



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2475

July 16, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman, Timothy Blinnikov**

**Related Categories:** Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Global Health; Japan; Russia; Ukraine

### THE TALIBAN TAKES PAINS TO REASSURE RUSSIA

A delegation from the Taliban arrived in Moscow on July 8th on a mission intended to reassure the Russian government that the fighting between the Islamist movement and the Afghan government would not spill over into Central Asia. The visit comes after warnings from the Kremlin that the Russian government might be forced to intervene militarily if regional ally Tajikistan was attacked. During the visit, Mohammad Sohail Shaheen, the spokesman for the Taliban, took pains to assure officials in Moscow that "we won't allow anyone to use the Afghan territory to attack Russia or neighboring countries." (Associated Press, July 8, 2021)

### BIDEN DEMANDS RUSSIA CRACK DOWN ON CYBERCRIME... AGAIN

Just weeks after first issuing the demand at his summit with Vladimir Putin in Geneva, President Biden recently urged the Russian president in a telephone conversation to crack down on cybercrime. Biden subsequently told reporters that "[he had] made it very clear to him [Putin] that the United States expects when a ransomware operation is coming from his soil - even though it's not sponsored by the state - we expect him to act. And we've given him enough information to act on who that is." Biden also disclosed that he had established a regular means of communication with the Russian leader. A Kremlin press release following the talk acknowledged that cyber activities had been a prominent part of the discussion, while also noting that the U.S. government had not yet made any formal appeals to the Russian government. (CNN, July 12, 2021)

### NORD STREAM II SET FOR COMPLETION NEXT MONTH

According to a recent interview with Matthias Warnig, the CEO of the consortium overseeing the project, the controversial Nord Stream II natural gas pipeline is currently 98 percent complete. Planners now expect the final sections of the undersea energy route to be in place by August. Furthermore, the company expects the pipeline to begin transporting gas from Russia to Germany before the end of the year. However, Western experts warn the pipeline, which will double Russia's transit capacity to Europe, will deepen the continent's energy dependence on Moscow. (Reuters, July 12, 2021)

### PUTIN'S VISION FOR UNITY WITH UKRAINE

Vladimir Putin is pushing Russo-Ukrainian unity anew. The Russian president has published an article on the Kremlin website focusing on the historical links binding Russians and Ukrainians together as a single nation. In it, Putin downplayed the Holodomor famine as a "common tragedy of collectivization," and urged unity between Moscow and Kyiv by charging that it is Western governments and Ukrainian elites who are responsible for the country becoming "anti-Russian."

Putin's message, however, has fallen largely on deaf ears. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has rebuffed President Putin's claims, stating that the "brotherly relationship" between the two countries more closely resembled that of Cain and Abel. (Meduza, June 12, 2021; Ukrinform, June 13, 2021)

### RUSSIAN COVID DEATHS CONTINUE TO SURGE

On Tuesday, July 13th, and Wednesday, July 14th, Russia experienced its highest single day coronavirus death counts since the start of the pandemic, reporting 780 and 786 deaths on consecutive days. The spike in fatalities has pushed Russia into 6th place globally for national deaths associated with COVID-19. To date, only 20 percent of Russian citizens have received even the first dose of any coronavirus vaccine, with new data pointing to the Sputnik-V jab having reduced effectiveness against the Delta variant and other more contagious strains of the virus. (The Moscow Times, July 14, 2021)

## EXTRA COACHING FOR TOKYO

Russian athletes preparing to travel to Tokyo for the Olympic Games this month are being coached by the Russian Olympic Committee on how to respond to "provocations" in the form of questions in front of international media. Among the topics athletes are being warned of are Black Lives Matter, Russian political aggression in regions such as Crimea, and the doping scandal that has barred the Russian flag and anthem from being used at the Games. In addition, the committee's guidance extends to athletes' conduct on social media, warning them to be wary of what they post, like, and comment. Such exertion of control over athletes' statements and conduct was a common practice during the Soviet period. (*Vedomosti*, July 14, 2021)