



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2501

December 24, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman, Kate Flaherty**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; India; Russia

### **ADDITIONAL RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS EXPELLED FROM U.S.**

More than two dozen Russian diplomats will leave the United States early next year, Russia's ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Antonov, has announced. The diplomats, who are to leave the country by January 30, 2022, are the latest casualties in the ongoing deterioration of relations between Washington and Moscow. Antonov has noted that the expulsion means Russia's official presence in the U.S. is now "facing a serious staff shortage." The expulsions follow a similar situation in August 2021, where 24 Russian diplomats were asked to leave the country as their visas expired. "It has gotten to the point where the U.S. authorities cancel valid visas of spouses and children of our staff with no reasons provided," Antonov had complained back then. However, State Department spokesman Ned Price refuted the statement, rejecting the assertion as "nothing new" and not retaliatory in nature. (*The Hill*, November 29, 2021)

### **MANDATORY QR CODES INCITE PROTESTS AND OPPOSITION**

In an attempt to reduce high mortality rates, a newly-established nationwide QR code system is restricting access to public places and public transport for Russia's unvaccinated. However, the efforts have engendered both opposition and protests from the country's vaccine opponents. "Forcing people to get vaccinated through QR codes violates at least six articles of the Russian Constitution," argues Yevgeny Stupin, an anti-lockdown activist and Communist lawmaker. Some 70% of the Russian population is estimated to oppose the use of QR codes.

The measures, however, represent an attempt by the Kremlin to address a pressing problem. Only about 35% of Russians have received a vaccine, despite widespread availability of COVID treatments. As a result, Russia's pandemic mortality rate is among the highest in the world, with the cumulative national death toll hitting 723,000 in November for a country of 142 million people. (*The Moscow Times*, November 29, 2021)

### **KREMLIN CRACKDOWN CREATES "CAMPAIGN OF FEAR" FOR COMEDIANS**

A small comedy troupe located in Ussuriysk is facing up to 8 years in prison for "extreme hooliganism." The group, known for its goofy political satire, portrayed a drunken political boss blowing up a "United Russia" election poster with a grenade launcher. "We're not criminals," said director Andrei Klochkov. "They're trying to make us into criminals. We are not hooligans. We are just an ordinary film crew."

The incident represents an alarming turn in the Kremlin's crackdown on free speech, which until now has primarily targeted independent media outlets, activists, opponents of President Putin, and journalists. Its sights have now apparently shifted to comedians, one of the last remaining bastions of free speech in Russia. Formerly imprisoned comedian Kirill Sietlov has said that the state's new actions have "launched a real campaign of fear — fear and hatred," severely limiting what comedians are able and willing to use. "That there is a dude in a leather jacket sitting there, not laughing at their show? And the first thing that comes to the comedian's mind is, 'The FSB came for me.'"

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said that while political satire that "does not cross the line" isn't prosecuted, "this line is very thin." The increasingly extreme restrictions have encouraged comedians to get creative in order to evade censorship. (*Washington Post*, December 2, 2021)

### **PUTIN HAILS INDIA AS A "GREAT POWER"**

In President Vladimir Putin's second trip abroad since the beginning of the pandemic, he lauded India as a "great power" and "longstanding friend" of Moscow following talks with Indian prime Minister Narendra Modi. "We see India as a great power, a friendly nation and a time-tested friend," said Putin from New Delhi, where the two countries will hold a summit. "Relations between our countries are developing." The Kremlin has said that the summit will focus particularly on defense and energy issues, as well as the situation in Afghanistan, distribution of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, and cooperation in space. Russia recently began supplying India with the S-400 air defense system, the result of a \$5.5 billion contract signed in 2018 and which remains in force despite the threat of U.S. sanctions against India. (*The Moscow Times*, December 6, 2021)

