



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Global Health; CAMCA; Caucasus; China; Russia

NAVALNY ALLIES CALL FOR "BIGGEST PROTEST RUSSIA HAS SEEN"

Supporters of imprisoned opposition activist Alexei Navalny have announced plans to organize the largest anti-Kremlin protest in modern Russian history this spring. The goal of the demonstration, according to the planners, will be to demand Navalny's release from jail. The political campaign was officially announced on the "Free Navalny" website, which was created specifically to gather signatures for the protest and where people were prompted to register their location on the interactive map online. In a video announcing the campaign, Leonid Volkov, a key aide to Navalny, explained that the first step was to raise awareness for the rally, and that its date and location would only be announced once at least half-a-million people expressed their willingness to participate.

The event looks as if it will have significant popular backing. Just a couple of hours after the site launched, more than 100,000 people had already signed up to participate. Plans for the gathering come as preparations for Russia's next parliamentary elections - which will take place in September - are beginning to heat up. (Associated Press, March 23, 2021)

RUSSIA, CHINA PUSH FOR UN SUMMIT, OPPOSE OUTSIDE "INTERFERENCE"

The foreign ministers from Russia and China recently held a joint meeting where they called for a United Nations Security Council summit in response to what they have labeled "heightened global political turbulence." The summit would aim to establish more direct dialogue in order to find solutions to some of "humankind's common problems in the interests of maintaining global stability." The statement comes amid increased Western criticism over human rights violations and repression of political dissent within both Russia and China. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, both criticized coordinated Western sanctions against their countries, and urged other nations to refrain from meddling in their domestic affairs. In a joint statement released on the Russian foreign ministry website, Wang and Lavrov declared that "interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the pretext of 'promoting democracy' is unacceptable." (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 23, 2021)

PUTIN RECEIVES FIRST VACCINE DOSE BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly received his first dose of a domestically-produced COVID-19 vaccine behind closed doors. According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, Putin felt fine after receiving the first shot and was planning to resume his regular work schedule the following day. Peskov made no comment as to which of the three Russian-produced vaccines Putin had received. The Kremlin's decision to shroud the procedure in secrecy has met with significant criticism, with detractors arguing that it will only increase existing public hesitation to get the vaccine and further slow down the domestic rollout of available treatments. (Guardian, March 23, 2021)

NAVALNY'S HEALTH "DETERIORATING," ACCORDING TO AIDES

Alexei Navalny's allies are expressing concern over claims that the opposition leader's health has been "deteriorating" in prison and that his lawyers were not allowed access to see him for their scheduled meeting. According to Leonid Volkov, a close ally and aide, Navalny had begun to experience acute back pain and severe numbness in his leg that prevented him from being able to stand a week prior. The only treatment he received at the time, however, were two Ibuprofen pills. Vadim Kobzev, one of Navalny's lawyers, stated that he and his co-counsel had initially been allowed to visit Navalny daily, but more recently had been prevented from seeing him due to "unspecified security measures." Volkov does not dismiss the idea that Navalny may have been moved to the IK-2 prison hospital and suspects that the prison administration may be trying to cover up his hospitalization. (The Moscow Times, March 24, 2021)

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE GAINS TRACTION IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Members of the parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh have voted overwhelmingly for a proposal granting the Russian language official status, alongside Armenian, in the disputed territory. Now the region's leader, Arayik Harutyunyan, must approve the measure in order for it to become law. Supporters of the step believe an official status for the Russian language will facilitate communication and cooperation with the 2,000 Russian peacekeepers stationed there as a condition of the Kremlin-brokered ceasefire that ended last year's war over the territory, as a result of which a significant portion of the territory and adjoining districts came under Azerbaijani control. For its part, Baku opposes the measure, with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev saying that "there can only be one official language in Azerbaijan." (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 25, 2021)

WORRIES OVER RUSSIA'S NEWEST VACCINE

The recent publication of clinical trial data for Russia's new EpiVacCorona vaccine has fueled speculation and doubts about the treatment's reliability. Unlike the Sputnik-V vaccine, clinical data for which was published in the prestigious journal *The Lancet*, the developers of EpiVacCorona published their data in *Infection and Immunity*, an obscure Russian journal, and only included data from Phases I and II of testing, totaling just 100 subjects. The study's limited scope only details the vaccine's short-term safety, while omitting information regarding its effectiveness, which is normally derived from Phase III trials. Moreover, the study data highlighted irregularities in the trial process itself, from questionable results among placebo recipients to indications of animal testing for a treatment intended for humans. (*Meduza*, March 27, 2021)