



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

AFTER SEPTEMBER'S VOTE, FISSURES IN THE RUSSIAN OPPOSITION

Yabloko, Russia's only officially registered political party committed to liberal democracy, is cutting ties with members who backed jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's "Smart Voting" strategy in last month's parliamentary election. Support for the system is now considered "incompatible with membership in the party," Yabloko's leadership has announced. The faction has taken several swipes at Navalny, accusing the anti-corruption crusader of playing into the Kremlin's hands by supporting the country's Communist Party so heavily. "Any vote for the Communist Party, LDPR and A Just Russia," said Yabloko in an official statement. "Is playing a game on the side of the authorities." While support for Navalny and his efforts doesn't automatically disqualify individuals from membership in Yabloko, it does exclude them from weighing in on any future decisions made by the party.

Founded in 1993, Yabloko was influential during the Yeltsin years, but fell out of favor not long after Vladimir Putin's rise to power. Navalny himself was a member of Yabloko from the 1990s until 2007, when he was expelled for opposing the party's founder, Grigory Yavlinsky, and for taking part in a nationalist, anti-immigrant demonstration. (*The Moscow Times*, October 18, 2021)

RUSSIA FREEZES DIPLOMATIC TIES TO NATO

As of November 1st, Russia will suspend the operations of its mission at NATO headquarters in Brussels, marking yet another downturn in its relations with the West. The actions come in response to NATO's move, earlier this month, to expel eight employees of the Russian mission and cut the number of Russia's diplomats there in half, to 10. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, NATO's actions have left Moscow without "the proper conditions for elementary diplomatic activities," thereby necessitating the measure. He indicated that any questions NATO may have should be directed to the Russian ambassador in Belgium. For its part, the Alliance claims the ousted diplomats were engaged in unfriendly activities. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 18, 2021; TASS, October 18, 2021)

MOSCOW HEADS TOWARD PARTIAL LOCKDOWN

In a decree published on Thursday, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin announced that the Russian capital will enter a partial lockdown between October 28th and November 7th. According to Sobyanin, the measure is being taken in response to skyrocketing COVID infection numbers in the city, with the objective to "break the maximum number of disease transmission chains in a short time." Restrictions will include the closure of certain businesses, such as catering services, certain entertainment venues, recreation centers, and some restaurants. Attendance at theaters and museums has been reduced to half capacity, and unvaccinated citizens over the age of 60 will temporarily lose access to public transit. The lockdown is to be considered a "non-working week" by employers, who are to provide paid vacation days or issue orders for furloughs, and students of all ages will be required to learn remotely. (*The Moscow Times*, October 21, 2021)

THE KREMLIN HOSTS AFGHAN STABILITY TALKS

Last week, Russia played host to a preliminary round of dialogue between representatives of Afghanistan's now-ruling Taliban movement and officials from neighboring Central Asian states. Russia is attempting to engage proactively with the group, and is one of the few countries that did not evacuate its embassy in Kabul in the aftermath of the group's takeover of the country in August. And while Russian officials have stopped short of formally recognizing the Taliban as Afghanistan's new government, they have emphasized the need for dialogue in order to address issues critical to Russian interests, including the potential use of Afghanistan as a terrorist safe haven and drug trafficking in the region. (Associated Press, October 20, 2021)

COMMUNIST PARTY'S FIRST ELECTORAL LAWSUIT SHOT DOWN

The legal fix is in for Russia's Communist Party (KPRF), it seems. In the wake of last month's parliamentary elections, which Russia's Communists charge were unfairly manipulated by the ruling "United Russia" party of President Vladimir Putin, the Party filed some 32 legal challenges. The first of these has now been tossed out by Moscow's Presnensky District Court. The KPRF's lawsuits accuse authorities of using a dubious electronic voting system to rig the outcome of the election, and to steal votes away from their own candidates. Despite protests following the announcement of the election results, the country's Election Monitoring Public Committee announced at the beginning of October that it had found no evidence of electronic voting fraud. (*Meduza*, October 21, 2021)

RUSSIA FEARS A STRONG UKRAINE

On the heels of U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Kyiv, Russian President Vladimir Putin has condemned Western military support for, and assistance to, Ukraine as a serious threat to Russia. Speaking before journalists and experts at the prestigious Valdai Club, the Russian president explained that - even if Ukrainian membership in NATO isn't in the cards - Western assistance is transforming the country's capabilities in ways that represent a danger to Moscow. "Formal membership in NATO may not take place, but military development of the territory is already under way," Putin said. "And this really poses a threat to Russia. We are aware of that." (Reuters, October 21, 2021)