



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; CAMCA; Central Asia; Russia

RUSSIA, U.S. REVIVE ARMS CONTROL TALKS

Russian and American experts met in Geneva in late July for a new round of arms control talks between the two countries. The meeting was first agreed upon at the June summit between President Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The "strategic stability" talks were expected to touch on a range of topics amid an increasingly fraught bilateral relationship between Washington and Moscow. For instance, "Russia still has concerns with U.S. modification of heavy bombers and launchers to launch ballistic missiles, and that's been there for a while now," notes Andrey Baklitsky of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. The U.S., meanwhile, is worried over unilateral Russian low-yield nuclear tests.

Back in January, the two countries agreed to extend the New START nuclear arms control treaty for another half-decade, and the latest round of talks was intended to build on this progress with new understandings. No concrete commitments were made by either side at the Geneva meeting, however. Both countries agreed to meet again in September. (*Deutsche Welle*, July 28, 2021)

RUSSIA LEANS ON GOOGLE

Russia has fined digital giant Google 3 million rubles (\$40,000) for failing to store the data of Russian users on local servers. The Russian government has cracked down on foreign companies operating within its internet sphere in recent years as part of efforts to erect a "sovereign internet." To that end, Russia has passed a number of laws requiring foreign technology companies to store the data of Russian users within the country - regulations to which authorities say Google is failing to adhere. Moscow's Tagansky district court found Google guilty of violating localization laws, marking the first time that the tech firm has been fined in Russia. Twitter and Facebook, on the other hand, were already fined last year for failing to comply with these laws, while LinkedIn was blocked in Russia altogether after it refused to move the data of Russian users. (*The Moscow Times*, July 29, 2021)

RUSSIA HACKED FEDERAL PROSECUTORS

According to the Justice Department, Russian hackers behind last year's Solarwinds attack broke into the email accounts of prominent federal prosecutors as well. Twenty-seven separate U.S. Attorneys' offices had at least one employee's email hacked during the course of the attack. In a statement released on July 30th, the Justice Department stated that the email accounts were compromised between May and December of 2020. The Administrative Office of U.S. Courts was also reportedly compromised, providing the hackers access to confidential information like trade secrets, espionage targets and whistleblower reports. The Justice department has not publicized what kind of information was taken, or what impact this hacking could have had on ongoing cases. (Associated Press, July 31, 2021)

KREMLIN WANTS TO UNMASK BITCOIN TRANSACTIONS, USERS

Russian federal financial regulators are moving forward with a plan to develop a system that will allow the Kremlin to monitor, track, and identify bitcoin transactions and users in an effort to curb illicit usage of the cryptocurrency. ROSFINMONITORING, an arm of the Russian Presidential Administration, is putting forward \$200,000 to develop a platform to track transactions and anonymous users, with an eye to ultimately identify them based on their behaviors online. The company pegged with developing the system, listed as "RCO" in documents related to the bidding, is allegedly associated with major Russian bank Sberbank. (*Cointelegraph*, August 4, 2021)

OSCE REFUSES TO OBSERVE UPCOMING ELECTIONS

Russia's parliamentary elections are slated to take place next month, but the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is declining to send a delegation of observers to monitor the process, citing "major limitations" imposed by the Russian government as the reason for its absence. According to the OSCE, Russian authorities cut the number of observers it was permitted to bring into the country to only 60, hampering the organization's ability to properly conduct its work. The official Russian justification for the restriction was the continued fight against COVID-19, although Russia's current pandemic-related border rules do not align with the decision to cut the OSCE's delegation size. September's polls will mark the first time since 1993 that the OSCE has not overseen elections in Russia. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 4, 2021)

MOSCOW EYES CENTRAL ASIA AS A HEDGE AGAINST AFGHANISTAN

Following weeks of instability in Afghanistan in the wake of the recent U.S. withdrawal from the country, Russia is strengthening its military ties to the countries of Central Asia in an effort to bolster its southern flank. Russian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov recently traveled to Uzbekistan to meet with that country's military head, Shukhrat Khalmukhamedov, and oversee combined Uzbek-Russian military exercises. Subsequent drills involved Russian, Uzbek, and Tajik forces only 12 miles from Tajikistan's common border with Afghanistan. The Taliban is currently undergoing a resurgence in Afghanistan, and Russian military officials have concluded that "[t]he main threat to the Central Asian region today comes from the Afghan direction." (*The Moscow Times*, August 5, 2021)