



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2449

March 17, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman, Matt Maldonado, Arianna G. Guerrero**

Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; SPACE; Global Health; CAMCA; Arctic; Afghanistan; Russia

BIDEN TEAM PREPS RETALIATION FOR SOLARWINDS HACK

The Biden administration is gearing up to take retaliatory measures against Russia following the discovery, late last year, that the country was likely involved in a major hack of governmental computer systems and various private sector companies utilizing IT firm SolarWinds. The *New York Times* reports that U.S. retaliatory actions in response to the SolarWinds breach will be designed to impact the Russian intelligence community, but not the Russian public. The response will be "a mix of actions seen and unseen," according to White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki. (*CNBC*, March 8, 2021)

MOSCOW, BEIJING PLOT JOINT LUNAR STATION

Russia's state space agency, ROSCOSMOS, and the Chinese National Space Administration (CNSA) recently agreed to work together in a joint effort to establish an experimental research facility on or orbiting the moon. The move comes as Moscow attempts to make up ground in the sphere of space exploration after falling behind Washington and Beijing in recent years. In anticipation of the project, ROSCOSMOS plans to send a lunar lander, dubbed *Luna 25*, to the moon this October – its first such probe since 1976. According to the Chinese side, the future lunar research center will be "open to all interested countries and international partners," and is distinct from the U.S.-led Artemis Accord, which endeavors to return astronauts to the moon by 2024. (*The Moscow Times*, March 9, 2021)

BITCOIN MINE "DIGS DEEP" IN SIBERIA

A Russian facility in Bratsk, located several hundred miles north of Irkutsk in southern Siberia, is home to a bitcoin mining operation that is quickly attracting the attention of foreign investors from North America, Europe, and Asia. Performed in warehouses with computer equipment guzzling electricity measured in dozens of megawatts, bitcoin mining is the process of generating complex numbers for use in the cryptocurrency's blockchain. As a reward, miners are compensated with units of bitcoin, the value of which topped \$50,000 this year, an all-time high. BitRiver, the company in Bratsk, is responsible for 2% of the world's bitcoin mining and reported 2.5x growth in 2020. BitRiver CEO Igor Runets credits Russian legislation recognizing cryptocurrencies in 2020 for the growth of the company. Russia is believed to produce 7% of the world's cryptocurrency, second only to China. (Reuters, March 9, 2021)

SPUTNIK-V VACCINE SLATED FOR ITALIAN PRODUCTION

The Italian-Russian Chamber of Commerce has announced that Russia recently signed a deal that would allow it to begin producing its Sputnik V vaccines in Italy. The arrangement was finalized between Adienne Srl, the Italian branch of a Swiss-based pharmaceutical company, and Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund. The agreement still needs the approval of the European Medicines Agency, or EMA, before the companies involved can begin producing, selling, or distributing the vaccine in the country. The new production facility is projected to begin work by July and, once operational, will produce around 10 million doses this year. (Associated Press, March 9, 2021)

RUSSIA SLOWS DOWN TWITTER

The Russian government announced that it was slowing down the speed of Twitter on all mobile devices in retaliation for the social media platform's failure to remove illegal content. According to state censor ROSKOMNADZOR, the move was taken in response to claims that Twitter failed to take down more than 3,000 posts with content that encouraged suicide among young children, drug use, and child pornography. Russia has threatened to completely block the U.S.-based platform if it continued to refuse to abide by Russian law. The restrictive measure comes just a week after Russian authorities attacked other social media platforms for inciting young children to join in on the illegal pro-Navalny demonstrations. (*Guardian*, March 10, 2021)

RUSSIA PLANS CONFERENCE TO FURTHER "INTER-AFGHAN TALKS"

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has announced plans to organize a conference in Moscow on March 18th to discuss the Afghan peace process. According to Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, invitations have been sent to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as well as to officials from the United States, China, and Pakistan. The Taliban and Qatar were also invited to take part in this meeting, which is aimed at advancing intra-Afghan talks. The goal of the meeting, according to Zakharova, would be to "reduce the level of violence and end the armed conflict in Afghanistan." The conference comes as the Biden administration weighs whether to proceed with plans (laid under the previous administration) to withdraw American troops from the country by May 1st. To that end, Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently sent a letter to President Ashraf Ghani pushing for a high-level United Nations conference with similar objectives as a way of breaking the political impasse in the country. (*Al Jazeera*, March 10, 2021)