



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2464

May 26, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Balkans; Russia; Turkey; Ukraine

PARALLEL MILITARY DRILLS IN THE BALKANS

Russia and the U.S. are holding nearly simultaneous military exercises with their respective allies in the Balkans. Near Belgrade, Russian and Serbian troops staged "anti-terrorist" and other exercises with 200 special forces operators through May 25th. After several post-communist states joined NATO in the 2000s, Serbia is Russia's last major ally in the Balkan region, an area Moscow claims as its historic sphere of influence. Elsewhere on the peninsula and across Europe, however, the U.S. Army is leading 28,000 participants in the "DEFENDER Europe 2021" exercises across 12 countries, including Romania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Croatia, and other Balkan states. Military personnel from 26 countries are participating, including NATO members and partner allies. (Associated Press, May 20, 2021; U.S. Army, May 2021)

SAKHAROV FREEDOM PRIZE AWARDED TO JAILED GULAG HISTORIAN

Yuri Dmitriyev, a Russian historian famous for identifying the victims of Soviet atrocities by assembling human remains from mass graves in the Karelia region, has just been awarded the Sakharov Freedom Award by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. Dmitriyev is currently serving a 13-year prison sentence in Russia for a child pornography conviction that is viewed by many as having been politically motivated. According to Geir Hønneland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Dmitriyev's research into the Stalin-era killings in Karelia is seen as a threat by the current Russian government, which fabricated the charges of child sexual abuse against him. This year's Sakharov Award is particularly symbolic because it also commemorates the hundredth anniversary of the Soviet dissident's birth. (*The Moscow Times*, May 21, 2021)

THE FIGHT OVER TSARGRAD GOES TO COURT

Video streaming platform YouTube's 2020 ban of the *Tsargrad* news channel over claims that its owner, oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, was violating U.S. sanctions is now under fire in the Russian court system. Malofeev went on to challenge the ban in court and Google, YouTube's parent company, was ordered to reinstate the channel on its platform last month. The U.S. tech giant filed an appeal last week. If unsuccessful, Google will be liable for a court-imposed rolling daily fine that could reach \$1.28 trillion by the end of this year. In response to the court's ruling, Malofeev shared, "If American internet platforms can't obey Russian law, then maybe there's nothing for them to do in Russia." (*Financial Times*, May 22, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Last year's referendum on constitutional amendments granted the Russian state new powers in instances such as the *Tsargrad* dispute. One of the approved amendments, for instance, cemented the supremacy of Russian law over foreign court rulings.]

MAKING RUSSIAN MERCENARIES INTO MOVIE STARS

Russian state television premiered an action-adventure movie last week portraying the exploits of private military contractors (PMCs) in the Central African Republic. The film is part of a line of high action military flicks produced by Russian filmmakers over the past decade. However, while most of those have portrayed WWII-era heroisms, the focus of "Tourist" is contemporary - and raises questions about attempts to whitewash the role of PMCs in Russian foreign policy.

The plot of the film follows a group of contractors helping train the CAR's security forces before getting caught up in an attempted coup. According to journalists at the *BBC* and *Meduza*, the film featured real life Wagner mercenaries as extras, as well as a small Cessna aircraft with registration markings identical to ones registered to companies owned by Evgeni Prigozhin, the benefactor of the Wagner Private Military Company. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 22, 2021)

LAVROV WARNS ANKARA ABOUT COOPERATION WITH KYIV

This week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly cautioned Turkey about the implications of its recent security and defense agreements with Ukraine. In an interview with Russian outlet *Argumenty i Fakty*, Lavrov was quoted as saying: "We strongly recommend that our Turkish colleagues carefully analyze the situation and stop fueling Kyiv's militaristic sentiment." Turkey's support for Ukraine has blossomed in recent years. In 2019, Ankara sold drone technology to Kyiv, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pledged support for Ukraine during Russia's recent military buildup along its common border with Ukraine. Shortly thereafter, the Turkish leader announced the start of a new dialogue platform with Ukraine on security and diplomatic cooperation. (Reuters, May 24, 2021)

RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS BELARUS' BLUNDER

Members of the Russian Foreign Ministry and State Duma have come out in support of Belarus' decision over the weekend to intercept a Ryanair commercial flight and force it to land in Minsk in order to arrest journalist Roman Protasevich. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the move was "an absolutely reasonable approach." Leonid Kalashnikov, head of the State Duma's committee on post-Soviet Affairs, added, "It [Belarus] is an independent state. If they see a threat to their security, then they must fight this threat." Ryanair Flight FR4978 was *en route* to Vilnius from Athens when a purported bomb threat on board forced it to land in Minsk. Belarusian state media has maintained that authorities did not know Protasevich was aboard the flight when it landed in Minsk. (*The Moscow Times*, May 24, 2021)