



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Europe; Russia

ROSCOSMOS HEAD HINTS AT BIG PLANS

ROSCOSMOS, the Russian state space agency, signaled last week that it intends to withdraw from the International Space Station (ISS) when its current commitment to the project expires in 2024. According to Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov, the station is aging and its continued use can lead to "catastrophe" in the near future. "We can't risk the lives [of our cosmonauts]," Borisov said. Russia is not about to abdicate its foothold in space, however. In place of participation in the ISS, the Russian government is now at work on its own alternative. ROSCOSMOS head Dmitri Rogozin has announced that "the first core module of the new Russian orbital station is in the works," with hopes for a 2025 launch. (*BBC*, April 21, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The news is an important indicator of Moscow's expanding ambitions in the space domain. Most immediately, however, the proposed Russian station is designed to confer strategic advantages to the Kremlin back on Earth. For instance, the facility, once complete, will orbit higher than the current ISS, giving Moscow a view of the polar region at a time when ice caps are receding and trade routes are emerging in the far north.]

PUTIN'S WARNING TO BIDEN

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his annual state-of-the-nation address to issue a warning to the West not to cross Russia's "red lines." "We want good relations... and really don't want to burn bridges," Putin said in the televised address before both houses of the Russian parliament. "But if someone mistakes our good intentions for indifference or weakness and intends to burn down or even blow up these bridges, they should know that Russia's response will be asymmetrical, swift and harsh." The comments were an apparent allusion to recent sanctions levied on Moscow by the Biden administration in response to Russia's involvement in the 2020 Solarwinds hack and its role in recent election interference. According to Putin, certain nations have started to adopt the habit of picking on Russia for no reason, and if these countries don't change their behavior they "will regret what they have done like they've never regretted anything for a long time." (*Reuters*, April 21, 2021)

NAVALNY SUPPORTERS ARRESTED EN MASSE

The same day that President Putin gave his annual state of the nation address, thousands of civilians from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad gathered as a part of protests organized by the heads of Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK). According to OVD-Info, more than 1,700 people were detained across the country, with the bulk in St. Petersburg. The demonstrations come shortly after Russian authorities pushed for three organizations, including the FBK, to be labeled as "extremist" due to claims that they were destabilizing the country's social and socio-political situation. Navalny's allies had originally aimed to hold the protests in the spring, but brought the date forward over fears over the imprisoned opposition activist's rapidly deteriorating health. Turnout for the events was also lower than anticipated, due in part to the increased police presence and the roundup of Navalny allies earlier in the day. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 21, 2021)

PRAGUE GIVES MOSCOW A DIPLOMATIC ULTIMATUM...

Relations between Russia and the Czech Republic are going from bad to worse. On April 21st, Czech Foreign Minister Jakub Kulhanek warned the Kremlin that, unless all 20 Czech nationals recently expelled by Russia were allowed to return to Moscow within a day, Prague would consider expelling still more Russian diplomats - a pronouncement that Russian authorities denounced as "unacceptable." The ultimatum, however, is part of rapidly deteriorating ties between the two countries in the aftermath of revelations that Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU, had a hand in a series of disturbances in the Eastern European country, including a 2014 explosion that killed two. Czech officials have also signalled that their government is no longer considering buying Russia's Sputnik-V coronavirus vaccine, and that it plans to exclude ROSATOM, Russia's state atomic agency, from a forthcoming multi-billion dollar tender. (*The Moscow Times*, April 21, 2021)

...AS EUROPEAN COUNTRIES EXPEL RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS IN SOLIDARITY

In solidarity with the Czech Republic, multiple Eastern European members of the EU and NATO expelled Russian diplomats last week after tit-for-tat expulsions between Prague and Moscow. Poland, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania expelled a combined total of 12 Russian diplomats, while Romania expelled Alexei Grichayev, Moscow's deputy military attaché in Bucharest. In a related move, President Putin approved a measure granting the Russian government the power to cap the number of Russian citizens working in the embassy or consular offices of a given nation, further restricting their staff. (Associated Press, April 24, 2021; *The Moscow Times*, April 26, 2021)