



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2463

May 21, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Global Health; Arctic; Russia

### SUPPORT FOR "UNITED RUSSIA" CONTINUES TO PLUMMET

Russia's ruling political party, United Russia, is continuing to see its popularity decline in popular opinion as the country prepares for parliamentary elections this Fall. In a recent poll carried out by the Levada Center, only 15 percent of Muscovites said they would be prepared to vote for United Russia if parliamentary elections were held this weekend. That figure represents a dramatic decline as compared to the findings of an earlier, February survey by Levada, in which 27 percent of Muscovites said they were willing to vote for the ruling party. The recent poll also shed light on citizens' overall political disposition; over half of respondents did not know when elections would be held, while 25 percent did not plan to vote. (*Radio Svoboda*, May 17, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Given the effect of Russia's increasingly authoritarian political climate on pollsters and respondents alike, the results of public opinion surveys in Russia should be viewed with some caution.]

### RUSSIANS STILL UNCOMFORTABLE WITH SPUTNIK-V

Recent polls conducted by Superjob.ru and the Levada Center show that many Russians are still uncomfortable with the idea of receiving the country's official Sputnik-V vaccine. In the Superjob.ru poll, 42% of respondents said they would not submit to Sputnik-V "under any circumstances," while 62% of respondents in the Levada Center survey said they are still not ready to get the Russian vaccine variant. This news comes as Europe is slowly beginning to open its borders to Russian tourists who have already received the vaccine. Despite Moscow's success in promoting its vaccines abroad (Sputnik-V and other Russian treatments have been made available in over 60 countries), health officials are grappling with vaccine skepticism at home. At its current rate of vaccination, Russia is on track to inoculate 70% of its population by February 2023. (*The Moscow Times*, May 17, 2021)

### ANOTHER SPILL IN THE FAR NORTH

Cleanup efforts are underway in Russia's far north after 90 tons of oil leaked from a LUKOIL pipeline and contaminated soil and water in the remote Komi Republic. The spill originated in the nearby Nenets Autonomous Okrug, from which oil entered the Kolva River and headed downstream, reaching the Usa and Pechora Rivers over 120 miles away. Officials blame the disaster on deteriorating pipeline materials and the lack of an automatic shut-off system capable of stopping the flow of oil after a leak occurs. Regional criminal investigators have opened a probe into the incident, and are investigating potential violations of environmental protection laws. Local activists, meanwhile, estimate that damage from the spill will end up totaling in the hundreds of millions of rubles. (*Meduza*, May 17, 2021)

### DUMA LOOKS TO BAN NAVALNY GROUPS, ALLIES

Russian parliamentary elections are scheduled for this Fall, and the State Duma (Russia's lower house of parliament) is now on the verge of passing legislation that can be used to effectively ban members of Alexei Navalny's various political groups from running for office. The State Duma voted overwhelmingly (293-45) to ban members of "extremist groups" from participating in parliamentary elections for three years, while group leaders will be banned for five under the legislation. Next month, a Russian court will decide if Navalny's regional political offices and Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) will be added to the list of "extremist organizations." Navalny allies had hoped to utilize the same "Smart Voting" strategy as they did in 2019, where coordinated efforts to support candidates deemed most likely to defeat ruling party members flipped seats in regional and municipal elections. (*Deutsche Welle*, May 18, 2021)

### RFE/RL APPEALS "FOREIGN AGENT" DESIGNATION IN EUROPEAN COURT

U.S. broadcaster *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* is pushing back on Russian claims that the organization is a "foreign agent," and has taken the matter to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The escalation of the situation comes only a week after Moscow authorities froze the outlet's bank accounts and started preparing to confiscate property from its offices. RFE/RL currently owes the Russian government \$2.4 million in fines for failing to identify its reporting with large disclaimers - a stipulation that has left other similarly-designated outlets, namely *Meduza*, struggling to bring in ad revenue. In its court filing, RFE/RL warned of the effect such legal classifications will have on objective journalism. "Left unchecked, Russia's campaign of imposing such severe punishments on RFE/RL over its stand on labeling its content will have a profound chilling effect on what is left of the country's independent media," it read. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 19, 2021)

## **U.S. LIFTS SANCTIONS ON NORD STREAM II CONSTRUCTION**

The Biden administration has lifted sanctions on the company working to complete the Nord Stream II pipeline from Russia to Germany, much to the frustration of senators from both U.S. political parties and several eastern European governments. In the words of Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, the decision to lift sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG, a subsidiary of Russian energy giant GAZPROM, will "demonstrate the Administration's commitment to energy security in Europe, consistent with the President's pledge to rebuild relationships with our allies." Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) condemned the move, stating, "I urge the administration to rip off the Band-Aid, lift these waivers and move forward with the congressionally mandated sanctions." Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) took his rebuttal a step further. "Objectively speaking, the Biden administration is shaping up to be the most pro-Russia administration of the modern era," he said. Nord Stream II is currently 90 percent complete and once it comes online will allow Russia to double energy shipments to Germany via the Baltic Sea, bypassing overland pipeline routes through Ukraine. Policymakers fear the pipeline's completion will increase Europe's energy dependence on Moscow. (*NBC News*, May 19, 2021)