

To the Prime Minister of Italy Giuseppe Conte

Palazzo Chigi

Piazza Colonna 370

00187 Rome - Italy

presidente@pec.governo.it

Rome, 8 April 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

We are writing to you as representatives of sixteen non-governmental organisations committed to defending human rights and the rule of law, as well as promoting campaigns to counter hostile foreign interference in liberal democracies. The methods and principles that allow us to carry out this mission are based on fundamental cornerstones – solidarity and international cooperation first and foremost. Italy, which in recent months has proven particularly vulnerable to the outbreak of COVID-19, has received support from several countries in order to cope with the current health emergency. On this account, we believe that special attention should be given to the strategic nature of this aid, especially in respect to those countries which are far from international standards concerning transparency and the management of the pandemic crisis. In particular, we refer to the arrival of supplies from Moscow to Pratica di Mare military airport which took place on March 22nd, 2020. In addition to inappropriate medical and health equipment, we are concerned with the fact that the Russian government has sent military means and high-ranking officers affiliated to the Russian Ministry of Defence, who are currently quartered on Italian soil with the *placet* of Palazzo Chigi.

Reliable sources report the extent (and risks) of the Russian operation involving military resources, which include fifteen Ilyushin cargo planes and a team composed of a hundred military doctors and other military personnel from Moscow under the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Defence¹. This mission raises concerns over the strategic interest of the military convoy sent by the Kremlin, which is given the opportunity to freely move within a NATO member country and close to the military bases of the Alliance, thus exposing to unknown intelligence operations. This is taking place even though the Russian Federation has been subjected to sanctions by the European Union due to the illegal occupation of the territories of Crimea and Donbas since March 2014. In these territories, where a war has been fought for six years, about 89 Ukrainian political prisoners and 200 war hostages, held in official and “unofficial” detention facilities, are exposed to the

¹ Iacoboni, J., “Militari di Mosca acquarterati nella foresteria dell’esercito italiano, i timori di un’”occupazione” russa in Italia”, La Stampa, March 25, 2020, available at: <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2020/03/25/news/militari-di-mosca-acquartierati-nella-foresteria-dell-esercito-italiano-i-timori-di-un-occupazione-russa-in-italia-1.38635908>

outbreak due to the lack of precautions². In relation to this situation, human rights organisations have mobilised to impose further targeted sanctions on individuals operating on behalf of the government of the Russian Federation: the so-called Magnitsky sanctions, currently being discussed at the Italian parliament as well.

However, the challenge concerning the fight against Russian propaganda, which in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict found fertile ground, remains. Italy, along with the European Union, is not immune to the consequences of Russian disinformation, which fuels the idea of selfless solidarity. Such propagandistic mechanisms already provoked repercussions at the international and national level; among the examples, there is the controversial case of Vitaly Markiv in Italy and the migrant crisis in Europe related to the Russian military operations in Syria. Concerning the territorial integrity of Ukraine, enshrined in international law, also on the Mediterranean front, in particular in Libya and in Syria, Italy and the European Union must stay united and evaluate carefully the physical presence of Russian soldiers motivated by the health crisis.

Moreover, as reported by numerous testimonies of doctors and activists on the ground, the government of the Russian Federation has a proven lack of promptness and transparency in response to the containment of COVID-19³. Several independent newspapers, including *Govorit Magadan* and *Ekho Moskvyy*, have been censored by the Russian media regulator body, *Roskomnadzor*, for “disseminating false information” about COVID-19⁴. Such restrictions sparked harsh reactions from the side of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of Media, Harlem Désir⁵. Worst of all, we find the recent threats addressed to journalists of the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* on behalf of representatives of the Russian Minister of Defence completely unacceptable⁶. Such intimidation constitutes a grave attack on Italy’s freedom of the press by the Russian Federation, a foreign power where the press is subject to censorship and independent journalists are exposed to increasing risks.

The facts and examples illustrated above are, unfortunately, part of the Kremlin’s misleading aid strategy towards Italy which can be summed up in the words of Virgil “*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*”. Russian presence in Italy is a worrying fact that should alarm us to the political and propagandistic schemes that Moscow put in motion with the aim of jeopardizing the European project, including Italy. With the utmost respect for the actions undertaken by the Italian

² Center for Civil Liberties, “COVID-19 in closed prisons in the occupied Crimea and Donbas which is under Russia effective control”, March 24th, 2020, available at:

<http://ccl.org.ua/en/statements/covid-19-in-closed-prisons-in-the-occupied-crimea-and-donbas-which-is-under-russia-effective-control-2/?fbclid=IwAR3EQDwp2DIURWMhqlZVBNzdJn0gD6rhTLdEoqYO3JZDkb3qJ75jgZq2u80>

³ Coda Story, “You lie there wondering if the person coughing next to you has coronavirus”: Hospital patients defy Russian state narrative”, March 24th, 2020, available at:

<https://www.codastory.com/waronscience/coronavirus-russia-patients-healthcare/>

⁴ CPJ, “Russian media regulator orders 2 outlets to take down COVID-19 reports”, March 24th, 2020, available at:

<https://cpj.org/2020/03/russian-media-regulator-orders-2-outlets-to-take-d.php>

⁵ Press release of the OSCE Representative on freedom of the media, “Coronavirus response should not impede the work of the media in Russia, says OSCE Media Freedom Representative”, March 24th, 2020, available at:

<https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/449110>

⁶ Statement by the Russian Ministry of Defence, April 2nd, 2020, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/mod.mil.rus/posts/2608714436037963>

Government during the COVID-19 crisis, we trust that you will carefully monitor the ongoing mission led by the Russian Ministry of Defence in Italy and communicate the details of Moscow-led operations on Italian soil, in the spirit of solidarity and openness which are distinctive traits of Italy and the European Union.

Yours sincerely,

Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)

Committee for the Defence of Democracy International (Belgium)

Crimean Tatar Resource Center (Ukraine)

Defend Democracy (Belgium)

Federazione Italiana Diritti Umani (Italy)

Free Hong Kong Center (Ukraine)

Human Rights Centre ZMINA (Ukraine)

Human Rights Initiative “Qaharman” (Kazakhstan)

Human Rights Movement 405 (Kazakhstan)

Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (Ukraine)

Kharkiv Institute for Social Research (Ukraine)

Open Dialogue Foundation (Belgium, Poland, Ukraine)

Oral History Institute of Moldova (Moldova)

Platform for Peace and Justice (Belgium)

Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union (Ukraine)

Ukrainian Students’ Association (Ukraine)

CC:

Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio
Piazzale della Farnesina, 1
00135 Rome - Italy
ministero.affariesteri@cert.esteri.it

Minister of Defence Lorenzo Guerini
Palazzo Baracchini
XX Settembre Street, 8
00187 Rome - Italy
sgd@postacert.difesa.it