



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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A HELPING HAND FOR IRAN

Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, is calling for "universal condemnation" of the U.S. attempt to get the UN Security Council to impose a permanent arms embargo on Iran. Lavrov said the U.S. has no legal right to indefinitely continue the current arms embargo, which is set to expire on October 18th. Russia's chief diplomat went on to criticize the Trump administration for withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran while still planning to invoke rights deriving from the UN resolution that endorsed the agreement. According to Lavrov, by pulling out of the nuclear deal, the U.S. "forfeited the possibility" of using "snap back" provisions that would automatically restore all UN sanctions that had been lifted or eased if Iran is found to have violated the nuclear deal. Russia's UN Ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, has already signalled Moscow's opposition to a Security Council resolution extending Iran's arms embargo, which Russia could potentially veto. (*Washington Post*, June 8, 2020)

OPPOSITION SPLIT ON REFERENDUM VOTE

Disunity within the Russian political opposition is emerging ahead of the scheduled July 1st referendum on proposed changes to the country's constitution. Political opponents of the Kremlin disagree about how best to parry the proposals, including a reset of President Vladimir Putin's electoral terms in office - a move that would allow him to serve as Russia's head of state until 2036. Opposition activist Aleksey Navalny and his allies in the Yabloko Party are encouraging a boycott of the vote, stating that its outcome is already a foregone conclusion. However, political leaders within the Communist Party of Russia, the second largest party in the national legislature (behind Putin's United Russia Party) are encouraging its supporters to participate, and to vote "NO" on the changes.

Meanwhile, the vote is proceeding in amended form, due to the coronavirus pandemic. In order to mediate the risk of transmission, a seven-day voting period and outdoor tents will be used to distribute the ballot box load. However, opposition leaders believe that these measures will only make the election results harder to observe and verify. (Reuters, June 10, 2020)

GRU SPY CONVICTED IN AUSTRIA

According to the verdict of a closed-door Austrian court in Salzburg, a 71-year-old retired Colonel in the Austrian armed forces has been found guilty of providing the Russian GRU with state secrets. The Colonel's name has been withheld, but according to prosecutors the defendant had worked with the intelligence branch of the Russian military since as early as 1987, receiving hundreds of thousands of Euros in exchange for the information he provided. The convicted spy was sentenced to three years in prison, but will serve no further jail time after already spending 18 months behind bars before his trial. (*Fox News*, June 10, 2020)

RUSSIAN BOMBERS INTERCEPTED JUST MILES FROM U.S. AIRSPACE

On June 10th, two formations of Russian military aircraft flew unusually close to American airspace before they were intercepted by F-22 fighter jets. The bombers came within eight miles of entering U.S. airspace off Alaska's coastline - the closest Russian approach to U.S. territorial limits in recent memory. Air Force Gen. Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, the commander of U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), had previously noted that he expected Russia to test American air defenses as the country deals with the coronavirus pandemic. (*ABC News*, June 10, 2020)

THE FIX IS IN FOR FORMER MARINE

After being detained for nearly 18 months, former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan has been sentenced by a Russian court to 16 years behind bars for espionage. U.S. authorities ranging from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan have denounced the proceedings as a sham trial with fabricated evidence. Whelan has been in custody since December of 2018, when the FSB knocked on his hotel room door and took a planted computer hard drive as evidence. Experts believe Russian authorities would like to use Whelan as a bargaining chip to exchange for Konstantin Yaroshenko and Viktor Bout, two Russian nationals currently serving out prison sentences in the U.S. for their roles in drug and arms smuggling. (Reuters, June 15, 2020)