



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Resource Security; Global Health; Europe; Russia; Turkey

RUSSIA REFOCUSSES ON DEMOGRAPHY

As part of a new push to improve the country's dismal demography, the Kremlin is attempting to slash abortion rates in Russia. An official document released by the Russian government outlines a "blueprint" with new approved measures aimed at halving the number of abortions in the country by 2025. The steps are part of a long-term plan to improve Russia's declining population by significantly reducing infant and maternal mortality, and by improving access to legal, psychological, and medical assistance for women considering abortions. The plan has already met with controversy, however, particularly among women's rights activists, who believe that abortion is a universal right and that government intervention should be minimal. Also seen as problematic is the document's focus on "strengthening traditional family values," a phrase that in the Russian context has traditionally been associated with homophobia. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 22, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The Russian government's "blueprint" represents the latest in a number of official efforts intended to improve the country's birthrate and reverse its deeply adverse demographic trends (including through financial incentives to families with multiple children). To date, however, none of these initiatives have had much effect on the trajectory of Russia's population decline.]

U.S. TRAVEL RULES DON'T RECOGNIZE RUSSIAN VACCINES

Despite a recent loosening of rules governing travel to the U.S. for vaccinated tourists, recipients of Russia's Sputnik-V vaccine will not see their ability to enter the United States expanded. According to the new U.S. policy, only foreign travelers inoculated with vaccines approved for emergency use by the WHO and FDA will see their travel restrictions lifted. Sputnik-V currently has neither of those two classifications, leaving Russians and citizens of countries utilizing the Russian treatment out in the cold.

For their part, Russian officials are railing against the measure - and alleging corporate malfeasance. Kirill Dmitriev, the head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which bankrolled the Russian treatment, has charged that a "number of 'Big Pharma' companies intentionally, as a matter of competitive rivalry, are attempting to restrict Sputnik and absorb markets." The question of "mutual recognition" of vaccines has become an overriding issue, he said. Sputnik-V has been approved in over 70 countries, according to the RDIF. (*Washington Post*, September 27, 2021)

IN RUSSIA, A RAGING PANDEMIC

Russia's coronavirus-related deaths have reached heights unseen since the start of the pandemic last year. On September 24th, 828 Russians succumbed to the virus, the country's deadliest day to that point. But only four days later, on September 28th, 852 Russians died of the disease. According to Anna Popova, the head of ROSPOTREBNADZOR, Russia's federal agency for consumer protection and human wellbeing, the end of this trajectory is not in sight because so few Russian adults have received the vaccine. "We have, let us say, 110-115 million adults. Of them, some 47 million have received one dose. This is less than a half [of Russia's adult population]," she said. Russia's official death toll associated with COVID-19 currently stands at 205,531. However, many health experts believe the number to be underreported - perhaps significantly so. (*CNN*, September 28, 2021)

NOW, EXPANDED RUSSIAN GAS HEADED TO HUNGARY

On the heels of the completion of the Nord Stream II pipeline, Russian gas giant GAZPROM has scored another victory, signing a new energy deal with Hungary to provide the country with 4.5 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually for the next 15 years. The gas shipments are set to utilize TurkStream, the pipeline that connects southern Russia to the Balkans via Turkey, bypassing Ukraine. The arrangement is a financial blow for Kyiv, which brings in \$3 billion annually in transit fees charged to Russia for shipping gas through its territory. (*The Moscow Times*, September 28, 2021)

AT SOCHI, A RUSSO-TURKISH THAW

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi for a new round of strategic talks. In their discussions, the first such dialogue in nearly two years, the two leaders focused on an array of issues, ranging from Syria to Libya to the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh to Turkey's potential purchase of a second batch of S-400 air defense batteries from Russia. The broad objective of the talks, however, appears to have been to deconflict positions between Moscow and Ankara, which hold opposing policies on issues like Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and back different factions in the ongoing conflict in Libya. Thus, both leaders stressed the importance of finding "compromises" and of "strengthening" bilateral relations. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 29, 2021)