



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2436

January 6, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Corruption; Resource Security; Global Health

NOVEMBER IS THE DEADLIEST MONTH

Amid the pandemic, mortality data coming out of Russia shows a sharp Fall surge and a November peak deadlier than any previous Russian month in the past 16 years. Using the excess mortality method of calculating deaths, where data from each month in 2020 is compared to the monthly averages of the previous five years, this November recorded over 78,000 deaths in excess of average deaths for any month over the past five years. In total, 229,700 excess deaths have taken place since January, over 186,000 of which are due to the coronavirus, according to figures compiled by the ROSSTAT state statistics agency. Russia's Fall surge has been exacerbated by poor health facilities and inadequate medical equipment on hand in hard-hit regions outside of Moscow, as well as by the Kremlin's unwillingness to implement additional lockdown measures since the Spring. (*The Moscow Times*, December 28, 2020; *Guardian*, December 28, 2020)

MOSCOW CLINIC PUSHES FOR WESTERN VACCINES

The Hadassah medical clinic in Moscow is eschewing Russia's "Sputnik-V" coronavirus vaccine and attempting to import the treatments made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna instead. The clinic already has a special designation that allows for the usage of medications and treatments that lack legal registration in the rest of Russia. Hadassah medical clinic is also lobbying the Russian Ministry of Health for the ability to conduct clinical trials of the same western vaccines within the country, but such a step requires approval from the state. Given the global demand for the two vaccines, whose effectiveness is 94-95% based on completed trials, it is unclear when they might become available for the Hadassah clinic, even if formal Kremlin authorization is granted. (*The Moscow Times*, December 29, 2020)

A RENEWED FOCUS ON "FOREIGN AGENTS"

In late December, President Putin signed into law legislation that expands Russia's "Foreign Agent" classification for NGOs and activists operating within the country. Under the newly broadened definition, organizations and individuals determined to be operating in the interest of a foreign government must register with authorities or face up to five years in prison. Once identified, such "Foreign Agents" are subject to increased legal scrutiny such as tax audits and public disclosures. Activities that can cause someone to be labeled a "Foreign Agent" include organizing political rallies or meetings, participating in election observation, campaigning for a certain outcome in an election, and more. Amnesty International and other international watchdogs warn that the "Foreign Agent" law and its amendments can be wielded by the state as a weapon against political dissidents. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 30, 2020)

AN ENERGY ROUTE TO THE BALKANS

Serbian energy consumers will now be able to receive Russian natural gas directly after the country opened a 250-mile-long branch extension to the Turkstream gas pipeline, originating in Southwestern Russia. Turkstream connects energy hubs near Krasnodar with ones in Turkey via the Black Sea, circumventing Ukraine. With the connection to Serbia operational, the path for Russian gas to reach EU countries such as Hungary and Austria by way of the Balkans is now open. Similar to the Nord Stream 2 project that endeavors to more closely connect Russia and Germany, Turkstream's operations have been threatened with U.S. sanctions because they risk deepening Europe's energy dependence on Russia. (Associated Press, January 1, 2021)

MICROSOFT COMPROMISED IN SOLARWINDS HACK

According to analysts at Microsoft, the hackers who breached SolarWinds' systems and used its access to compromise data from numerous federal agencies and private companies were also able to get a peek at the tech giant's source code. Given the widespread availability and usage of Microsoft software such as Office and Windows, the hackers' insight into the company's inner mechanics can make it easier to breach customer data in the future. Microsoft had previously disclosed the discovery of suspect SolarWinds code in its system. However, the exposure of its source code is a new development previously unknown to the public. U.S. cybersecurity officials believe Russia is behind the SolarWinds breach. (CNBC, January 1, 2021)

TARGETED BY TERROR, BOTH AT HOME AND ABROAD

Two violent attacks on Russian interests were carried out by Islamic extremists at home and abroad in the past week. The first took place in the Chechen capital of Grozny, when two brothers from neighboring Ingushetia killed one police officer and stabbed another in an attempt to steal their weapons. The pair were shot dead in a firefight, and the Islamic State terrorist group claimed responsibility for the attack. At the same time, in Syria, members of the Guardians of Religion Organization, an al-Qaeda affiliate, carried out New Year's Day attacks on a Russian military base and checkpoint in Raqqa Province in northern Syria. The region is currently held by Kurdish forces, but Russian military detachments supplement security there. (Reuters, December 31, 2020; *Middle East Monitor*, January 2, 2021)