



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; China ; Middle East; Russia; Ukraine

RUSSIA, CHINA RENEW FRIENDSHIP TREATY

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese Communist Party Chairman Xi Jinping have formally agreed to renew the 2001 "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation" demarcating the border between the two countries, which expires this year. The agreement came during a live video conference between the two leaders, in which Putin highlighted the importance of the treaty for maintaining "the protection of state unity and territorial integrity." The treaty extension, however, is quite short; according to Russian news sources, the two sides only agreed to prolong the arrangement for a period of five years. (RIA Novosti, June 28, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: That timeline is significant - and telling. Back in 2001, when the original agreement was negotiated between Moscow and Beijing, the Russian side reportedly sought an open-ended arrangement. Chinese officials, however, preferred a more time-limited approach in response to what they viewed as deeply adverse demographic trends within the Russian Federation, which they believed would make it more and more difficult for the Kremlin to hold onto its eastern territories as the years went on. Those trends still largely prevail, which helps to explain why the treaty was not extended for longer than half-a-decade (something Russia surely desired).]

MORE JOURNALISTS HARASSED BY POLICE

Journalists working for Proekt, a Russian investigative group, were detained and questioned by police shortly before the organization published a report on alleged financial corruption by the family of current Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev. The author of the report, a senior editor at Proekt, and the publication's editor-in-chief were all approached by authorities. Officially, the raids were related to a four-year-old defamation case, but observers see the Proekt expose as the proximate cause of the pressure. Among other things, Proekt's report lays out that Interior Minister Kolokoltsev and his family have accumulated nearly \$25 million in real estate holdings, and raises questions about the provenance of these properties. (*The Guardian*, June 29, 2021)

PUTIN EYES AN "UNFRIENDLY" UKRAINE

During his annual "direct line" Q&A with Russian media outlets, President Putin hinted at potential talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, but stopped short of openly calling for them. One of the main stumbling blocks to better relations between the two countries, Putin suggested, were the close ties between Kyiv and Washington, as well as domestic policies such as a de-emphasis on the Russian language in Ukrainian schools. "Today's [Ukrainian] leadership is clearly unfriendly to us," Putin told reporters. "This is a completely obvious case." (UNIAN, June 30, 2021)

KREMLIN HUNTS FOR NAVALNY ALLY

The Kremlin has officially placed Ivan Zhdanov, the former director of Aleksei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), on an international wanted list and shared his details with Interpol. Zhdanov was placed on the list relating to a 2017 court order that required him to remove an FBK investigative report on corruption accusations against former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, which Zhdanov refused to do. Moscow's Nagitno District Court also issued an arrest warrant for Zhdanov *in absentia*. Zhdanov's lawyer, Vladimir Voronin, argued that, "We always assumed that if Ivan returns [to Russia] he will be immediately sent to a detention facility from the moment he crosses the border. Now we know this for a fact." Zhdanov currently resides in Lithuania. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June, 29, 2021)

RUSSIA REFUSES TO OPEN SYRIAN AID CROSSING

Russia has rejected a UN draft resolution to open up a second aid crossing into Syria from Iraq. The proposed measure called for the opening of an aid crossing at Al-Yaroubiya in the Kurdish-controlled northeast of the country. Currently, the only open crossing is the one at Bab al-Hawa into Idlib province. Despite strong pressure from the UN, the U.S. and many European nations, however, Russia's Permanent Ambassador to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia, vetoed the resolution, arguing that aid not coming through the Syrian government undermines Syria's legitimacy. Nebenzia dismissed claims of an impending "humanitarian disaster" in the war-torn nation, arguing that "facts on the ground" confirm that conditions are improving. (Associated Press, July 1, 2021)

CRUZ PLAYS HARDBALL OVER NORD STREAM II

Texas Senator Ted Cruz is utilizing procedural barriers to block several of President Biden's State Department nominees in a bid to pressure the administration into reversing course on Nord Stream II. The thirteen nominees have already been approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and now only require a confirmation from the Senate at large. The group includes nominees for the positions of Assistant Secretaries of State for Intelligence and of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, as well as ambassadors to several African countries. Earlier this year, Sen. Cruz temporarily blocked the confirmation of other senior nominees, such as for the post of CIA director, until the Biden administration pledged to sanction companies working on the pipeline. Ultimately, however, the State Department only sanctioned some ships and entities participating in the pipeline's construction, but declined to sanction the companies financing the project. (*NBC News*, July 3, 2021)