



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2454

April 9, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Arianna G. Guerrero, Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Global Health; Europe; Pakistan; Russia; Ukraine

RUSSIAN MILITARY BUILDUP SPURRING UKRAINIAN FEARS

Russia's growing troop presence on Ukraine's borders is stoking fresh concerns in Kyiv. The troop build-up, which is reported to be the largest since the outbreak of hostilities in 2014, comes amid increased clashes between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists. Although Russian intentions are still unclear, many analysts are concerned about the scale of the troop movement. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov has insisted that, although Russia does not deny the troop buildup, "it is not threatening anyone."

Russia's military build-up is having another effect as well, however, and accelerating Ukraine's push for membership in NATO. Peskov has argued that such a step will not prove to be an effective solution for Ukraine's problems, and will only serve to worsen the situation. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, however, disagrees. He has stated the Atlantic Alliance is the only way to end the war in Donbas, and that "Ukraine's membership action plan will be a real signal for Russia." (*Guardian*, April 6, 2021)

NINE DOCTORS DETAINED AS NAVALNY HEALTH CONCERNS SOAR

Russian police detained a number of doctors outside of Alexei Navalny's penal colony after they were denied access to see the imprisoned opposition activist. Among the arrested was Dr. Anastasia Vasilyeva, head of the Alliance of Doctors and one of Navalny's trusted physicians. News of the arrests comes as doctors say they have found Navalny to be suffering from two spinal hernias and a spinal protrusion that has led him to lose sensation in his hands. Although Navalny tested negative for COVID-19, his respiratory ailments have also caused international condemnation regarding his treatment, with human rights group Amnesty International stating that it believes Russian authorities are attempting to "slowly kill Navalny" during his imprisonment. (*France 24*, April 6, 2021)

EU REGULATOR TO INVESTIGATE SPUTNIK TRIALS

The European Union's drug regulator, the European Medicines Agency, will begin investigations to confirm whether clinical trials of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine have followed global clinical and scientific guidelines. The probe into "good clinical practice" standards comes after text messages were released that exposed how a Moscow state office manager pressured his staff to sign up for the clinical trials. Kirill Dimitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, denied the allegations of coercion, saying, "There was no pressure [on participants] and Sputnik V complied with all clinical practices." According to him, the EMA has not expressed any concerns about Sputnik V's clinical trials and any statements to the contrary only seek to undermine the objectivity of EMA's review. Along with the inspection, EMA is also expected to carry out examinations of Sputnik V's production process this month. If approved, Sputnik V could become the first non-Western COVID-19 vaccine to be used throughout the 27-nation bloc. (*Financial Times*, April 7, 2021)

RUSSIA, PAKISTAN TIGHTEN MILITARY TIES

Moscow and Islamabad are strengthening their strategic cooperation. During a recent state visit to the Pakistani capital, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov held talks with Pakistani army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa. The summit yielded a commitment by Russia to supply the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan with unspecified military armaments and begin carrying out joint military exercises. "We stand ready to strengthen the anti-terrorist potential of Pakistan, including by supplying Pakistan with special military equipment," stated Lavrov. To many, the meeting, the first of its kind in over nine years, represents a Russian attempt to capitalize on the waning U.S. presence in neighboring Afghanistan, as well as a reflection of warming ties between the two countries who are key players in China's Belt and Road Initiative. (*Associated Press*, April 7, 2021)

WHITE HOUSE: REJOINING OPEN SKIES WILL SEND "WRONG MESSAGE"

In a reversal of then-President-elect Joe Biden's condemnation of the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty, the State Department communicated to multiple partners on March 31st that, "...to rejoin a treaty [Open Skies] that Russia continues to violate would send the wrong message to Russia and undermine our position on the broader arms control agenda." The U.S. Air Force also recently announced that it is retiring its two OC-135B Open Skies aircraft, casting further doubt on the Biden administration's willingness to recommit to the intelligence pact. (*Defense News*, April 7, 2021)

ZOOM BLOCKS GOVERNMENT ACCESS, KREMLIN THREATENS BAN

Zoom is the latest American tech company that may soon have its access to the Russian market blocked by state authorities as a result of continued tensions between Washington and Moscow. According to Russian media sources, Zoom is barring its proponents from selling licenses to Russian state agencies over fears of impending U.S. sanctions stemming from the treatment of imprisoned political dissident Alexei Navalny. In response to the development, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov – though downplaying the possibility of an all-out ban – emphasized the need to develop Russian alternatives to the U.S.-based online meeting platform. Education Minister Sergei Kravtsov expressed similar sentiments while touting the effectiveness of the Russian-developed Sferum platform as an alternative for schoolchildren. (*The Moscow Times*, April 7, 2021)