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Kremlin Mulls Resuming Georgian Wine Imports

By The Moscow Times

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If visiting Russian specialists find conditions in Georgia satisfactory, the famous wines could be allowed entry. **Denis Grishkin**

The Kremlin is considering resuming wine imports from Georgia, Gennady Onishchenko, head of the Federal Consumer Protection Service, said Wednesday, Interfax reported.

"We see major progress in both Moldova and Georgia," he said.

Onishchenko added that in the 1990s the Russian market was flooded with counterfeit Moldovan and Georgian wines.

He called those beverages "poison" and added that some of them were produced by Russian manufacturers and passed off as Moldovan wines.

"The rest was diluted wine at best and ethanol mixed with coloring agents at worst," he said.

The production of counterfeit Moldovan wines totaled about 45 million deciliters a year at that time, while Moldova's own wine output amounted to a mere 20 million to 23 million deciliters, he said.

But in recent years, Moldovan and Georgian winemakers have increased the quality of their beverages, he said.

The consumer rights watchdog is prepared to send specialists to Tbilisi to inspect wineries and consider resuming imports of Georgian wines, Onishchenko said.

"Our specialists need to go [to Georgia] and see in what degree the documents submitted to us correspond to the real condition of the businesses seeking to supply [wines] to the Russian market," he said.

Onishchenko said he had asked the Foreign Ministry to contact Georgian authorities to get access to wine producers' facilities.

In 2006, the Federal Consumer Protection Service banned imports of Georgian and Moldovan wines, citing poor product quality, as the Kremlin's relations with the two former Soviet neighbors deteriorated.

Some observers have interpreted the measures as politically motivated, arguing that the watchdog has been repeatedly used as a tool of the Kremlin's foreign policy rather than for protecting consumers.

The Georgian and Moldovan economies were hit hard, since wines were their staple product and Russia was the main export market.

In 2007, the consumer rights watchdog allowed some Moldovan wineries to resume supplies, but the ban on the importation of Georgian beverages has not yet been lifted.

Russia will consider gas price cuts and debt relief for Moldova if the former Soviet republic renounces its energy agreement with the European Union, Energy Minister Alexander Novak said Wednesday, Reuters reported.

"First of all, we propose that Moldova denounce the protocol on entering the European energy community agreement. This is a precondition for us to discuss the issue of gas price cuts and the relief of debt, which at the moment amounts to $4.1 billion," Novak said before President Vladimir Putin's meeting with Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat.

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