



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2419

October 14, 2020 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman, Amanda Hardy**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; Corruption; Global Health; Caucasus; Russia

THE BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION FEELS THE HEAT

Nearly two months after disputing the results of Belarus' presidential election, opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is now a target for arrest in neighboring Russia. Tikhanovskaya has been hiding out in Lithuania since shortly after Belarusian strongman Aleksandr Lukashenko claimed victory in a reelection campaign rampant with fraud. Lukashenko's allies in the Kremlin, however, do not seem content with letting the matter lie.

According to sources within Russia, the outstanding warrant for Tikhanovskaya is not an international one, meaning its legal validity in Russia stems from the multiple bilateral agreements that exist between Minsk and Moscow. In response to the development, the foreign ministers of both Latvia and Lithuania tweeted out messages of support for Tikhanovskaya, reiterating that her persecution is politically motivated. According to the TASS news agency, Belarus has also issued a warrant for Valeri Tsepkalo, another political hopeful from August's election. (*Politico*, October 7, 2020; TASS, October 7, 2020)

KAMCHATKA DISASTER LEAVES SCIENTISTS PERPLEXED

Russian ecological scientists and experts were left perplexed when reports of dead marine animals began coming out of Russia's Kamchatka region. The story broke in part due to local activists posting photos on social media of hundreds of beached carcasses and discolored sea foam that can be seen from space. Kamchatka Governor Vladimir Solodov was quick to deflect accusations that the disaster was caused by fuel waste making its way into the ocean from a military base in the area. Despite the governor's reassurances, however, water samples show petroleum contamination at four times the average level. An alternative explanation is an algae bloom, which has been known to kill off large marine populations in the past. Triggered by climate change, algae blooms are known to cause burns, skin and eye irritation, and nausea if exposed to humans. These symptoms were reported by surfers active in the area during the month of September. (*The Moscow Times*, October 8, 2020)

RUSSIAN HEALTH SYSTEM UNDER STRAIN AS PANDEMIC REALITY RETURNS

Hospitals in Russia are reaching capacity as approximately 11,000 new COVID-19 cases are now being reported daily. According to personal accounts, hospitals in cities such as Moscow are beginning to turn away even severely ill patients. New cases, however, are not limited to Russia's major metropolitan centers. Cities across Russia are beginning to open overflow hospitals to deal with a growing number of coronavirus cases. In some regions, patients are waiting hours for CT scans and days for ambulances and in-home doctor visits. So far, however, neither local officials nor national government representatives have commented on the declining availability of hospital beds throughout the country. (*Meduza*, October 8, 2020)

RUSSIA EYES KYRGYZ PROTESTS

The most recent political upheaval in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan has left the Russian government more than a little rattled. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has stated in a press briefing that the Central Asian state has descended into chaos and "needs stabilizing." Demonstrations there began earlier this month, following what is believed to have been a rigged parliamentary election. Protestors have stormed government buildings and several groups are now claiming authority within the country.

Moscow's interpretation of events carries a significant amount of weight, for strategic reasons. Russia claims that a series of security treaties between the two countries obligate Russia to prevent the dissolution of Kyrgyzstan's government. While Peskov did not state which actions Russia planned to take, he did reveal that FSB director Alexander Bortnikov has already met with Kyrgyzstan's acting security chief, Omurbek Suvanaliyev. The security coalition which Suvanaliyev heads has stated that "Kyrgyz security forces would not be used as a tool by any party." (Reuters, October 8, 2020)

RUSSIA-BROKERED CEASEFIRE ALREADY VIOLATED IN N-K

According to reports on the ground, the ceasefire recently brokered by Moscow between Armenia and Azerbaijan lasted only minutes before both sides resumed firing on each other. Last week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov mediated talks between Armenian and Azerbaijani officials, whose dispute over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region flared into renewed violence at the end of September. The terms of the ceasefire were humanitarian, giving both sides the opportunity to exchange their dead and treat their wounded. (Reuters, October 10, 2020)