

Integrated Intelligence, Defence and Security Solutions

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# RUSSIA MONITOR

April 2021



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### Political and Security Overall Assessment

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**Levels of Risk Probability:** H - High; M – Medium; L – Low.

- **RUSSIA.** Passing the point of non-return in dealing with political opposition (neutralizing the Navalnii movement, actually outlawing any kind of political opposition), Kremlin will continue an unabated repression of political opposition regardless of West warnings because September electoral elections are too important to take any chances. Kremlin will be more cautious in dealing with protesters, thus hoping to avoid some of the Western criticism, but ruder in covered repression of main centres of resistance. Kremlin will try to take some social measures in order to reduce the grievances of the population. Economy will remain the main concern of the Kremlin and cautious steps will be taken in order to maintain macroeconomic stability. **(H to M)**

- **RUSSIA / EUROPEANS.** Moscow will try to avoid further tension in relation with EU but will not negotiate its inner political policy. It will only answered “in the mirror” to European decisions to expel Russian diplomats and impose sanctions on Russian officials. Russia is eager to avoid a European Magnitsky Law and new European economic sanctions. In Ukraine, Kremlin will maintain incertitude and will continue to pressure Kiev. No cease fire agreement is in sight and Zelenski proposals to include US in Normandy Format will be strongly rejected. Kremlin will accuse US for the new behavior of the Europeans towards it **(H to M)**

- **RUSSIA / US.** Relations will be dominated by the perspective of the future meeting between US and Russia presidents. The messages and actions of Kremlin will prepare the Russian position for this meeting, being known the Kremlin strategy of extracting concessions at such face-to-face meetings. Main Russian points will be: 1) Arms Control, Russia looking for an agreement on starting negotiation for a new NEW START treaty but involving also US ABM defense systems; 2) Some recognition of its self declared sphere of influence, mainly in Ukraine, but also US acceptance of what Russia has already achieved in Belaruss; 3) Political situation in Russia will not be accepted to be discussed; 4) Any other problem (Syria, Libya, Iran, Afghanistan) will be negotiable if and only if US will concede in the first three points. In this regard, there will be some stabilization of the Russia-US relations, but at a level full of multiple incertitude and hostile actions. However, Russia will avoid strikes such SolarWinds. Especially the economic filed will be protected of any kind of hostile action. **(H to M)**

- Russia will not take hostile measures against Western companies. However, the diplomatic difficulties will make Western economic activities in Russia more difficult. Kremlin will remain

deeply concerned about new Western economic sanction and will avoid any economic sanction “in the mirror”. (H to M)

## Key Political and Security Events

### I RUSSIA

● **The official end of Navalnii political movement.** Russia adds Navalny’s regional campaign offices to ‘extremism’ list. Russia’s financial monitoring agency said (30.04) it had added jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny’s network of regional campaign offices to a list of organizations involved in “terrorism and extremism”. Allies of Navalny said (29.04) they were disbanding the network as the authorities sought to ban them. A Moscow court is also considering whether to declare Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) “extremist”, a ruling that would give Russian authorities the power to jail activists and freeze bank accounts.

**Assessment** ~ *Democracy is being outlawed in Russia. This is the last step in the process of banning political opposition. → The Putin regime will not tolerate any kind of real political opposition or Western interference in its inner policy at least till September elections. (H)*

● **Putin gives to the people some money, but any economic change.** In his (21.04) state-of-the-nation speech, Putin promised a recovery from the coronavirus and its economic effects, cash payments for struggling citizens, more housing and infrastructure, but no fundamental economic change or reform.

**Assessment** ~ *As ratings for the ruling party could pose trouble in September parliamentary vote, Kremlin is seeking for stability, throwing social money, but avoiding any reform that could generate instability or negative reactions. → Halfway socio-economic measures will be implemented (as higher oil price are bringing more money) with immediate social impact, but necessary economic reform measures combined with a stimulus packet for the productive middle class will not be implemented. (M)*

### II RUSSIA – EUROPE

● **RUSSIA / UKRAINE. Russia said it will start pulling back troops from Crimea and the border with Ukraine.** Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said (22.04) that the units deployed to the border area had shown their capabilities and should return to their regular positions by May 1. However, some military equipment would remain. Shoigu had called the build-up a test of the Russian military’s readiness and an answer to NATO military deployments.

**Assessment** ~ *Russia step back from the brink of war with Ukraine ending a major demonstration of force. → Regardless of this step, the Damocles sword of Russia military threat will continue to hang over Kiev. Moscow could use military threat again when it will deem it necessary. (M to L)*

● **RUSSIA / CENTRAL EUROPE. The unending vortex of diplomats’ expulsions.** The revelations about explosions at two ammunition depots in 2014 allegedly executed by GRU operatives have caused a huge rift in Moscow’s ties with the Czech Republic. Not only a great numbers

of Russia diplomats were declared persona non grata and Moscow retaliated with expulsion of more Czech diplomats, but also a limit was imposed on the number of embassies diplomats. In solidarity with Czech Republic, Slovakia, Baltic States, Poland and Romania expelled Russia diplomats and Moscow retorted. **Bulgarian prosecutors said (28.04) that there is a “reasonable assumption”** that the explosions at four warehouses and production facilities in Bulgaria between 2011 and 2020 are connected to the poisoning of Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev in 2015 and the explosion at Czech ammunition depots in 2014. In connection with this, Bulgaria expelled another Russian diplomat. **The Kremlin complained of “mass anti-Russian psychosis”.**

**Assessment** ~ *This it is the greatest wave of diplomats’ expulsions in decades, bringing the relations between Russia and former communist countries to a new low. Russia is accused of executing terrorist acts & killing people on the soil of these countries. → Deep cooling of relations of Moscow with Central Europe countries and revelations could continue.*

*US could have a say in the process. However, Kremlin will suspect that US is encouraging the Europeans to investigate these crimes and to take a hard stand toward them. (H to M)*

● **RUSSIA / UK. London imposes (27.04) first sanctions from Magnitsky Law, including 14 Russians.** In this first round of sanctions under its new global anti-corruption regime, UK froze assets and imposed restrictions on 14 individuals from Russia (as well as eight others from different parts of the world). The 14 Russians were hit with sanctions for their involvement in corruption uncovered by the late Sergei Magnitsky. British Foreign Secretary Dominik Raab said that “as with our Global Human Rights sanctions approach, the anti-corruption sanctions are not intended to target whole countries or whole peoples, but rather to get the individuals who are responsible, and should be held responsible, for graft and the cronies who support or benefit from their corrupt acts”.

**Assessment** ~ *UK is the first European country to implement such a law, first voted and implemented in the US. International financial criminal activities protected by the Russian state have taken a blow. → Moscow will react angrily, not with financial sanctions against London, but by amplifying and extending such financial illegal activities. Washing illegal money is a must for the Russian political elite. Pressure on European Council to take similar measures will rise, especially from the European Parliament. (H to M)*

● **RUSSIA / EUROPEAN UNION. Russia has imposed (30.04) an entry ban on President of the European Parliament David Sassoli, Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency Vera Jourova, Berlin chief prosecutor Jorg Raupach and five more citizens of EU nations.** The measure was taken in response to the European Council’s sanctions against six Russian nationals. EU institutions and EU member states “strongly rejected and firmly condemned this decision, which was purely politically motivated and lacks any legal justification”.

**Assessment** ~ *This unjustified sanctions are without precedent and represent a new political low in the European relation with Moscow. → Such Russian answers will unite Europeans in*

their stand against Moscow. The gap will deepen as Europeans have to punish Russian involvement in various criminal activities in Europe (already at the level of terrorist acts). (M)

### III RUSSIA – UNITED STATES

- **Putin announced “red lines” in Russian foreign policy.** In his annual speech to the nation (21.04), Vladimir Putin warned foreign countries not to cross Russia’s “red lines”. He threatened them with an “asymmetric, fast and harsh” response if they crossed what Russia regards as its “red lines”. These “red lines” will be defined “by Russia and only by Russia”.

**Assessment** ~ Vladimir Putin considered that it is the time to take such stand which not only rejects international right and democratic principles but also try to legalize Russian hybrid (and arbitrary) approach to foreign policy. US are the main target, being seen by Kremlin as the most important adversary. → Actually, Putin will avoid to draw a clear line in the sand, instead trying to continue his policy of ambiguity (between covertly breaking the international law and, in the same time, invoking it), but he had to send an answer to Biden policy toward Russia who asks for accountability. Russia will accuse US for the new Western united position against it, especial that of the Europeans. (H to M)

- **In his address to Congress (29.04), President Biden sent a warning signal to Kremlin.** “With regard to Russia...I made very clear to Putin that we’re not going to seek escalation, but their actions will have consequence if they turn out to be true. And they turned out to be true, so I responded directly and proportionally to Russia’s interference in our elections and the cyberattacks on our government and our business. They did both of these things and I told them we would respond, and we have. But we can also cooperate when it’s in our mutual interest. We did it when we extended the New START Treaty on nuclear arms, and we’re working to do it on climate change. But he understands we will respond”. **Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated (03.05):** “President Biden has been very clear for a long time, including before he was president, that if Russia chooses to act recklessly or aggressively, we’ll respond. But we’re not looking to escalate. We would prefer to have a more stable, more predictable relationship. And if Russia moves in that direction, so will we. US are looking for a more stable, more predictable relationship”.

**Assessment** ~ President Biden sent not only a warning, but also reaffirmed a policy. Russia has to behave or US will retaliate even if Washington is looking for a modus vivendi, one in conformity with international law. → US will continue to send such messages. Moscow will answer in kind but with its own proposals, warnings and accusations. A modus vivendi will not be found easily. The American one will not be accepted by Russia because it means an end of an aggressive but efficient foreign policy. In the end, Kremlin does not want a “more stable, more predictable relationship” as US does. (H to M)

- **Looking for a meeting but from different perspectives.** President Joe Biden says (04.05) he hopes to hold his proposed summit with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, during his planned trip to Europe in June: “That is my hope and expectation. We’re working on it”. **Putin’s top foreign policy aide, Yury Ushakov, has said (25.04) that planning for a meeting**

**between the two presidents was under way.** “June is being named, there are even concrete dates,” Ushakov said on April 25. Russian Security Council Secretary Patrushev discussed by phone with Biden’s assistant the topic of the meeting of the leaders of the two countries.

**Assessment** ~ *A face-to-face meeting between the two presidents is becoming a reality, which in itself represent a huge step toward a détente. → Putin is looking for such a meeting because it will signify his coming back on the international arena. Putin is hoping to extract some concession from Biden, especially regarding Ukraine and other countries from self declared Russian “sphere of influence” and also US anti-ballistic missile defense. Both parts will continue to take appropriate actions with the aim of strengthen their positions at the negotiating table. Antony Blinken will visit Ukraine to show solidarity after the Russian military moves. Russia will blame US for many real or imagined punishing actions against it. (H to M)*

● **US / RUSSIA. The U.S. Embassy in Russia is set to cut its staff by 75 percent and, starting May 12, reduce consular services after Moscow announced it would restrict foreign missions from employing local staff.** The announcement came as the U.S. and several European countries expelled Russian diplomats over the past month and Moscow decided to limit the number of Russian citizens working in embassies of “unfriendly countries” soon to be announced.

**Assessment** ~ *It is one of the greatest cut in US stuff in Russia, strongly affecting consular services. → Personal and business contacts will became more difficult as the capacity of US consulates in Russia will diminish. US will be on the top of the “list of unfriendly countries”. (H to M)*



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