



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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HOW A RUSSIAN OLIGARCH COURTED GADDAFI'S SON

Documents seized as part of the recent arrest of two Russian political consultants have highlighted a link between Russian mercenaries and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of the slain Libyan dictator. The younger Gaddafi has been living in hiding since the 2011 "Arab Spring" revolution that toppled his father's regime. The documents allege that a company associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Russian oligarch who bankrolls the notorious Wagner Group mercenary outfit, and who has served as a financier of the infamous Internet Research Agency political disinformation unit, reached out to Al-Islam about joining forces with rebel leader Khalifa Haftar, who Moscow has backed in his bid for control of the country.

Russia has consistently been seeking to outmaneuver European powers in the war-torn North African nation. To that end, Prigozhin supported Haftar's 2018 March on Tripoli with 1,400 mercenary Wagner forces, but the offensive was ultimately unsuccessful after Turkey intervened on behalf of the opposing Government of National Accord. The documents highlight that Prigozhin, a close ally of Russian president Vladimir Putin, has continued to try to quietly shape the political environment in the country to the Kremlin's advantage. (*Bloomberg*, March 20, 2020)

CONSTITUTIONAL VOTE PUT ON HOLD

President Putin has postponed Russia's upcoming referendum on proposed constitutional changes, including a reset of his presidential terms that would potentially allow him to run for two additional terms and remain in office until 2036. The vote had originally been scheduled for April 22nd, but there is currently no official determination for when the new date will be. The Kremlin's official justification for the change is that it is precautionary, intended to prevent the potential spread of coronavirus among voters and campaigners active at and near the polls. (TASS, March 25, 2020)

RUSSIAN AID TO ITALY MOSTLY "USELESS"

Italian sources are saying that the vast majority of medical material arriving in Italy from Russia to fight Coronavirus is ineffective. In total, Russia dispatched 600 ventilators, along with 100 doctors, to help the nation, which is currently Europe's epicenter in the coronavirus crisis. The aid, which follows a recent bilateral discussion between President Putin and Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, is being viewed skeptically by the Italian press, which has depicted it as a publicity ploy. Italy's *La Stampa* newspaper has reported that "around 80%" of the Russian supplies have turned out to be "useless." (*The Moscow Times*, March 26, 2020)

RUSSIANS NOSTALGIC FOR SOVIET ERA

Recent polling conducted by Moscow's Levada Center has highlighted a growing nostalgia among ordinary Russians for the country's Soviet past. 75% of respondents in the survey believe that the Soviet period was the best in Russian history. The sentiment reflects the view of the Soviet era as a period of stability and prestige in people's lives - even among those who are not old enough to remember it themselves. Additionally, 65% of those polled expressed regret at the Soviet Union's 1991 disintegration. (*Vedomosti*, March 23, 2020)

[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.]

NEW PRIME MINISTER CUTS IMPORT TAPE

After watching European supply chains fray under the strain of the coronavirus pandemic, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin has announced a lifting of import restrictions on many goods as Russia prepares for its own bout with the disease. Customs duties have been slashed for a whole month with the goal of ensuring that Russian store shelves stay stocked. Facemasks and medical devices are reportedly on Russia's wish list of imports. The Prime Minister added that domestic producers of essential goods also needed to step up their own production to meet increased demand. Lastly, the move is an effort to preemptively combat the sale of counterfeit medicines, a practice that can easily fly under the radar of authorities during times of chaos. (TASS, March 19, 2020)