



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Global Health; Russia

LUKASHENKO SECURES RUSSIAN FUNDING IN SOCHI

At a recent meeting in Sochi, beleaguered Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko managed to secure a \$1.5 billion loan from the Kremlin - money that might help his regime avoid an economic collapse in the face of sustained political protests. The reasons for the loan, observers and analysts say, likely has to do with expedience. While Russian President Vladimir Putin has come to dislike Lukashenko and view the Belarusian leader as a liability, a democratic uprising on Russia's border is an unwelcome development - and one that could reverberate within the Russian Federation. For their part, Belarusian opposition activists have accused Lukashenko - who they blame for rigging the country's August 9th presidential election - of "sell[ing] the country" to Russia. Behind their anger, however, is trepidation; some experts have warned that Putin could capitalize on the current crisis and move to annex Belarus, an objective he has pursued for years. (*Guardian*, September 14, 2020)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Despite the grandiose optics, Russia's loan to Lukashenko is not likely to change much for the Belarusian leader. Belarus currently has about \$1.2 billion in public debt that comes due this year - and most of it is owed to Moscow. As a result, experts have speculated, most of the new funds pledged by the Kremlin are likely to end up being used to service Minsk's existing debt to Russia.]

NO PROOF OF RUSSIAN BOUNTIES ON U.S. TROOPS

After several weeks of focused intelligence gathering and analysis, U.S. General Frank McKenzie, the military official who oversees American troops in Afghanistan, has commented that allegations the Kremlin paid bounties to Taliban militants to target American troops have not yet been confirmed. Both a detained Taliban member and financial intelligence connecting the Taliban to the GRU, Russia's military intelligence service, have suggested that such a program is a possibility. Nonetheless, Russian support of the Taliban long precedes the current allegations, so those facts fall short of definitive evidence for the allegations. (*NBC News*, September 14, 2020)

SIDE EFFECTS OF SPUTNIK V EMERGING IN SMALL TESTING POOLS

Phase III testing of the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine is underway in Russia, over a month after the treatment was approved by state authorities. Thus far, 14 percent of participants are experiencing side effects such as fever, muscle pain, and weakness. Trials are being administered in two dosages, with a second shot given 21 days after the first. Of the 40,000 volunteers announced to be participating in the Phase III trials, only about 300 have received their first dose, keeping the test pool low and fueling speculation about the vaccine's reliability and safety in large populations. (*The Moscow Times*, September 15, 2020)

NAVALNY PLANS TO RETURN TO RUSSIA

After emerging from a medically induced coma and coming off a ventilator, poisoned political dissident and opposition politician Alexei Navalny took to Instagram to share his condition with his supporters by posting a photo of himself in the hospital. Responding to questions from journalists, Kira Yarmysh, Navalny's spokesperson, shared the dissident's intention to return to Russia in the future. "[N]o other options were ever considered," Yarmysh said.

Navalny has been recovering in a Berlin hospital since August 22nd. He arrived in Germany only two days after being poisoned by what has been determined to be a dose of Novichok nerve agent while waiting to board a plane in the Siberian city of Tomsk. German media outlets have reported a heavy police presence around the hospital where Navalny is being treated. Speculation persists that the Russian government was behind the politician's poisoning. (*BBC News*, September 15, 2020)

U.S. LAWMAKERS PUSH FOR TREVOR REED'S RELEASE

Twenty-one members of the House of Representatives have submitted a resolution demanding the release of Trevor Reed, a former U.S. Marine currently imprisoned in Russia. The bipartisan group submitted its resolution to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. Reed was sentenced to nine years in prison earlier this year for allegedly assaulting two police officers while vacationing in Moscow. However, evidence provided by the prosecution during the trial was weak and contradictory. Video recordings from after Reed was picked up by police do not show the patrol car swerving dangerously as a result of Reed's alleged violent actions inside. Another former Marine, Paul Whelan, is also currently languishing in a Russian prison after being convicted of espionage back in June. Like Reed, Whelan was vacationing in Russia when he was detained and charged with a crime in what many view as a politically-motivated arrest. (*ABC News*, September 16, 2020)