



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2465

May 28, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Global Health; Europe; Russia

SAKHAROV CENTENARY EXHIBITION PULLED

The Moscow municipal government's Ministry of Culture has reversed course and rejected designs for a public commemorative exhibition of Andrei Sakharov, meant to honor the hundredth anniversary of the famed dissident's birth. The Ministry of Culture had communicated to the Sakharov Center, the organizers of the exhibit, that they were ready to approve designs for the display as recently as March 23rd. However, on April 30th, the office rejected the design of "Andrei Dmitriyevich Sakharov: Anxiety and Hope," calling it "unacceptable." According to a statement from the Sakharov Center, event organizers, "consider both the decision itself, whoever made it, and the wording of the refusal to be unconvincing and shameful..." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 17, 2021)

BIDEN-PUTIN MEETING SET FOR JUNE 16TH

President Biden's first meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin has been scheduled for June 16th in Geneva, Switzerland. According to White House press secretary Jen Psaki, President Biden will use the meeting to discuss "a full range of pressing issues" with his Russian counterpart. The meeting comes after months of diplomatic tension between Washington and Moscow in the wake of the SolarWinds hack and President Biden's characterization of President Putin as a "killer," which led to the expulsion of American and Russian diplomats from their respective foreign embassies. In a subsequent statement, President Biden claimed the U.S. response to the SolarWinds hack could have been more severe, but that he had decided to keep retribution "proportionate." (*USA Today*, May 25, 2021)

RUSSIAN CENSORS THREATEN, FINE GOOGLE

Earlier this week, Russian authorities issued Google a 24-hour ultimatum to remove content from its platforms allegedly depicting violence, drugs, and extremism, including over 5,000 videos on the YouTube platform. The deadline came and went, with Moscow ultimately fining Google only \$81,600 and issuing further warning of throttled internet traffic to the site. State censors ROSKOMNADZOR had flagged some of the material for encouraging minors to participate in public protests supporting jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. According to TASS, ROSKOMNADZOR had sent Google over 26,000 notices about the content before the company was ultimately fined. (*BBC*, May 25, 2021; *CNBC*, May 25, 2021)

SHIELDING STATE MEDIA FROM "FOREIGN AGENT" SCRUTINY

The Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media is putting forward legislation that, if passed, will shield journalists at state-run media outlets from the same financial scrutiny that has led to journalists and independent outlets being declared "foreign agents" under Russian law. The language of the bill draws a distinction between state and commercial media outlets, claiming the former "are of strategic importance for ensuring the defense and security of the state," while the latter is attempting "to influence Russian information space from the outside with the aim of biased informing and creating a distorted picture of political reality." Current Russian law requires all media outlets operating within the country to submit information about their funding every three months. (*The Moscow Times*, May 25, 2021)

GUERRILLA MARKETING, RUSSIAN STYLE?

French and German social media influencers have allegedly been approached by representatives of a PR agency asking them to use their platforms to promote a narrative that the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine leads to three times the number of deaths the AstraZeneca variant does. The PR firm in question, Fazze, has management based in Moscow and has connections to a Russian entrepreneur, according to data from LinkedIn. In recent days, Fazze, which claims to have offices at 5 Percy Street in London, has shuttered its website and switched its Instagram account to private. According to popular French twitter user Léo Grasset, the campaign had a "colossal budget" but refused to share the identity of its client. AstraZeneca and the Russian Sputnik V variant are viral vector vaccines, as opposed to the Pfizer shot, which is a mRNA shot. (*The Guardian*, May 25, 2021)

MH17 CASE POISED TO ENTER NEXT PHASE

Prosecutors are preparing to make their opening arguments in the next phase of the trial of the Flight MH17 conspirators taking place in The Netherlands. Preliminary hearings began in March of 2020, but witness testimony and evidence are expected to be heard during this new phase, which is scheduled to begin on June 7th. Three Russians and one Ukrainian are currently accused of perpetrating the missile attack that downed a civilian airliner flying over rebel-held territory in the Donbas in July 2014, killing 298. All four defendants are at large and only one, Russian national Oleg Pulatov, has hired a defense lawyer for the case. (Reuters, May 26, 2021)