



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2283

August 23, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman, Timothy Blinnikov**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Afghanistan; Russia; Ukraine

RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR: KABUL SAFER UNDER TALIBAN

Mere hours after the Taliban took control of Kabul and proclaimed their victory in Afghanistan, Russian authorities began praising the group for its conduct on the streets of the capital. Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitri Zhirnov remarked: "The situation is peaceful and good and everything has calmed down in the city. The situation in Kabul now under the Taliban is better than it was under (President) Ashraf Ghani." The statement reflects Russia's evolving thinking about Afghanistan's future. Over the last seven years, the Kremlin has established contacts with the Taliban because it began to see the group as a key stakeholder in future governments in the country - a calculation that has now been validated. (Reuters, August 16, 2021)

RUSSIAN WILDFIRE WORLD'S BIGGEST

The ongoing wildfires in Siberia are now the largest fires ever to be recorded by satellite, and are larger than the rest of the world's ongoing wildfires combined. The current wildfires are burning through 17.08 million hectares of land, beating the record set in 2012, when 17 million hectares of land burned. Grigory Kuksin, the head of the firefighting unit of Greenpeace Russia, has argued that, "This is a new reality in which we need to think about the measures that must be urgently taken in our country in order to prevent such disasters in the future, or at least reduce their scale." Some environmental experts blame the fires on a widespread lack of funding for mitigation methods, while others fault Russia's firefighting policy, which allows regional governments to "ignore" fires if the cost of fighting the fires outweighs the expected damages they cause. (*The Moscow Times*, August 17, 2021)

POLICE SEARCH HOUSES OF NAVALNY, FBK SUPPORTERS

On the night of August 17th, police in civilian clothing carried out a series of searches of the Moscow houses and apartments of people whose addresses had been part of a "Smart Voting" database. The database included people who participated in the "smart voting strategy" started by imprisoned Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, those who participated in the "Free Navalny" protests, and even those who had donated to Navalny's "Anti-Corruption Foundation" (FBK). RedSheild VPN, the virtual private network used to keep track of donations, had a problem maintaining user anonymity, and thus failed to protect the names and addresses of those who donated to the FBK. Since the FBK was labeled an "extremist organisation" by the Russian government, those who donated to it could be subject to criminal charges. (*Novaya Gazeta*, August 17, 2021)

JAIL TIME FOR FORMER DNR MINISTER

The Presnensky Court of Moscow extended the jail term of Alexander Timofeiev, the former minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) in Ukraine's Donbas region. Timofeiev and his business partner, Igor Sosnokov, have been accused of "attempted large-scale fraud" for trying to scam \$5 million from the former owner of machine manufacturing company "Ormeto-Yumz," Sergei Shpak. Timofeiev was the minister of fees and revenue of the unrecognized DNR from 2014-2018, during which time the con took place. He also served as the acting Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the DNR from 2016-2018. (*Novaya Gazeta*, August 18, 2021)

NO ASYLUM FOR AFGHANS...

Several Afghan citizens who arrived in Russia earlier this year and were awaiting decisions on asylum applications have been detained in recent days and now await deportation back to their homeland, which is now controlled by the Taliban. One case involves a 12-year-old girl and her family who had fled to Russia to escape the girl's forced marriage. While trying to cross into neighboring Finland, the girl and her family were arrested and charged with violating Russia's laws on border exclusion zones. The family was convicted and expelled, the harshest form of punishment for such an offense. A separate group of Afghans was arrested while trying to apply for asylum at an Interior Ministry office in Saint Petersburg. Among them are the sons of Afghan government and military leaders who fought the Taliban and therefore fear possible retaliation. (*Meduza*, August 18, 2021)

...AS MOSCOW ENCOURAGES COOPERATION ON AFGHANISTAN

Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Russia's powerful Security Council, has argued that the situation in Afghanistan can be resolved through peaceful means. Speaking to Izvestia Media, Patrushev said: "We are ready for a dialogue with the authorities [in Kabul], which will be proceeding from the will of the people, will be following the aspirations of their people and will be working on turning Afghanistan into a normally operational, strong and flourishing country." He further added that Russia has reinvigorated its contacts with the national security agencies and militaries of Afghanistan's neighbors as a failsafe measure. Most concretely, that list includes Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, but Russia's ties with China, India, Pakistan and Iran have intensified as well. (Itar-TASS, August 18, 2021)