



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Resource Security; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

AHEAD OF ELECTIONS, RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES STACK THE DIGITAL DECK

Last month, Russian state censor ROSKOMNADZOR began applying pressure to U.S. tech giants Google and Apple to remove Alexei Navalny's Smart Voting app from their app stores before upcoming nationwide elections. In early September, the Kremlin stepped up the pressure, threatening Silicon Valley with criminal liability if it did not comply, citing interference in domestic elections. Smart Voting is a tactic developed by Navalny's team to coordinate votes across parties to defeat members of the ruling United Russia Party. Navalny himself is now imprisoned, but has continued to encourage Russians to download the app. For their part, representatives of the Russian government have characterized the app as "illegal content" and "extremist" in nature. (*The Moscow Times*, September 2, 2021)

CRIMEAN TATARS ARRESTED ON SABOTAGE SUSPICION

Earlier this month, Russian security forces arrested a number of prominent Tatars on the Crimean Peninsula under suspicion that they had sabotaged an energy pipeline on the territory, which Russia unilaterally annexed back in 2014. Among the arrested was Nariman Dzhelyalov of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis, or parliament. The Russian FSB alleges that Ukrainian military intelligence offered the Tatars in question \$2,000 to plant an explosive device along a gas pipeline at Perevalnoye, located along a highway connecting Simferopol and Yalta. That pipeline was indeed damaged back in August.

Ukrainian officials have responded with indignation to the incident. Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has characterized it as part of a campaign of "escalated terror" being waged by the Kremlin on the occupied territory. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, meanwhile, has made clear that he believes the arrests come in retaliation for Kyiv's championing of the "Crimean Platform," a diplomatic initiative recently unveiled by the Ukrainian government and intended to generate international consensus regarding ending the Russian occupation of Crimea. (Reuters, September 5, 2021; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 7, 2021)

RUSSIA, BELARUS INCH TOWARD INTEGRATION

In early September, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with his Belarusian counterpart, Aleksandr Lukashenko, in the Kremlin to work out further bureaucratic details surrounding a possible future merger between their two countries. The two leaders discussed macroeconomic policy and the introduction of common tax structures and customs regulations. Following the talks, Putin went on record about how an economic roadmap is required before the two countries can focus on political integration. Notably, however, the two sides stopped short of declaring plans for a common currency. (*The Guardian*, September 9, 2021)

NORD STREAM II COMES OF AGE

Russia's newest energy route is now complete. Executives with Russian state natural gas giant Gazprom have formally announced the completion of the Nord Stream II pipeline, ending months of geopolitical uncertainty over the fate of the project. The pipeline, which is capable of transporting 55 billion cubic meters of gas per year to Europe via Germany, had previously been the target of U.S. sanctions until President Biden lifted restrictions on the firms involved in the project earlier this year. Experts and policymakers believe the pipeline's completion puts European and Ukrainian energy security at risk. (*The Moscow Times*, September 10, 2021)

NATO WARY OF ZAPAD-2021 MILITARY EXERCISE

This past Friday, Russia and Belarus launched Europe's largest military exercise in 40 years. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, the multi-day drills will involve up to 200,000 troops, 760 tanks, multiple launch rocket systems, 80 aircraft, and 15 warships. The Ministry explained that the objectives of the exercises include checking military readiness levels, as well as the ability of both countries to "jointly ensure military security and territorial integrity." However, NATO officials said that the Alliance was not invited to send observers, despite the fact that under a 2011 OSCE Vienna document, observations are required when exercises on the continent exceed 13,000 troops. Military analysts now anticipate a greater integration between the Russian and Belarusian militaries and secret services, as well as the potential for Russia's military to establish a more permanent presence in Belarus. (*The Moscow Times*, September 10, 2021)