



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; International Economics and Trade; Europe; North Africa; Russia

U.S.-RUSSIAN COMPETITION HEATS UP IN AFRICA

The appearance of both Russian and American naval vessels in Sudanese ports is underscoring the budding strategic competition between Washington and Moscow in Africa. Sudan's recent political transition following the 2019 ouster of longtime President Omar al-Bashir has provided both countries with new access to Khartoum's territorial waters. The *USS Carson City* and *USS Winston Churchill* are some of the first American vessels to arrive in Sudanese ports in decades, while a recent agreement signed between Khartoum and Russia allows the Kremlin to construct and lease a brand-new port in the country for the next 25 years.

Meanwhile, to Sudan's northwest, Libya is also proving to be a flashpoint in what is becoming a new strategic scramble for Africa. Russia has been flying in mercenaries from the Kremlin-aligned Wagner Company to assist warlord Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army in taking full control of the war-torn country. NATO leaders worry that a permanent Russian military presence in Libya will threaten the Alliance's southern flank. (*AI-Monitor*, March 3, 2021)

NAVALNY-LINKED MEDICAL UNION LABELED "FOREIGN AGENT"

The Alliance of Doctors, an independent doctor's union with links to opposition leader Alexei Navalny, has been declared a "foreign agent" by Russia's Justice Ministry. The union, headed by Navalny's ophthalmologist, Anastasia Vasilyeva, has come under scrutiny in the past year after it openly condemned the government for its lax approach to the coronavirus pandemic and for shortages of medical equipment in the early stages of the outbreak. According to Interfax, the Ministry has charged that the Alliance "repeatedly received foreign funding and engaged in political activities." In January, Vasilyeva was arrested for calling supporters to a protest that demanded Navalny's release and for violating pandemic restrictions. Despite the charges, Alexandra Zakharova, a spokeswoman for the union, asserts that the Alliance does not receive foreign funding and that it will continue to support doctors in tough situations despite the official censure. (*Barrons*, March 3, 2021)

PUTIN TRIES TO TAKE MINORS OFF THE TABLE

Russian president Vladimir Putin has called on police to crack down on individuals who incite children to participate in illegal demonstrations. In a recent talk with officials at Russia's Interior Ministry, Putin urged them to more actively monitor social media platforms and to identify the people who "draw the underaged into unlawful actions." A month earlier, Russian authorities had accused Leonid Volkov, Navalny's chief of staff, of encouraging minors to join in on unsanctioned protests - a charge which could result in up to 3 years in jail for Volkov. Earlier still, the State Duma supported various new fines on social media platforms that failed to delete illegal content as well as another bill that would restrict U.S. platforms if they "discriminated" against Russian media outlets. The increased surveillance and monitoring is seen as a part of a new Kremlin initiative to limit and manipulate the Internet through "moral laws." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 4, 2021)

A SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN AGAINST PRO-NAVALNY PROTESTORS

In its "February 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report," social media giant Facebook detailed that a Russian-backed group of fake accounts aimed at deterring supporters of opposition activist Alexei Navalny has been removed from Instagram. According to Facebook, the 530 accounts targeted domestic audiences and utilized tactics often employed by "spam and financially motivated actors." The accounts sought to spam the network with irrelevant information and to mass-post content with the same location tags and hashtags used by people that were posting about the pro-Navalny protests. The fake accounts also spread misinformation about the number of minors attending the events and utilized memes to criticize the demonstrations. News of this campaign follows recent accusations that Russian intelligence services directed a COVID-19 disinformation campaign aimed at undermining trust in the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. (*Meduza*, March 4, 2021)

THE TUG-OF-WAR OVER NORD STREAM II HEATS UP

U.S. politicians on both sides of the aisle are ramping up efforts to impede Russia's ability to complete the Nord Stream II pipeline, which currently lacks just a short section to come online. U.S. worries center around the likelihood that the project will deepen Europe's already-significant energy dependency on Moscow. Last week, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) placed a hold on Bill Burns, President Biden's nominee to head the CIA, until the new Administration leveled additional pressure at Russian entities now rushing to finish the project. However, obstructing the completion of the natural gas pipeline is made more complex by Germany's heavy investment in the project - given the new Administration's efforts to reset relations with Europe. (*Politico*, March 5, 2021)