



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2499

December 6, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman, Kate Flaherty**

Related Categories: Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Missile Defense; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations

RUSSIAN PLANS TO SHUT DOWN NGO ROIL BERLIN

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has expressed shock at recent moves by the Kremlin to shut down Memorial, a prominent Russian NGO originally created to document Stalin era crimes and which now focuses on human rights. Maas has asserted that the group is vital to Russian-German relations. "Dealing with the past in an independent, critical and professional manner is... inestimably important for relations between Germany and Russia — particularly when it comes to the crimes Germans committed against people in the Soviet Union," he said. On November 11th, Memorial announced that Russian state prosecutors had accused the group of violating the country's "foreign agent" laws and demanded closure of its main offices. (*Reuters*, November 12, 2021)

CITIZEN APATHY AIDS "FOREIGN AGENT" POLICIES

In a new survey conducted by the independent Levada Center polling group, 65% of respondents said they were unaware of the Russian government's strict "foreign agent" laws and its intensifying campaigns against journalists dubbed as such. Another 34% of those polled said they had heard about the policies. Best informed were Russians 55 or older and frequent readers of Telegram channels, while those between 25-39 and who get most of their information from television were least informed. As for popular sentiment toward those policies, 66% of respondents were indifferent to them and 11% approved, with only 19% expressing their disapproval of the increasingly draconian measures. (*Meduza*, November 12, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Given the effect of Russia's increasingly authoritarian political climate on pollsters and respondents alike, the results of public opinion surveys in Russia should be viewed with some caution.]

A RUSSIAN SHOW OF FORCE IN SUPPORT OF BELARUS

Amid mounting tensions over the migrant crisis in neighboring Belarus, Russian paratroopers returned home in mid-November from participating in joint tactical exercises with Belarusian troops. According to Russia's Defense Ministry, the drills were designed to help Russian airborne troops familiarize themselves with Belarus' Grodno Region. The contingent included about 250 officers. Earlier in the week, Russia also sent bombers to patrol Belarus' border. Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko has emphasized the importance of military cooperation with Russia in response to what he calls aggressive actions by NATO and its allies. (*Itar-TASS*, November 12, 2021)

INDIA RISKS U.S. SANCTIONS FOR RUSSIAN DEFENSES

Russia has begun supplying India with its advanced S-400 air defense system, with the first unit anticipated to arrive by the end of 2021. The deal, worth \$5.5 billion, was signed in 2018 to aid India in countering threats from China. Its execution, however, will put India at risk of incurring U.S. sanctions under the 2017 *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (CAATSA), which aims to deter countries from buying Russian military hardware. This is not the first time a country has risked U.S. sanctions to acquire Russia's S-400; in 2020, Turkey acquired the system, resulting in sanctions as well as its removal from the U.S. F-35 stealth fighter program. (*Reuters*, November 14, 2021)

PUTIN TALKS BELARUS MIGRANT CRISIS

In a recent interview, President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia is prepared to back Belarus as much as possible with the worsening migrant crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border. He emphasized that, contrary to Western accusations, he had no prior knowledge of any plan or vision to weaponize the migrants against Poland, and did not have any such discussion with Belarus' Lukashenko. "I personally learned [what had happened] from the mass media," Putin asserted. Lukashenko has blamed the West for the recent influx of migrants, claiming that the migrants are fleeing wars caused by Western actions. (*Itar-TASS*, November 14, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Putin's protestations to the contrary, many have noted that the ongoing migrant crisis in Belarus is, at a minimum, being sustained by Russia's approval - if not by more active Kremlin involvement in the situation. For instance, Poland's Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, has charged that the situation has a "mastermind in Moscow."]

UKRAINE CRISIS HIGHLIGHTS U.S. INTELLIGENCE SHORTFALLS

Russia's unusual military movements along its border with Ukraine has exposed a weakness in U.S. policy: poor intelligence. One congressional source explained that "The intelligence community's job in Russia has gotten progressively difficult [...] It's moving toward what you would call a denied area." The lack of reliable information or visibility into President Putin's inner circle - in other words, his decision-making processes - has created a blind spot for U.S. officials, and therefore significantly increased the risk of miscalculation in attempts to deter escalation. (*CNN*, November 15, 2021)