 27 doctors are asking for clarification of what they see as perplexing data pertaining to Russia's "Sputnik-V" COVID-19 vaccine. Russian scientists recently published preliminary findings relating to clinical trials of "Sputnik-V," which are now underway, in the British medical journal *The Lancet*. But, the doctors note in their open letter, the testing data associated with the early-stage trials is insufficient and suspect, drawing into question the reliability of the study as a whole. "There are several data patterns which appear repeatedly for the reported experiments," the open letter said. "On the ground of simple probabilistic evaluations the fact of observing so many data points preserved among different experiments is highly unlikely." The study and rebuttal have touched off a further debate over the Russian vaccine, with some researchers - such as Naor Bar-Zeev of Johns Hopkins University, one of the study's reviewers - suggesting that the results could be attributable to small sample size, and should not be considered suspect. (CNBC, September 10, 2020; *The Moscow Times*, September 10, 2020)

A SHOW OF MILITARY UNITY WITH BELARUS

Despite ongoing political unrest in the country and the optics surrounding the move, Belarus is playing host to military exercises involving Russia. 1,500 members of the 76th Guards Air Assault paratrooper division departed their stations in Pskov, Russia to take part in the exercises, dubbed "Slavic Brotherhood." The drills, which are slated to run from September 14-25, are taking place in Brest, only a few miles from Belarus' western border and NATO member Poland. (*Meduza*, September 15, 2020)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The exercises - which are occurring against the backdrop of mass demonstrations against Belarusian President Alexandr Lukashenko's electoral win last month - are proving deeply controversial. In years past, for instance, Serbia has taken part in the "Slavic Brotherhood" drills. This year, however, Belgrade declined the invitation due to pressure from the EU, which it is actively trying to join.]

SAFRONOV'S DAY IN COURT, DELAYED

The pretrial detention of former journalist Ivan Safronov, who faces espionage charges before a Moscow City Court, has been extended into December. Safronov was arrested on July 7th by FSB agents and charged with passing state secrets to Czech intelligence on Russian military activities in Africa and the Middle East. His trial is proceeding behind closed doors, and the legal proceedings remain shrouded in secrecy. FSB investigator Alexander Chaban only recently agreed to present the material Safronov allegedly passed to Czech intelligence in the closed courtroom, after initially failing to explain the charges against Safronov to the defendant's legal team. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 15, 2020; *TASS*, September 15, 2020)