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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

News From Russia: What You Missed Over the Weekend

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Valery Sharifulin / TASS

Coronavirus fight

President Vladimir Putin on Sunday ordered the creation of a special working group within the State Council to fight the spread of the coronavirus, the state-run RIA news agency reported.

Putin put Moscow's Mayor Sergei Sobyanin in charge of the new group, which will also include government officials, Interfax news agency reported.

Russia has recorded 63 cases of the coronavirus as of Sunday.

Optional school

Russia's ministry of science and higher education recommended higher educational institutions switch to distance learning from Monday to combat the spread of coronavirus, Russian news agencies reported Sunday.

Moscow said on Saturday it will make school attendance optional from Monday, having previously suspended many flights to and from coronavirus-hit countries.

Border closures

Russia will suspend trains to Latvia, Ukraine and Moldova from March 17 in a move to contain the coronavirus' spread, state-run Russian Railways said over the weekend.

The Russian government also said it was closing the country's land border with Poland and Norway to foreigners from midnight Saturday to try to stop the spread of the virus.

'Unconstitutional coup'

More than 350 lawyers, academics, journalists and writers signed an open letter in protest of President Vladimir Putin's constitutional changes, including an amendment that could see him extend his rule until 2036. "We believe that the threat of a deep constitutional crisis and an unlawful anti-constitutional coup in a pseudo-legal form is looming over our country," the letter states.

Police in Moscow and St. Petersburg also detained several activists who staged pickets against the constitutional changes over the weekend.

Cut short

Russia and Turkey cut short their first joint patrol in Syria's Idlib on Sunday after rebels and civilians opposed to a ceasefire agreement cut off a main roadway to block its path, according to witnesses and Russian news agencies.

The patrol on the M4 highway in Idlib province was the result of a March 5 ceasefire accord between Moscow and Ankara, which back opposing sides in Syria's nine-year war. The ceasefire has largely held since then.

President for life

Putin has formally asked the country's constitutional court if it is legal for him to change the constitution, the Kremlin said Saturday, a move that could allow him to remain in power until 2036.

The Constitutional Court must now rule whether the changes are legal ahead of a planned nationwide vote on the shake-up due on April 22.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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