



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2466

June 3, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Missile Defense; Europe; Russia

### **KHODORKOVSKY GROUP LEAVES RUSSIA**

Open Russia, the political group founded by exiled former oil tycoon (and Kremlin critic) Mikhail Khodorkovsky, has ceased its operations within the country out of fear for legal retribution on its employees. The organization was branded an "undesirable organization" under Russian law in 2017, and had since been operating as a separate legal entity in an attempt to shield its employees and supporters from prosecution. Under the same proposed legislation being used to target allies and supporters of Alexei Navalny, Open Russia employees may soon face up to four years in prison for their involvement with the organization if arrested and convicted. In February of this year, Russian authorities delivered a suspended four-year sentence of house arrest to a woman working for Open Russia (Reuters, May 27, 2021)

### **PUTIN MEETS WITH AN EMBATTLED LUKASHENKO**

Less than a week after Belarusian authorities forced a Ryanair flight to land and arrested opposition journalist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend, causing an international furor, President Putin welcomed his Belarusian counterpart, Aleksandr Lukashenko, to Sochi for talks. During a public press event following their meeting, Lukashenko decried what he described as western attempts to destabilize Belarus - including through widespread demonstrations last summer after his August 2020 reelection victory was deemed fraudulent. For his part, President Putin used the occasion to tout the "Union State" between Russia and Belarus that has existed de jure between the two countries since the late 1990s. "We've been building the Union State," Putin told Lukashenko. "We are confidently moving in that direction, that work is already bringing concrete results to our citizens." (*The Moscow Times*, May 28, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Putin's mention of the "Union State" is telling. While the legal architecture for such a confederation has existed for roughly a quarter-century, Moscow has historically stopped short of pressing for a formal merger, while Minsk has resisted it by carrying out diplomatic outreach to the West. Now, however, Lukashenko's weakened political state and international isolation in the wake of the Ryanair incident might well lead to renewed Russian pressure for the idea.]

### **RUSSIA SPIES ON U.S. MISSILE DEFENSE TEST**

A recent U.S. weapons test off the coast of Kauai in Hawaii was delayed due to the presence of a Russian spy vessel lurking just outside U.S. territorial waters. The vessel, a *Vishnya*-class intelligence ship named the *Kareliya* (SSV-535), was located one mile into international waters and was likely there to gather signals intelligence (SIGINT) from the missile test. The *Kareliya* is an auxiliary general intelligence ship (AIG), one of seven such vessels that the Russian Navy operates in the Pacific. (*The Honolulu Star Advertiser*, May 29, 2021)

### **RUSSIAN ESPIONAGE A CASUALTY OF CZECH SPAT**

April's diplomatic row between Prague and Moscow culminated this week in the expulsion of 63 Russian diplomats from their embassy in the Czech Republic. After weeks of recriminations, the two sides eventually agreed to limiting each other's in-country staff to seven diplomats and 25 technical employees. In order to reach this level, however, the Czechs had to dismiss 79 Russian nationals working at their Moscow embassy - a reflection of Prague's role in recent years as a hotbed of Russian espionage against the Czech Republic and other neighboring European countries.

The blow to Russian spycraft, experts say, cannot be overstated. "It will take years to create such an intelligence hub under diplomatic cover," estimates Aleksandr Morozov of the Boris Nemtsov Academic Center in Prague. "Such activity cannot be simply taken and transferred to another country." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 29, 2021; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 30, 2021)

## **BOLSTERING STRENGTH ON WESTERN BORDERS**

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has announced the establishment of 20 new military units that will be deployed this year in the country Western Military District, which includes Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad. According to Shoigu, the move is necessary because the threat that the NATO alliance poses to Russia is growing, reflected in frequent large scale military exercises and aircraft activity near the country's borders. These operations, the defense chief said, "destroy the international security system and force us to take the relevant countermeasures." (*ABC News*, May 31, 2021)