



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2460

May 7, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Arianna G. Guerrero, Ilan I. Berman**

**Related Categories:** Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Global Health; Russia; Ukraine

### **RUSSIA URGED TO STOP ATTACKING INDEPENDENT MEDIA**

Hundreds of journalists from all over the world have demanded that Russia put an end to its persecution of independent media in an open letter published on the website of Russian student-run news journal *DOXA*. The statement, released on World Press Freedom Day, comes after *DOXA* itself was accused by authorities of supposedly "inciting minors to participate in illegal activities" a month prior. Other prominent news organizations have also come under scrutiny, including the Estonia-based *Meduza* news website, which was recently labeled a "foreign agent." "Russia's independent media is under serious threat," the letter - authored by 235 journalists from 63 countries - read. The authors detailed that they believe the Kremlin has been seeking to silence the media and Russian citizens while also preventing their ability to access accurate and truthful information. (*The Moscow Times*, May 3, 2021)

### **RFE/RL IN HOT WATER WITH STATE CENSORS**

Russian state media regulators are preparing to clamp down on *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL). The U.S.-funded news agency, which spearheaded broadcasts into the Soviet Union during the Cold War, has operated in Moscow since 1991. But RFE/RL was branded a "foreign agent" under Russian law in 2017, a classification that limits the agency's ability to operate freely in the country. It has also racked up \$2.4 million in fines from the Russian government for failing to attach video or text disclaimers to its content identifying itself as such. RFE/RE's refusal to cooperate now opens the door for state authorities to conduct police raids on its offices and arrest its representatives. According to staff members, employees and resources are already being transferred to satellite offices in Prague and Kyiv as a precaution. (*The Guardian*, May 5, 2021)

### **PROPOSED BILL TO BLOCK NAVALNY SUPPORTERS FROM ELECTIONS**

A number of Russian lawmakers have floated a bill to prevent anyone with links to an "extremist or terrorist" organization from running for office and taking part in the country's upcoming parliamentary elections this September. The draft legislation, recently submitted to the State Duma, states that any employees or heads of these organizations are prevented from being elected as lawmakers if they have worked there for one and three years, respectively, before the groups were banned. The restriction would also apply to anyone who provided assistance of any kind to these organizations in the year prior to them being banned. Leonid Volkov, a close associate of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny, believes the draft bill is designed to marginalize the Kremlin critic and his supporters still further. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 5, 2021)

### **80,000 RUSSIAN TROOPS REMAIN ON BORDER WITH UKRAINE**

Despite late-April statements from Moscow about its decision to withdraw troops from Russia's common border with Ukraine, only a few thousand soldiers have actually been pulled back. According to Pentagon officials, around 80,000 Russian troops are still deployed along the border, and the earlier modest withdrawal left Russian heavy artillery and armaments in place. According to Major General Michael S. Repass, NATO's special operations adviser to Ukraine, the ambiguity of Russia's stance in the region shows that they "want to come back later when timing and circumstances are more advantageous." (*New York Times*, May 5, 2021)

### **COURT TO HEAR NAVALNY LAWSUIT AGAINST KREMLIN SPOKESMAN**

The Presnensky District Court has agreed to hear the libel lawsuit that Alexey Navalny has filed against Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov. According to Lela Kokaya, the court's press secretary, the lawsuit was filed in response to earlier comments made by Peskov which accused the Russian opposition leader of working alongside U.S. intelligence officers and suggested that Navalny's statements, including those against Vladimir Putin, were written by the Central Intelligence Agency itself. Navalny asked for these accusations to be considered false and demanded that the Kremlin publish his rebuttal of them on its official website. The initial lawsuit had been filed back in November 2020, but the court refused to register it at the time on account of "procedural shortcomings." (*Sicurezza Internazionale*, May 5, 2021; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 5, 2021)

### **SPUTNIK LIGHT CLEARED FOR EXPORT**

Nearly 20 million people around the globe have received their first dose of Sputnik-V, and the vaccine continues to be the main remedy to the coronavirus within Russia. Now, the Russian government is moving onto the next phase of its vaccine diplomacy. The country's Sovereign Wealth Fund is planning to begin shipping the single-dose "Sputnik Light" vaccine variant to overseas markets. The version is currently in Phase III trials and is said to be 79 percent effective. Health authorities envision it being used to raise vaccination rates in countries suffering from surging pandemic case numbers. Single doses cost less than \$10 and can be safely stored using standard vaccine storage logistics. (*CNBC*, May 6, 2021)