



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2446

February 26, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman, Arianna G. Guerrero**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Resource Security; Global Health; Arctic; Europe; Russia

A NEW DISEASE RISES IN RUSSIA

H5N8, a strain of avian flu known to be lethal in birds but which never before transmitted to humans, has infected seven workers at a poultry farm in southern Russia. Experts at official health regulator ROSPOTREBNADZOR announced on state television that scientists at the Vektor research lab were analyzing samples of the disease, and have reported the discovery to the WHO. ROSPOTREBNADZOR does not believe the virus is currently capable of human-to-human transmission and can only spread via contact with animals. None of the seven workers infected have thus far exhibited severe symptoms of illness. If the need arises, the Vektor lab is capable of developing test kits for the H5N8 virus, much like it did for COVID-19 last year. (*The Moscow Times*, January 20, 2021)

RUSSIA APPROVES ITS THIRD VACCINE

Russia has officially announced the approval of its third COVID-19 vaccine, known as CoviVac, for domestic use. Large-scale clinical trials of the treatment have yet to begin, but the first 120,000 doses of the vaccine, produced by the Chumakov Centre, are set to be distributed to Russians by March. Scientists at the Centre claim the vaccine has a greater than 90 percent efficacy rate against the coronavirus and that, unlike its predecessors, it uses a whole inactive virus as one of its components. According to Russian virologist Alexander Chepurinov, this "whole virion" approach will produce a wider immune response that could be useful in protecting against variants of the coronavirus. The approval of the vaccine has given Russia a lead in the battle against COVID, according to Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, who stated that production of CoviVac makes Russia "the only country today that already has three vaccines." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 21, 2021)

EU PUSHES NEW SANCTIONS

After a meeting with European Union foreign ministers in Brussels, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borell has stated that the bloc would impose new restrictions on Russian officials involved in the arrest of opposition activist Alexei Navalny earlier this year. The sanctions will mark the first time the EU will utilize its "global human rights sanctions regime," a framework that would permit it to target individuals "responsible for human rights violations and abuses worldwide." Contrary to the desires of Navalny supporters, however, Borell indicated that oligarchs close to Putin would not be targeted by the measure. According to Borell, the steps are driven by the Council's conviction that Russia is shifting further toward authoritarianism and "driving away from Europe." The names of the officials to be sanctioned are set to be confirmed, and sanctions are expected to take effect, within a week. (Associated Press, February 22, 2021)

A RUSSIAN SPY IN SWEDEN

An unidentified 47-year old man has been charged by Swedish authorities for selling information over the course of several years to a Russian diplomat. The man allegedly posed as a consultant in several Swedish companies, including Volvo and Scania, where he illegally obtained and sold information. The man was arrested while meeting with a Russian diplomat from whom he had received 27,800 Swedish crowns (\$3,360 USD). According to prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist, the individual could face a lengthy sentence if convicted. The news of this alleged spying comes weeks after Sweden and two other countries expelled Russian embassy employees in response to Russia's earlier expulsion of EU diplomats. (*Al-Jazeera*, February 22, 2021)

CLIMATE CHANGE OPENS THE ARCTIC

The effect of climate change on the accessibility of the Arctic Ocean became visible this month when a Russian vessel successfully traversed the Northern Sea Route during the winter season. The tanker, the *Christophe de Margerie*, carried Russian liquified natural gas from the Yamal Peninsula in the northern extreme of Siberia to Jiangsu, China, by heading east, bypassing the route that passes through the Suez Canal and Strait of Malacca. Last year, the same vessel was able to traverse the Northern Sea Route in May, two months earlier than a travel window that previously opened in July. With more Arctic ice disappearing every year, the prospect of year-round shipping through the Northern Sea Route is quickly becoming a reality. (*CBS News*, February 23, 2021)

PRISON ABUSE CAUGHT ON TAPE

Russian news outlet *Novaya Gazeta* has acquired videos allegedly documenting the horrific beatings of two prisoners at Penal Colony 1 in Yaroslavl Oblast. The videos capture two separate incidents, dating back to 2016 and 2017, when inmates were isolated in rooms, held down on a table, and beaten by multiple correctional officers with batons. One of the victims, Georgian national Vazha Bochorishvili, died of liver damage and trauma only days after the incident. The release of a 2018 torture video that captured similar beatings led to the firing of multiple guards at the same penal colony. *Novaya Gazeta* acquired this new video from a Russian human rights watchdog that is currently classified as a "foreign agent" under Russian law. (*The Moscow Times*, January February 23, 2021)