



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Corruption; Middle East

MOSCOW'S MESSAGE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

As the Kremlin deepens its involvement in the Middle East, it is also stepping up its media outreach to the Arabic-speaking world. A new study from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a leading DC think tank focusing on Mideast affairs, has detailed Russia's growing messaging campaign directed at the countries of the Persian Gulf and Levant. The effort, spearheaded by *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik Arabic*, "cultivate[s] an image of Moscow as a great power in the Middle East and focus[es] heavily on social media." It also "advance[s] a divisive, conspiratorial, anti-Western ideology," write authors Anna Borshchevskaya and Catherine Cleveland.

The Kremlin's efforts in this domain are bearing fruit. "The Middle East media landscape provides Russian state with unique opportunities," Borshchevskaya and Cleveland note. "A region with strong state-controlled media, weak independent outlets, and a burgeoning reliance on social media — along with a historical suspicion of Western news sources — has created useful openings that the Kremlin exploits to advance its agenda. Russia presents its own media as a better alternative to other Arabic-language networks, and it has a more receptive audience in the region than in the West." (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2018)

RUSSIA'S ULTRA-RICH

New data from *Forbes* magazine is illuminating the stark income disparity between Russia's most privileged citizens and the vast majority of their fellow citizens. This month, 98 Russians made the magazine's list of the world's billionaires. As a group, they represent a combined value of \$421 billion. The staggering figure exceeds the entire accumulated savings accounts of all Russian citizens, which total only \$420.7 billion — and according to Russian government data, the country's aggregate rate of savings continues to decline alarmingly. (*The Moscow Times*, March 6, 2019)

THE KREMLIN DOUBLES DOWN IN CRIMEA

Moscow is expanding its footprint even further on the Crimean Peninsula. At a recent meeting of the State Duma's Defense Committee, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the Ministry of Defense plans to increase the number of forces stationed on the annexed territory in order to protect Russia's interests in the Black Sea. When referring to the reinforcements and Russia's new maritime operations center in the region, Shoigu touted the entire expanded structure as "permanent readiness units." (Itar-TASS, March 11, 2019)

THE LESIN CASE, REVISITED

A Freedom of Information Act lawsuit may shed new light on the mysterious 2017 demise of Mikhail Lesin, who had been one of Vladimir Putin's closest aides prior to his death. Lesin, who helped Putin consolidate Russian media under government control, reportedly died alone in a Washington, DC hotel room of blunt force trauma after what hotel workers and witnesses described as an erratic three-day drinking binge.

In court proceedings of the suit filed by *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, DC Superior Court Judge Hiram Puig-Lugo has ordered the city's medical examiner to turn over its autopsy report and all other files relating to the Lesin case. Although the medical examiner originally ruled the death accidental, suspicious circumstances — including a gap in the hotel's security footage in the hours after Lesin was last seen alive, heavy redactions of witness interviews in the police report, and conflicting reports about the cause of death in Russian media reporting — have fed conspiratorial conjecture ever since. One popular theory claims that Lesin was yet another unfortunate victim of Russian state power, murdered to prevent him from acting or speaking out against the Kremlin; another speculates that Lesin faked his own death with the help of U.S. authorities and is now in hiding. (Associated Press, March 12, 2019)