

RUSSIA MONITOR

MONTHLY

April 2017



W WARSAW
INSTITUTE

CONTENTS



7

GAME
CHANGER



25

RUSSIAN
MERCENARIES IN SYRIA



35

MEDVEDEV
UNDER FIRE

3 ATTACK IN
ST. PETERSBURG

4 A NARRATIVE
IN RUINS

5 WHERE WILL
RUSSIA STRIKE?

7 GAME
CHANGER

8 SERBIAN
SLALOM

10 THE ANNEXATION ON
CAUCASUS IS GETTING CLOSER

11 MOLDAVIAN SCORES,
A RUSSIAN LINK

13 NATIVE
TERRORISTS

14 A GRU SPY
IN ESTONIA

16 OIL WAR BETWEEN
KADYROV AND SECHIN

17 YET ANOTHER DISMISSAL, A SHOCK
FOR THE SYSTEM OF POWER

20 GAS RETREAT FROM
CENTRAL ASIA

21 A COLD WAR
IN AFGHANISTAN

22 LONDON SHARPLY
CRITICIZES RUSSIA

25 RUSSIAN
MERCENARIES IN SYRIA

26 BEAR'S AIR
PROVOCATIONS

27 ELECTORAL
INTRIGUE

28 DOOMED
FOR IRAN

30 THE POSITION OF KADYROV
IS GETTING WEAKER

31 RUSSIA IS TEMPTING
DUTERTE

32 MOSCOW FUELS
A CONFLICT IN THE BALKANS

34 IS SOMEONE
BEHIND NAVALNY?

35 MEDVEDEV
UNDER FIRE

36 A SHOWCASE
SENTENCE FOR A GENERAL

38 A TIE
IN THE HAGUE



© EPA/ANATOLY MALTSEV PAP/EPA

4 April 2017

ATTACK IN ST. PETERSBURG

An explosion that killed 14 people occurred on Monday in a subway car, between two stations. The attack brings Kremlin some profits.

It marginalizes the topic of Medvedev's corruption as well as the strong explosion of public anti-regime emotions, surprising for the observers and for the authorities themselves, manifested in the recent wave of demonstrations. A year before the elections, Putin will use the attack to suppress the opposition more ruthlessly. Besides, it cannot be excluded that the attack will be used as a playing card in conflicts within the ruling elite, or even within the security apparatus. As usual in such circumstances, Moscow goes back to saying that it is necessary to tighten antiterrorist cooperation with the West, on Russian terms obviously. This is meant to weaken the sanctions on Russia for its annexation of the Crimea.

Kremlin propaganda promptly linked the attack with the recent anticorruption campaign of the activists such as Navalov and with the ensuing street demonstrations.

According to the official interpretation, enemies of the regime, allegedly supported by western secret services, want to destabilize Russia and to weaken Putin before the presidential elections, scheduled for 2018. Russia's Investigative Committee said that the attacker behind the blast was Akbarzhon Jalilov. He was born in the city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan. His relatives have said that since 2011 he's lived in Russia with his parents. When the family moved back home, he stayed in Russia. Identifying him as the bomber suggests that the version of a terrorist attack mounted by Islamists having some connections with the war in Syria will prevail. It should be remembered that thousands of comers from Central Asia have fought or are still fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State. It's not clear how will the authorities link the assassin with actions taken by the opposition. Eventually, they may force the thesis that the attack wouldn't have happened if in recent

weeks the law enforcement authorities didn't have to focus on the "subversive" activities against the regime.

As expected, soon after the attack the authorities have imposed some new more stringent regulations, thus strengthening control of security services over the society. Putin sticks to the political agenda conceived already in 1999, assuming that the foundation for a social contract of a kind is the fight against terrorism. First, the target were Chechens, then, more broadly, the North Caucasian Islamists, and more recently – the

Jihadists connected with the war in Syria and with the Islamic State. The said social contract amounts to the following deal: the government ensures security and in exchange the society gives up a part of its freedom. With every new notorious attack, Russians have less and less of this freedom but still – as we can see – they are not protected from terrorism. And they will never be fully protected, since the goal of Putin is not to protect his fellow countrymen. Rather, he plays with the terrorist threat to tighten the grip of the regime and to strengthen his mandate each time when it begins to weaken.



© STRINGER PAP_EPA

5 April 2017

A NARRATIVE IN RUINS

At least 86 people have died in a chemical attack of 4 April on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in the Idlib Governorate in north-western Syria. The casualties include 30 children and 20 women. The attack was most probably launched by Syrian or Russian aircrafts. The Assad regime denies the charges, same as Russia, which propagates a thesis that the tragedy happened in result of an air strike hitting a rebel depot full of chemical munitions. However, the US administration rejects such explanation.

The use of chemical weapons in Syria by the regime forces, and not for the first time, caused a storm in the world of politics, and it can already be said that this torpedoed any possibilities of even basic cooperation between the US and Russia in this conflict. Washington will go back to its harsh rhetoric against Assad, even though recently Trump's administration is said not to press so much for removing the dictator. The attack in Idlib has totally destroyed the narrative that Moscow has been trying to impose for the last few days, namely that West should tighten its antiterrorist cooperation with Russia. This has been the message from Kremlin after the metro attack in St Petersburg, which was swiftly linked with the Jihadists, the Islamic State and Syria. A similar scenario is repeated after each major Islamist attack in the West or,

as is this case, in Russia. Kremlin's reasoning is simple: either the West will agree to cooperate with Moscow on the issue of terrorism and will give up on other issues (e.g. Ukraine) or it will not, and then Moscow will have yet another argument to criticize the West. The use of chemical weapons immediately after the tragedy in St Petersburg and all its political consequences is an argument for rejecting the theory that the attack was a provocation of Russian services. It would make no sense to destroy the antiterrorist narrative just after it has been created. Or maybe the coordination has failed and those deciding to use the gas against civilians did not take Kremlin's reasoning into account. The question arises: did they do this unwittingly or, on the contrary, intentionally, to harm Putin.

6 April 2017

WHERE WILL RUSSIA STRIKE?

Ukraine and Georgia alarm that Russia concentrates more and more armed forces at their borders. What's more, the nature of this concentration expressly suggests Moscow's offensive intentions. The attack in St Petersburg may lead to recrudescence of Kremlin's war rhetoric, in line with the old principle that Russian regime tends to export its internal problems. The best way to divert attention from destabilization at home is a "little victorious war" with a much weaker neighbor. This strategy has proven effective thus far. It is sufficient to mention the second Chechen war, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass, and last but not least the war expedition to Syria.

The attack in St Petersburg metro has been used by the pro-government media to fuel the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. Aleksandr Mikhailov, a retired general and former spokesman for FSB, said to the Moskovsky Komsomolts that Ukrainian nationals might have some connections with the attack. Also Komsomolskaya Pravda brought accusations addressed at "Ukrainian radicals". This rhetoric may be an introduction to the escalation of warfare against Ukraine. The conflict with Kiev may become a leitmotiv before the presidential elections in Russia to be held next year. Nothing boosts the

popularity of Vladimir Putin as much as external conflicts, especially the victorious ones. Also, an increase has been noticeable in the activity of pro-Russian rebels in Donbass who seem to ignore the ceasefire, which should have come into effect on 1 April, and heavily shell the Ukrainian positions as well as the civilians. Ukrainian Deputy Minister for Defense, Ivan Rusnak, when appearing on 5 April before the NATO – Ukraine Commission stated that Russia had gathered around 43 thousand soldiers at the border with Ukraine: 24 thousand in the Crimea, 18 thousand in mainland Russia and



© EPA/VADIM GRISHANKIN/RUSSIAN DEFENCE MINISTRY PAP/EPA

1 thousand in Transnistria. 36 thousand rebels and 3 thousand Russian soldiers in Donbass should be added to the above numbers.

However, not only Ukraine feels threatened. The recent inclusion of separatist armed forces in South Ossetia into Russian military structures reminds us about Russia's military potential in the Caucasus. The military situation in Georgia is today much weaker than it was in 2008. Russian forces are bigger, better armed, reformed, and have military experience gained in Ukraine and Syria. Besides, they are deployed much closer to the strategic positions in Georgia. The town of Gori and the strategic East-West highway are within the firing range of Russian artillery. Tbilisi is in the firing range of Iskander ballistic missiles. In two Russian military bases (the 7th in Abkhazia and the 4th in South Ossetia), there are over 8 thousand soldiers, 80 tanks, 370 armored vehicles, several dozen Grad rocket launchers, and over 100 artillery pieces of other types. In Abkhazia, S-300 anti-aircraft systems are stationed which may play a key role in blocking air support for Georgia

in the case of war. On the other hand, such systems as Bastion in the Crimea severely obstruct access to Georgia by sea. The core of the 49th Army (the staff in Stavropol) and the 58th Army (the 9th staff in Vladikavkaz) are stationed no more than 250 km from the Georgian border. Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri in Armenia is situated only 35 km from the Georgian border. All these military assets are under administration of the Southern Military District, which since July 2016, it is under command of General Aleksandr Dvornikov, former chief of Russian operations in Syria.

In the current situation the advantage of Moscow is that it is hard to predict whether it will attack Ukraine or Georgia (if it decides to attack). After all, Zapad 2017 military exercise of Russia and Belarus will take place next September. Thus in the fall of 2017 the potential war theater will spread from the Gulf of Finland to the Black Sea. This makes the job of NATO strategists more difficult and is an increasing cause for concern in Kiev and in Tbilisi.



© EPA PHOTO US NAVY KENNETH MOLL

7 April 2017

GAME CHANGER

In early hours of 7 April, 59 cruise missiles were launched from two US warships USS Porter and USS Ross in the eastern Mediterranean. The Tomahawks targeted a Syrian military air base al-Sharyan in Homs Province. A few Assad's soldiers were killed. US intelligence has established that the aircraft which on 4 April dropped a bomb containing sarin gas on Khan Sheikhoun, a rebel held town in the Idlib province, was launched from the al-Sharyan air base. 86 civilians died, including 30 children.

Donald Trump's decision to attack Assad regime forces with missiles, for the first time since the beginning of the Syrian war, has drastically changed the situation not only in Syria, but also in the global context. Main target of the attack is not at all Assad's regime, but rather its protector, the Putin Russia. Trump's decision took Moscow by surprise. Russian propaganda apparatus, considered as highly effective thus far, which failed already after the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun (claims, that the gas leaked from the bombarded rebel depot made little sense), broke down again. Russians reacted chaotically, making accusations that are so unfounded that they may only appeal to the Russian public or to the most dogged enemies

of the US in the world. Russia, which for the last few years kept doing practically whatever it wanted in Syria, with passive attitude of the former US administration, has ended out in a very awkward situation. All it can do is to threaten to shoot down the US airplanes over Syria – but will Russia dare to do that? It is extremely doubtful. For Putin does not want a total conflict with America. And vice versa, indeed, the Pentagon alerted Russia of its planned attack on al-Sharyan. It seems that we will witness just political escalation between Washington and Moscow. The military action of the US paradoxically reduces the risk of a global war, as it will force Russians to be more cautious. It was the passiveness of the West, led by the USA, that posed a greater risk, as

it emboldened Russia to take more and more impudent and dangerous actions.

The scenario most feared by the Russian after Trump's victory came true. The new US president acted decisively (some may say: unexpectedly, impulsively, not having objectively analyzed the effects of the action). So far, Russia has been an active player and it was Russians that astounded the West with subsequent moves; and America was faced with a fait accompli. Russians behave this way because they knew that any reaction on the

part of Obama was barely probable. In the case of Syria, the turning point came in 2013, when the then US president drew the famous red line, let Assad cross the line and failed to react as he had promised. It was then Putin decided that he could act boldly in Syria. And maybe not just in Syria, indeed six month later he attacked the Crimea. The missile attack on the Syrian base ends this shameful period for the USA. Both at the global and regional, Syrian level – now we can expect a stronger engagement of the US, which will put an end to the winning streak of Assad and his allies.

10 April 2017

SERBIAN SLALOM

Russia will supply warplanes, tanks and armored vehicles to Serbia.

Confirmation of this news coincided with the presidential elections in this Balkan state. The decisive victory of Aleksandar Vucic means that Belgrade's bi-directional policy will be strengthened and continued. Serbian aspirations to join the European Union are accompanied by its aversion to NATO and its strengthened collaboration with Russia in security. However, such maneuvering between Brussels and Moscow cannot last forever, and Russians are more active than the West, striving with determination to drag Serbia to their own camp for good.

Vladimir Putin has promised Aleksandar Vucic to deliver the arms during a recent visit of the chief Serbian government in Moscow. This arrangement is to be finalized now. The shipment will comprise six MiG-29 fighter jets, 30 T-72 tanks and 30 BRDM-2 armored vehicles. These weapons are to come from the reserves of Russian Federation Military Forces, and Belgrade will pay nothing for them. Belgrade, however, will cover the costs of repair and modernization of the equipment, to be carried out in Serbia by Russians. Getting the aircrafts ready for combat alone may cost ca. 200 million euro. The victory of Vucic in the presidential elections on April 2 fosters further cooperation with Russia. Acting Serbian PM, running in the elections as the candidate of the ruling conservative Serbian

Progressive Party (SNS), won already in the first ballot, getting over 50% of votes. Vucic has lead Serbian government since 2014, and established himself as the most powerful politician not only in Serbia but also in the entire region. He cleverly gets his message across both to the pro-western Serbs and to the supporters of Russia (including highly radical nationalists). The cooperation with Moscow is backed by history and by the feeling of religious unity (Orthodoxy). Serbia formally applied for the EU membership in 2009. The negotiations began in 2014. Belgrade expects that they will end in 2020. Serbia's attitude towards Russia will surely not contribute to their successful finale. Belgrade failed to impose sanctions on Moscow authorities, although the Union demanded such action from the candidate countries.



© EPA/SERGEI KARPUKHIN / POOL PAP/EPA

Soon after his presidential victory, Vucic underlined that Serbs voted for the EU accession policy, but at the same time for maintaining close relations with Russia. Such collaboration is manifested mainly in the sphere of security. It is not limited supplying Russian military equipment to the Serbian army. This year, in September, Serbia will take part in the military exercise of Collective Security Treaty Organization in Kazakhstan – for the first time as a fully-fledged member. For a long time, Belgrade has had the observer status in CSTO, a military alliance assembling some of the post-soviet countries. Russians want to use Belgrade to block the process of NATO enlargement incorporating countries of former Yugoslavia. In the neighboring Montenegro, during recent

parliamentary election, a group of Serbian radicals sent there and supported by Russian secret services, attempted a coup d'état, thus halting the country's accession to the North Atlantic Alliance. Formally, Belgrade maintains positive relationships with NATO (three agreements have been signed in the past four years), however there are no chances for integration – considering Serbia's strategic objectives (first of all, Kosovo) and the fact that NATO members already include, i.a., Croatia, Serbia's traditional enemy. In local conflicts, Serbs count on Russian support and Moscow strives for Serbia to officially proclaim neutrality, which in practice would mean that Serbia remains in the Russian sphere of influence.



© EPA/ZURAB KURTSIKIDZE PAP/EPA

11 April 2017

THE ANNEXATION ON CAUCASUS IS GETTING CLOSER

On April 9, “presidential” elections took place in the separatist Republic of South Ossetia. The elections were held together with a referendum on changing the name of this quasi-state, which in the light of international law is still a part of Georgia, and whose independence has been recognized by Russia and a few Latino countries. The “parliament” speaker Anatoly Bibilov won the elections on 9 April, already in the first round, garnering 58% of the votes. Incumbent Leonid Tibilov gained 30% of votes. 78% voted for changing the name into Republic of South Ossetia – State of Alania. The outcome of two votes may be interpreted as a big step towards incorporating South Ossetia into the Russian Federation, by “uniting” it with North Ossetia.

Both main rivals obviously support the full dependence of South Ossetia from Moscow. The controversial issue is if and when should South Ossetia become a part of Russia. It is Bibilov who enthusiastically supports the fastest possible “unification”. For a long time, his party, One Ossetia, currently dominating in the “parliament” (20 out of 34 seats), has called for the referendum on unifying the two Ossetian Republics. Tibilov is much more cautious on the issue. He has warned against the negative reaction of

international community for yet another annexation on the part of Russia. Tibilov has strongly advocated strengthening of the current “independent” status of South Ossetia, in closer alliance with Moscow. Still in mid March the polls suggested the victory of Tibilov (24%), followed by Bibilov (15%); but over 50% of respondents were still undecided. The surprisingly clear-cut victory of Bibilov means that he was finally supported by the Kremlin, which in turn implies that Russia will take a course aimed at the annexation of

South Ossetia. This is confirmed by the recent incorporation of Ossetian troops into Russian military forces.

USA condemned the actions taken by separatist authorities, calling the recent voting “illegitimate”. The White House strongly emphasized that “The United States fully supports the territorial integrity of Georgia and its sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders”. The US position on Abkhazia and South Ossetia is clear and consistent. These regions are integral parts of Georgia. Russia recognized independence of the two rebellious regions after the war in Georgia, in 2008. NATO took the same position.

The problem of South Ossetia (same as

that of Abkhazia, where two rounds of “parliamentary” elections took place in March) underlines the escalation of conflict between Moscow and Washington. The Kremlin began to change its policy towards Tskhinvali, leaning towards the Crimean rather than the Transnistrian scenario, only when the illusions that it would be possible to make a deal with Trump were shattered. Russia, by upholding secession of the two regions, which in 1990s rebelled against the legal government in Tbilisi, hits Georgia – the closest US ally in the Caucasus. The configuration of powers in the area will, indeed, be very important for the development of the situation not only in the Black Sea basin but also in the Middle East, as the Caucasus is for Moscow a natural bridge linking it with the latter.

12 April 2017

MOLDAVIAN SCORES, A RUSSIAN LINK

On April 7, seventeen people were detained at the same time in Chisinau and Kiev. Moldavian and Ukrainian authorities claim that they had planned to assassinate Vladimir Plahotniuc, a Moldovan businessman and politician. Eight conspirators were detained in Moldova and nine in Ukraine. Large sums of money and weapons were seized, including grenade launchers and automatic weapons. The assassination was to take place at the beginning of April. The plotters were to attack the GBC business center, where Plahotniuc has his office. After murdering the oligarch, they were to get to Ukraine (on April 10, one more person was arrested – an inhabitant of Transnistria who helped the plotters to get to Moldova illegally).

The assassination was allegedly contracted – for 200,000 dollars – by two Moldova nationals. One of them, as Chisinau has informed, is currently staying in Moscow. This information is very important, as this is not the only Russian lead in the investigation. Moldovan prosecutors initially tend to the view that Plahotniuc’s political activity was the motive behind the assassination plot. Plahotniuc is a leading Moldovan oligarch, worth an estimated 300 million

dollars. Formally, he is just the leader of the Democratic Party, one of the parties in the governing coalition. In fact he shakes up the whole country. He controls the parliament, the government and judiciary; he dominates the media. All his serious political rivals have ended up in jail, in result of Plahotniuc’s intrigues. Compared to the decidedly pro-Russian president Igor Dodon, Plahotniuc appears undoubtedly pro-Western – but this is just a guise. In reality the oligarch is currently



© EPA/DUMITRU DORU PAP/EPA

promoting cooperation with the EU because this is politically profitable. The opposition is also formally pro-Western, however it is extremely weak. Quite unlike some oligarchs and politicians who support the alliance with Moscow.

The fact that the entire affair has been revealed is politically beneficial for Plahotniuc.

However, the reason for the attempted attack was not politics but rather the fights between oligarchs and, most likely, the Russian interest in silencing the Moldovan businessman. The alleged paymaster residing in Moscow, who probably commissioned the assassination, is Grigory Karamalak, member of the powerful Solntsevskaya mafia group who has influence, both in Moldova and in Russia. Karamalak is a business partner of Plahotniuc's enemy Renato Usatii who is hiding in Moscow. Usatii, in turn, was a partner of Vyatcheslav Platon

and Constantin Popusoi. For his financial swindles, Platon is now in a Moldovan jail, and he has compelling reasons to take revenge on Plahotniuc, who contributed to revealing the money-laundering scheme for the funds stolen from Moldovan banks. The scheme was created by Usatii and Popusoi, but behind it there was also an Ukrainian gas oligarch Dmytro Firtash, who is wanted by Americans. It can't be excluded that Ukrainian prosecution authorities came across some traces of the conspiracy when they were working on Firtash's interests and links. Ukraine also asserts that Russian secret services are behind the conspiracy, as they wanted to destabilize Moldova and conflict it with Kiev. Some of the arrested suspects are said to have undergone training in the occupied part of Donbass.



© SERGEI CHIRIKOV PAP EPA

13 April 2017

NATIVE TERRORISTS

After the attack in St. Petersburg subway, launched by a Kyrgyz-born man, the director of Federal Security Service (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov admitted that major terrorist threat in Russia is posed by migrants coming from other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), not from the Middle East. It can be expected that FSB will now focus on economic migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia. This in turn, along with an increased terrorist threat presented by the incoming Muslims, will foster xenophobia among ethnic Russians, which may mean a come back to times of ethnic clashes and riots on a massive scale. This kind of tension, added to the existing political and social distress, makes destabilization of the regime more likely.

Moscow itself contributed to such a situation, among others by making it easy for Islamists from the former Soviet Union to travel to Syria and join the jihad. As could have been expected, the problem was eliminated (indeed, the activity of Islamist rebels in Caucasus has declined, same as the number of terrorist attacks) for a short time. As the fall of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria approaches, the number of its members from the post-Soviet area who are coming back home is growing. And most of them

are heading to Russia. They are trained, experienced and indoctrinated – they are gaining ideological influence over young Muslims in Russia and in other post-Soviet republics.

Russia is the biggest Muslim country in Europe; around 20 million followers of Islam live there, every tenth of them in the Moscow agglomeration. There are around 8 thousand active mosques all over the country (in 1991, there were around 300), but the problem is

not just the spread but also the radicalization of Islam in Russia. Salafist communities (there may be as many as half a million of them) exist in almost every region. They also exist in prisons and in penal colonies, which have become a major source of supporters for radical Islam. Once, the inhabitants of North Caucasus were the main supply-base for Islam in Russia; today economic migrants

from Central Asia and Azerbaijan are such base. There are over six million of them (at the beginning of Putin's rule, the number was less than half a million). This community is particularly exposed to the activity of Islamic State emissaries. The overwhelming majority of Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz men fighting in Syria on the side of jihadists adopted their slogans while staying in Russia.

14 April 2017

A GRU SPY IN ESTONIA

Estonian counterintelligence, namely the Security Police (Kaitsepolitsei, KaPo), has arrested a Russian national who, according to the Estonians, is an employee of Main Intelligence Agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, i.e. the military intelligence agency GRU.

Arnold Sinislaui, the head of KaPo, has informed that criminal proceedings have been instigated in the case. As Inna Ombler, the prosecutor in charge of the investigation, has reported, the man suspected of subversive activity has been detained by court's decision. He is facing 10 years of imprisonment. The man was arrested already in January, but the authorities informed about the fact only recently. KaPo has declined to say if the man has Estonian residence permit. Thus the alleged spy may be a local Russian with a passport of the Russian Federation (a Russian minority group living in Estonia is quite substantial – a remnant of the Soviet occupation) or a visitor from Russia. If the allegations are confirmed, this will be the first case of capturing a GRU spy in any of three Baltic States. So far, only agents of civic intelligence, namely FSB and foreign intelligence SVR, fell into the hands of local intelligence services.

The main object of interest of Russian intelligence in Estonia are local defense structures and facilities, the army, as well as NATO soldiers deployed there, and NATO infrastructure in general. The information about arresting a GRU agent coincided with

publication of the annual report on KaPo activities in 2016. According to the said report, last year two men with dual Estonian-Russian citizenship were detained, suspected of collaboration with FSB, i.e. Russian civil security service. The court found both of them guilty of espionage and convicted them respectively for two years and six months and three years in prison.

Estonian counterintelligence is highly esteemed by NATO. It is considered as one of the most effective among the allied services of this kind. Built from scratch after Estonia regained independence in 1991, Estonian counterintelligence was much more immune to infiltration of Russian secret services than counterintelligence in other post-communist and post-soviet states. Already in 1990s, British intelligence established close cooperation with KaPo, and KaPo may boast of being highly effective in capturing Russian spies. The best-known case was the 2009 arrest of Herman Simm, a former employee of KaPo, and later a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Defense, who after Estonia joined NATO had access to secret information of the Alliance and its member states. Simm worked for SVR. In Brussels he is still



© DMITRY ASTAKHOV PAP EPA

considered as a Russian spy who caused greatest damage to NATO's security since the

end of cold war. Simm was sentenced to 12 years and six months in prison.



© EPA/YURI KOCHETKOV PAP/EPA

15 April 2017

OIL WAR BETWEEN KADYROV AND SECHIN

The news about a conflict between Igor Sechin and Ramazan Kadyrov, published by The Financial Times, produced nervous reactions in Russia. Both heroes of the article promptly responded with denials, threatening to sue the prestigious newspaper. In reality, there is a war going on between Rosneft's CEO and Chechnya President – it has political and, first of all, economic grounds. Indeed, the extent of influence of both men is lesser only than that of President Vladimir Putin. The strife over oil assets in Chechnya is a part of a greater conflict between two camps. On one side, there are the federal siloviki led by FSB, and Igor Sechin, and on the other side there is Victor Zolotov – the chief of the National Guard, the Federal Guard Service and Ramazan Kadyrov. The latter camp enjoys a greater support of Vladimir Putin.

Chechenneftechimprom (CNCP), an oil company operating in Chechnya, is owned by the Federal Agency of State Property Management (Rosimushchestvo). However, the CEO of CNCP is a Sechin's man, and the majority of extracting infrastructure is managed by Grozneftegaz, a subsidiary of Rosneft. Kadyrov has been trying to get control over CNCP for a long time. However, a few years ago, the government of Russia

placed CNCP on the list of enterprises to be privatized. At that time, Kadyrov used all his contacts in the Kremlin to prevent this scenario from happening. This coincided in time with the escalation of conflict between the Chechen leader and the federal siloviki (the assassination of Boris Nemcov was an element of the intrigue). Kadyrov emerged from this conflict unscathed, and at the end of 2015 he finally convinced Putin that CNCP

should be handed over to Chechen authorities.

Kadyrov's opponents in the government, however, are so powerful that Putin's recommendation has not been implemented so far. To begin with, taking CNCP off the list of entities intended for privatization was being delayed, and then bargaining began about how and how much of the company is to be handed over to the authorities in Grozny. The formal owner of CNCP, the Rosimushchestvo agency, is unable to reach any agreement with Kadyrov on the issue. Especially, since Rosneft entered into play, trying to save for

itself the best parts of CNCP. The negotiations must have failed to satisfy Kadyrov, as at the end of March he went to Rossiya-24 TV and publically attacked Rosneft, accusing it of hindering development of the petrochemical sector in Chechnya. The suggested price of 12.5 billion rubles for CNCP was, in Kadyrov's opinion, exorbitant and unacceptable. If the dispute escalates further, we can expect intervention of Putin himself, as in the current domestic and international situation exposing conflicts within the ruling elite is definitely not in his interest.

18 April 2017

YET ANOTHER DISMISSAL, A SHOCK FOR THE SYSTEM OF POWER

Leonid Markelov has ruled the Mari El Republic for 16 years. He left the post of Governor on April 16. Officially, he resigned himself – the Kremlin was supposed to find a new position for him. Surprisingly, however, on April 13 Markelov was detained and taken to Moscow. On April 14, by decision of a Moscow court, he was placed in custody until at least June 12. Markelov is accused of having accepted, since 2013, bribes of 235 million rubles in total (ca. 4 million dollars). The ex-governor denies the accusations and declares that he will continue his political career.

This has been a shock for the ruling elites, as President Vladimir Putin himself has promised a “new job” to Markelov. When appointing Alexander Estifeev as the new Governor of Mari El, Putin stated: “Now a situation has arisen when the acting head of the republic has asked for another area of work. Leonid Igorevich [Markelov] has been in Mari El for 16 years and would like to change his place of work”. If it weren't for these Putin's words, the arrest of Markelov would just be added to the growing list of dismissed and arrested governors. Just a week before Markelov's dismissal, Udmurtia's Governor, Alexander Solovev, had been removed from the office. The wave of governors' arrests

began already in 2014, with detention of Alexander Khoroshavin, the Governor of Sakhalin Oblast, and it has since continued. Nevertheless, the story of Markelov stands out from others. Alexander Khoroshavin, Vyacheslav Gayzer (Governor of the Komi Republic), Nikita Belykh (Kirov Oblast) or Solovev, who were all arrested in recent years, did not get any guarantees from the President. Several governors ended up behind bars only after they had been dismissed by President's decision, due to the “loss of trust”. With Markelov, it was different – there were rumors that he would become a senator. So far, the word of Putin used to be treated as a verdict of the highest instance. This is proved by the

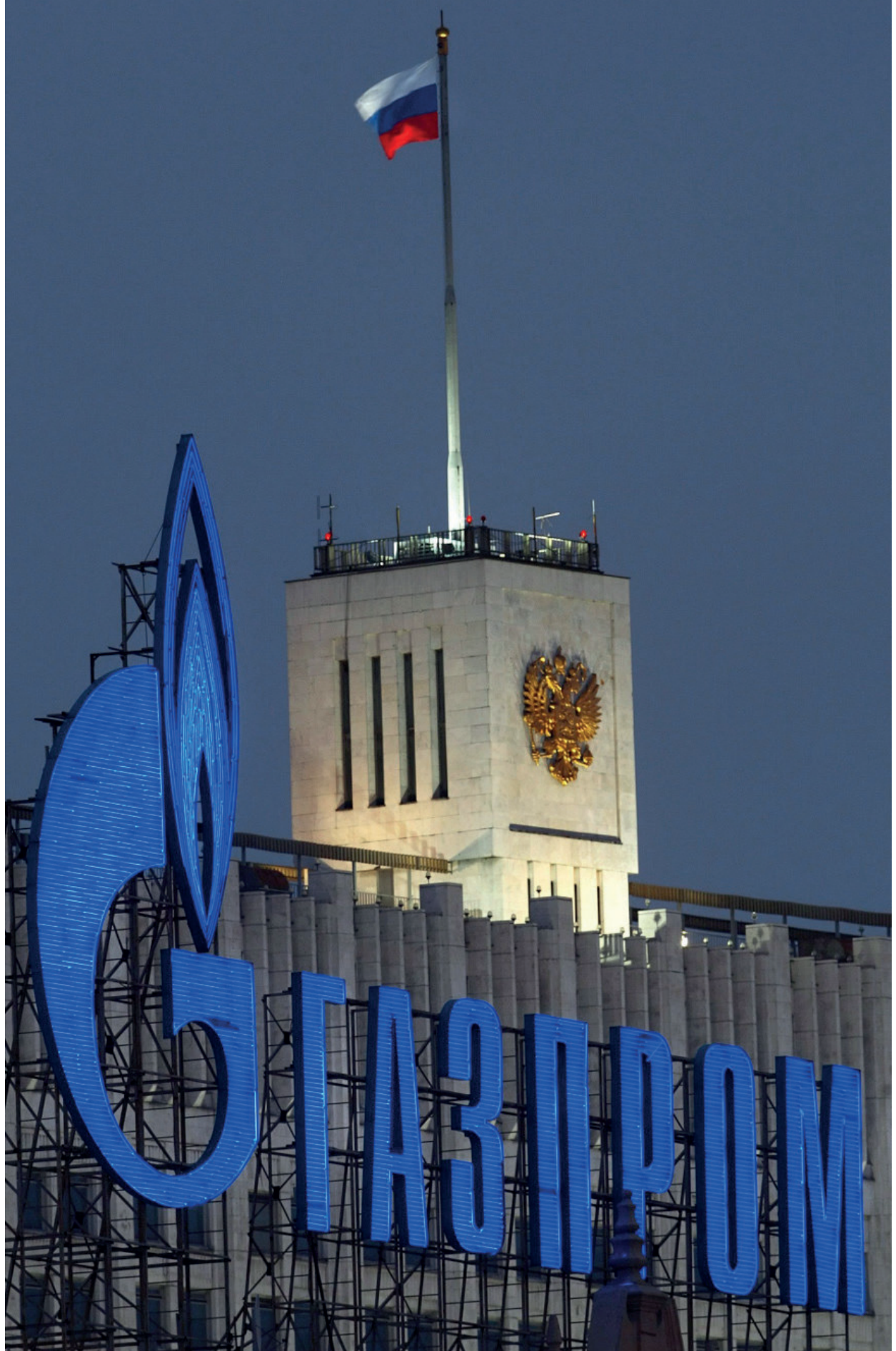


© SERGEI KARPUKHIN POOL PAP EPA

case of Dmitry Medvedev. Putin promised Medvedev during their famous fishing expedition in 2011 that he would hold the post of Prime Minister until 2018, and Medvedev is still the Prime Minister, despite numerous attacks against him and although he has powerful enemies in the Lubyanka and in the Kremlin. President's public support thus far protected officials of a much lower rank than a governor. This was visible even during the last series of changes of the heads of republics. Putin would meet with every leaving governor and thanked him for his service. It was a signal that they weren't facing arrest and that they would be assigned a different public post.

What befell Markelov will arouse increasing nervousness in Russian political elites. There may be two explanations of what has happened, both not optimistic for the officials, politicians and businessmen. Version number one: the word of Putin is not as important as it used

to be; President may promise something and then go back on his promise. Version number two: the siloviki are playing their own game, either in collaboration or in conflict with someone in the Kremlin, and they don't inform President about it. In both cases, a fundamental rule underlying the government system functioning thus far in Russia (power vertical, or *vertikal vlasti*) has been undermined. The system has functioned reasonably efficiently as long as the highest arbiter remained at the top of the pyramid. Now, we have a big question mark. And what is the moral for the governors (and all other administration staff)? It doesn't matter if you give way to Kremlin or not, you may end up behind the bars anyway. We will soon learn how destructive will the impact of Markelov's case be on the attitude of administration, especially considering the economic crisis and the growing wave of protests.



© EPA/SERGEI ILNITSKY PAP/EPA

19 April 2017

GAS RETREAT FROM CENTRAL ASIA

The information that Gazprom has signed a contract to purchase gas from Uzbekistan has given rise to much speculation, ranging from the claim that Russians are going to seize the raw material that could be purchased by European customers to the assertion that Russia has embarked on expansion on the gas market of Central Asia.

In reality, however, the contract concluded on April 5 proves something very different, namely that Gazprom is withdrawing from the Central Asian market (recently Gazprom has reiterated that it has no intention of resuming gas supplies from Turkmenistan). This is evidenced, first of all, by the contract duration: five years (such contracts would usually be signed for tens of years). Secondly, the contract provides for a supply of 4 billion of cubic meters of gas annually, that is less than has been supplied in recent years (e.g., 6.2 billion of cubic meters in 2016). Gazprom has revealed the amount it is going to pay to Uzbekneftegaz: 2.5 billion of USD in total. This translates into the average of 125 USD per 1,000 cubic meters delivered. Gazprom sells the Uzbek gas to the southern regions of Kazakhstan. In exchange it gets from northern Kazakhstan the raw material for its Gas Processing Plant in Orenburg, which depends to a large extent on these foreign supplies (on average, ca. 8 billion of cubic meters annually). The problem is that Kazakhstan is getting better in supplying gas to the south of the country on its own. At some point, it will no longer need the Uzbek gas (via Gazprom),

and then the supplies for Orenburg will be undermined.

The lower volume of gas sold by Central Asian Republics to Russia is also connected with the fact the main destination of exported gas is now China, which has already constructed three pipelines starting in Turkmenistan and is currently constructing a fourth one, beginning in Tajikistan. Currently, Chinese companies dominate economically in Central Asia. Central Asia finally turned towards China when it was understood that the Russian partner was not going to keep its promises to purchase gas at European prices, modernize timeworn Soviet pipelines and build a new pipeline down the Caspian Sea. Turkmen first, followed by Uzbeks and Kazakhs, turned towards the Chinese market. The insignificance and purely technical character of the purchase of Uzbek gas by Gazprom is demonstrated by the fact that the Uzbek-Chinese contract provides for a supply of 10 billion of cubic meters of gas annually (that is over two times more than the contract with Gazprom), and the volume will possibly increase.



© EPA/JALIL REZAYEE PAP/EPA

21 April 2017

A COLD WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

In recent weeks, tension between Russia and the USA in yet another point of conflict in the Middle East has mounted. It is increasingly clear that Afghanistan is becoming one more area of struggle between Russia and the USA.

On the one hand, we have Moscow's "peace diplomacy" and ever-closer collaboration with Pakistan, and support for the Taliban. Putin wants to draw advantages from the regional chaos and to increase Russian influence in the Middle East, at the US expense. On the other hand, Kabul accuses Russia that it fuels the war by engaging in intrigues with the Islamists. Kabul also levels accusations at Washington, which under the new leadership is getting military active in Afghanistan and is abandoning the withdrawal policy pursued Barack Obama.

At least 90 jihadists from the Islamic State were killed when the US military deployed the most powerful conventional air bomb (MOAB, called "mother of all bombs") on Afghanistan. The bomb was dropped on a complex of tunnels and bunkers used by

IS militants in Achin district in the eastern Nangarhar province, near the border with Pakistan. This may be a signal of increased US engagement in the Afghan war. Currently ca. 13,000 NATO soldiers are stationed in Afghanistan, including 8,400 US soldiers. This is part of the mission to support the government. The chief aim is to train Afghan military and police forces consisting of 300,000 people. It can't be excluded that in Afghanistan, like in Syria, Donald Trump will break from the anti-war policy of his predecessor. Generals have for years been making appeals to the White House to increase the number of troops in Afghanistan.

The US calls upon the countries in the region, including Pakistan and Russia, not to support the Taliban. Such an appeal was made during a recent visit of US President's national

security adviser H.R. McMaster to Kabul. Moscow's (and not only Moscow's) help stiffened the position of the Islamists and that had a paralyzing effect on peace talks. A few days earlier, on April 14, Moscow hosted a new round of talks on security and perspectives of bringing peace in Afghanistan. Apart from the host and Afghanistan, the following countries took part in the talks: Pakistan, China, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Moscow had also invited the US to participate, but they refused. The State Department branded the talks in Russia as a "unilateral Russian attempt to assert influence in the region". This was already the third round of such negotiations, the previous two being held in December and February. Washington believes that Russian "peace diplomacy" has just one goal: to weaken the influence of NATO in Afghanistan. Americans accused Moscow once again of supplying arms to the Taliban.

The Uruzgan province police chief told Afghan media that intelligence reports

revealed Russian generals visiting Taliban military bases and Russia providing Taliban militants with weapons and training. "Eleven Russians, including two women, dressed in doctor's uniforms and guarded by four armed Taliban, along with an Afghan translator, have been spotted in various parts of the province" – said Ghulam Farooq Sangari. Russian military advisers have been spotted twice near Tirinkot, the capital of Uruzgan province. Russians had also provided the Taliban with a mobile clinic where injured Taliban fighters are treated in Helmand province. A number of Afghan lawmakers have accused Russia, among others, of having sent its military delegation to the Waziristan tribal region in Pakistan, which borders with Afghanistan and is packed with Taliban camps. In this case, Kabul and Washington are concerned not only with cooperation between Russia and the Taliban, but also with the visible warming up of the relations between Russia and Pakistan. Moscow denies that it lends military support to the Taliban. Russians admit only that they keep contact with the Islamists to encourage them into peace talks.

21 April 2017

LONDON SHARPLY CRITICIZES RUSSIA

The chemical attack of the Assad regime on civilians and Trump's missile response brought about radical changes in international politics. The effects of the new wave of Syrian crisis include deteriorating relations between Russia and the UK. London's uncompromising attitude is clearly being consulted with the Americans.

To start with, Boris Johnson called off his visit to Moscow, planned for April 10. The UK foreign secretary stated that the "developments in Syria have changed the situation fundamentally". It was a reaction to the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhun killing more than 80 people, including 30 children. Johnson made it clear that he had agreed his plan with Rex Tillerson. It was the US

Secretary of State who conveyed the message to Moscow – also that of London. In this way the Britons wanted to show West's unity towards Russia. Johnson let it be understood that he preferred to stay in London to agree a common stance with other G-7 countries. London was pushing participants of the Lucca summit to tougher their sanctions against Russia if it doesn't stop supporting



© EPA/FEHIM DEMIR PAP/EPA

the Assad regime. According to The Times, the new sanctions, hitting the highest officials in Russian administration, were listed in the form of a document. However, the discussion ended to the satisfaction of the supporters of maintaining the status quo in the relationship between the West and Moscow, as confirmed by Tillerson's visit to Moscow, which lowered the temperature of the debate.

This does not change the fact that today London is the chief critic of the Kremlin. It can't be excluded that such distribution of roles was agreed upon in a phone conversation between Theresa May and Donald Trump on April 10. Recently, London has made it clear: Putin has an opportunity to break its ties with the Assad regime; if he doesn't he cannot expect that that Moscow's relations with the West will improve. That was the message conveyed to the British press by Johnson and defense secretary Michael Fallon. The latter even wrote that "Russia is directly responsible for every civilian death" in Syria. A few days later, Johnson asked Russia to put an end to

the war in Syria, withdraw its support for Assad (a pre-requisite) and join the broad international coalition combating the Islamic State.

Earlier it had been expected that during his visit to Moscow Johnson might talk about reviewing the poor relations between the UK and Russia in recent years. The very fact that this was to be the first meeting between the diplomatic heads of the United Kingdom and of Russia speaks for itself. Moscow's very sharp reactions to the cancellation of the visit show that Russia's expectations connected with Johnson's visit were high. The events in Syria have radically changed the attitude of London towards Russia, as confirmed not only by the rhetoric of top British politicians. The structures of the GCHQ intelligence agency responsible for cyber security have warned against hackers' attacks targeting institutions and state representatives. It was not stated that such attacks would come from Russia, yet this is evident from the context of the warning.



© SERGEI CHIRIKOV PAP_EPA

22 April 2017

RUSSIAN MERCENARIES IN SYRIA

It has been known for a long time that Bashar al-Assad has huge problems in replenishing losses in his troops. The government forces are too lean to conduct large offensive operations in various Syrian regions and guard already captured terrain at the same time.

Were it not for the presence of thousands of Hezbollah fighters and other Shia militias, as well as hundreds of Russian and Iranian military personnel (not to mention military equipment and aerial support), Assad would have already lost this war, or at least control only a fraction of what he does now. At least 10,000 fighters and soldiers from Russia and the former Soviet Union are involved in the war in Syria. They are not only volunteers who joined the Islamic State and various rebel groups but also regular troops and units deployed to Syria by Ramzan Kadyrov.

Officially, Russia's war operation in Syria has ended but significant regular army forces remain in the country (with Tartus and Khmeimim as main bases). Above all, participation of mostly irregular Russian forces in the war is on the rise. More and more reports of mercenaries from Russia and other post-Soviet countries emerge. They are referred to as "USSR Spetsnaz", with most members coming from Central Asia and the Caucasus. They call themselves Turan, have their own uniforms, and are reported to be about one thousand men strong, according to the Russian Spring portal, launched following the annexation of Crimea. Unlike the Russian mercenaries who were previously fighting on the regime side in Syria, Turan operates within the structures of the government army and takes part in regular battles. Both Damascus and Moscow find their presence hard to deny. Their presence means that the Russian presence in Syria will continue for much

longer than it appears, it will not end with withdrawal of all official units and advisers.

Turan is not the first unit of mercenaries from Russia to fight in Syria on Assad's side. First, there was the Slavic Corps organised in the autumn of 2013 by two managers from the international Moran Security Group which specialises in providing armed vessel protection against pirates. In October 2013, following the training in Latakia, two companies of over 250 mercenaries set out east. Their mission was to shield oil fields of strategic importance. However, on their way, they had to fight a hard battle with jihadists from the Islamic State and the Slavic Corps suffered heavy losses, which effectively ended the project. The following year, one of Moran Security Group and Slavic Corps veterans, former commander of a GRU Spetsnaz unit, lieutenant-colonel in the reserves, Dmitry Utkin aka Wagner, formed a company of mercenaries known today as Company Wagner. Its members took part in the annexation of Crimea and fought in the Donbass. Wagner's men were used to remove some warlords, including Alexey Mozgovoy and Pavel Dremov, who were inconvenient for the "official" authorities of the Luhansk People's Republic. Wagner's unit returned to Russia in the autumn of 2015 when Putin decided to embark on a military expedition to Syria. This is where most soldiers from the Russian Private Military Company Wagner ended up – perhaps even more than 2,000 men.



© EPA/YURI KOCHETKOV PAP/EPA.

22 April 2017

BEAR'S AIR PROVOCATIONS

Four times in recent days after nearly two years of silence. Russian army aircraft, including strategic bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons, appeared in immediate proximity of US and Canada borders.

First, on April 17, two Tu-95's flew along the Aleutian Islands to the south at the distance of over 150 km. The Russians were intercepted by two F-22 Raptor jets off the Elmendorf airbase in Alaska and assisted for 12 minutes until they returned. Approximately 24 hours later, two more Tu-95's (NATO reporting name: Bear) appeared near Alaska again. This time, they were only followed by the E-3 Sentry early warning and control aircraft. On Wednesday, April 19, the patrol of Il-38's of Russia's naval aviation – no jets took off, either. Russians appeared in the area for the fourth time on April 20. Close to the border of Canada's airspace – they had not been seen here for over two years, either. For the last time, they were spotted here in December 2014 when a Canadian fighter jet intercepted Russian aircraft approaching from the Far North. Two CF-18's took off when the American early warning system in

Alaska spotted two Tu-95's approaching from the west towards the Canadian border. The Russians were also observed by two US F-22's from Alaska.

Previously, the Russians made such regular flights in 2012-2014, before Tu-95's were grounded for a longer period due to safety concerns after the accident on 8 June 2015. One of the bombers collapsed on the runway and caught fire, one crew member was killed, several were injured. For the last time, a pair of Bears flew along Alaska and California on 4 July 2015. The resumption of flights in the Arctic coincides with the most serious crisis in US – Russia relations for years, several days after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Moscow. The near-Canada flight shows that Russia also considers Ottawa as an enemy, beside the USA and Great Britain. And this is in spite of Justin Trudeau government's

initial plans to attempt to improve relations with Moscow. In this case, similar to London, the chemical attack in Syria, has changed the government's stance.

Resumption of air patrols near the border of the USA is just another step of Moscow's departure from the "waiting for the change" policy assumed after last November's victory of Donald Trump. Since the swearing-in of the new president, Kremlin's disappointment

has been deeper and deeper each month. The quickly chilling relations are accompanied by the return of the policy of military confrontation characteristic for the period of 2014-2016. The appearing of the Russian intelligence collection ship, Victor Leonov, twice near the eastern coast of the USA as well as provocations by Russian aircraft towards the American USS Porter destroyer in the Black Sea are examples.

24 April 2017

ELECTORAL INTRIGUE

Presidential elections in Russia have been scheduled for March 2018. Vladimir Putin hasn't declared yet whether he will participate. Thus it's not surprising that each mention of the topic by Putin elicits a strong response. This was also the case on April 20 in the Kremlin at the meeting of the organizational committee for Russian celebrations of the end of World War II. One of the participants, an Afghan veteran, said that according to some senator the current chairman of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, would be the "rightful successor" of President Putin. Putin replied briefly: "The successor of president of the Russian Federation may only be chosen by the Russian people in free democratic elections".

This looks like a setup. And it isn't about Volodin at all. The former chief of Kremlin administration is popular and loyal, but he's already 53, and Putin will very likely give up Kremlin only in 2024. Now he's changing the cadres. He promotes young technocrats, such as Anton Alikhanov, the governor of Kaliningrad Oblast, and faithful former security guards, such as Alexey Dyumin, the governor of Tula. Putin is preparing people out of whom he will select his successor in 2024. First, they will obviously have to step down from their governor positions and will be appointed to top central government posts. But this is still far away. First, it's necessary for Putin to ensure the fourth term in office – in presidential elections to be held in one year's time.

It is still unclear what will be the leading

theme of the election campaign. It seems that war with Islamic terrorism, once very effective, does no longer guarantee success. Maybe the theme will be some external conflict. The problem is that since 2014 the security situation in Europe has changed considerably – Ukraine is stronger and NATO is better prepared to resist aggression. Putin may decide to win as the leader of anti-corruption crusade and the suppressor of the "fifth column", financed by the CIA. Surprisingly numerous anti-corruption demonstrations after the Alexei Navalny's report, exposing the properties owned by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, show that playing the anti-corruption card may prove beneficial for Putin. By arresting corrupt governors (their list keeps getting longer) and selected members of the opposition, Kremlin shows that it notices and reacts to social



© EPA/ALEXANDER NEMENOV / POOL PAP/EPA

expectations, and at the same time it captures the opponent's "topic of the day" (a favorite tool in the arsenal of measures of Putin's

adviser Vladislav Surkov), thus convincing the Russians that the regime is purging itself of "contaminators".

24 April 2017

DOOMED FOR IRAN

The military involvement of the US in Syria after the chemical attack and the visibly growing Russian-US conflict strengthen the Teheran-Damascus-Moscow axis. In the current situation, the greatest beneficiaries are Iran and obviously Bashar al-Assad. It should be remembered that it was Teheran that persuaded Moscow to launch military intervention in Syria and that Russian military presence (in particular in the airspace) in this country lies in Teheran's interest. Assad can't win the war without it.

After the conquest of Aleppo, the interests of Russia and Iran in Syria began to dissipate. Moscow has been seeking to retreat from the war while keeping its military bases and political influence. Recently, there have been a growing number of signals indicating that Moscow may come to an understanding with the US, also with the participation of Turkey. This would threaten

the Assad's regime and the Iranian influence in Syria. However, the chemical attack in the Idlib province on April 4 undermined the rapprochement between Russia and the US. Deliberate provocation on the part of Assad can't be excluded. Once again it's turned out that Moscow has no other allies in Syria than Iran, whereas the US attack has cemented the Moscow-Damascus-Teheran triangle.



© SERGEI KARPUKHIN PAP EPA

On April 9, President Hassan Rouhani called Putin. According to Kremlin's reports, both leaders "condemned US aggression in Syria" and stated that actions against Syria violated international law. Rouhani also called Assad on the same day. As national Iranian TV has informed, Rouhani said that the "allegations that Syria launched the chemical attack were just a pretext to disrupt the Syrian peace process". At the same time, defense ministers of Russia and Iran also held a phone conversation, same as Iranian security advisor Ali Shamkhani and his Syrian counterpart, Ali Mamlouk. The joint command operation center of Russian, Iranian and Shia militia in Syria also expressed its opinion, stating that the US airstrike crossed the "red line" and accusing the United States that they are planning to occupy northern Syria. On April 10, heads of Foreign Ministries of Russia and Iran spoke on the phone, and on April 14, together with the head of Assad's diplomacy, they condemned the US airstrike.

The chemical attack in the Idlib province and the American response suit Iran also for another reason. The exacerbation of relations between Teheran and Trump's administration has been accompanied by reconciliation between Russia and Israel. Iran may have been worried that Moscow, in a decisive moment, will sell it along with Assad in a frame of some bigger deal. The Ayatollahs and Assad might have been concerned that Putin, with Israel's assistance, will reach an agreement with Trump over Syria. On March 9, Benjamin Netanyahu paid a visit to Moscow. At a meeting with Russian president, he accused Iran of spreading "Shia Islamic terrorism". On March 17, ten days before Rouhani's visit in Moscow, Israel launched an airstrike on Syria. The events that took place on April 4-7 changed the situation. Putin called Netanyahu and criticized Israel for expressing "one-hundred percent certainty" that chemical weapons had been used by the Syrian regime.



© EPA/IAN LANGSDON PAP/EPA

25 April 2017

THE POSITION OF KADYROV IS GETTING WEAKER

There are signals indicating that Ramzan Kadyrov is experiencing problems. The leader of Chechnya has for a long time been in serious conflict with federal siloviki and he has many enemies in Moscow.

Only Putin's protection has allowed Kadyrov to keep his strong position: he's become the absolute ruler of Chechnya where federals have no entry, and he's received generous grants from central budget. However, in recent weeks Kadyrov has become visibly defensive – so offensive that rumors started to circulate in Russia that his opponents may strive to overthrow the Chechen president using to this end regular army troops which would be sent to Northern Caucasus for large-scale military exercises. Such a scenario is still rather unlikely (too high risk of an armed confrontation that would destabilize the entire Northern Caucasus), but this does not change the fact that Kadyrov has suffered a number of defeats recently.

First, his opponents sparked a media storm around bullying of homosexuals in Chechnya.

Such repressions have been known for a long time but the fact has been used against Kadyrov only recently. At the beginning, a series of publications appeared in “Novaya Gazeta”, an opposition newspaper which nevertheless had been used several times to attack Kadyrov's opponents (for example, in the case of Boris Nemcov's assassination). Now the newspaper became a center of attention after it announced that was getting threats from Chechnya. Moreover, gay repressions in Chechnya have been broadly commented by foreign press and political circles abroad. Moreover, Kadyrov's attempts to control Chechen oil assets have turned out an emblematic failure. On April 19, a tripartite meeting took place between Putin, Kadyrov and Rosneft's CEO Igor Sechin (linked to the siloviki), followed by face-to-face talks between Putin and Kadyrov, as well

as Putin and Sechin. After the talks, Kadyrov gave up his claims to Rosneft's assets in Chechnya. Rosneft will not sell its Chechen assets to the government and will not build a refinery there. Rosneft will instead invest in social infrastructure in Chechnya, including housing. The meeting at the highest level was held after the storm provoked by an article in The Financial Times about a conflict between Sechin and Kadyrov (Russia Monitor wrote

about it link). The current arrangement means not only a defeat of Chechnya president (Kadyrov criticized Rosneft for its plans to privatize Grozneftegaz; he didn't like the price of 12.5 billion rubles that Sechin's oil company demanded for a 51% stake in its subsidiary) but also a change of Putin's decision taken a year and a half ago, when he had given green light to Kadyrov for taking over the oil assets in Chechnya.



© EPA/MARK R. CRISTINO PAP/EPA

25 April 2017

RUSSIA IS TEMPTING DUTERTE

On April 20, the flagship of Russian Pacific Fleet, a guided missile cruiser named Varyag, arrived in the capital of Philippines Manila, accompanied by a tanker Pechenga.

This isn't the first visit of Russian war fleet in this Asian country, which shows a growing interest of Moscow in cooperation with this traditional US ally. Under President Rodrigo Duterte, the relations between Philippines and the USA have visibly deteriorated, and Filipino leader is openly

seeking to forge closer ties with Russia and China. Duterte paid a "goodwill" visit on board of Varyag. Earlier, the ship commander had met with Vice-admiral Ronald Joseph Mercado, the Philippine Navy commander-in-chief. As declared by lieutenant colonel Alexey Ulyanenko, the four-day visit of his ship

in Philippines is to strengthen the bilateral relations between the two countries. This has been already the second visit in three months of Russian war navy ships in the Philippines. On January 4, a Russian destroyer Admiral Tributs and a sea tanker Boris Butoma docked in Manila. At the time, President Duterte mentioned a possibility of joint maritime exercises with Russia.

After having hosted a meeting of ASEAN defense ministers in April 2016 in Moscow, Russia has been increasingly active in the region. It's been striving to intensify its cooperation not just with its old allies, such as Vietnam and Laos, and not only with Indonesia, but also with traditional US allies in the region, namely Thailand and the Philippines. Contacts with the latter have become particularly intense after Duterte was elected president in June 2016. He met Putin for the first time last November, at a regional summit in Peru. There Duterte informed Putin about his plans to distance himself from the US. The Philippines and the US are bound by a mutual defense treaty, concluded in 1951. Manila benefited from American assistance, among others, when quelling the Muslim

rebellion at the south of the archipelago, and also in joint patrols of disputed areas of the South China Sea. Relations between the Philippines and the US soured significantly after the Americans had criticized the so called "death squads", killing, on Duterte's order, people allegedly involved in drug trafficking. After a US senator threatened Philippines with blocking the sale of 26 thousand of M-4 airsoft guns, the Filipino defense minister Delfin Lorenzana, went to Moscow, at the end of last year, to explore the possibilities to purchase arms there. The agreements are to be finalized shortly. Rodrigo Duterte, when announcing his visit to Moscow to take place on May 25, stated: "Russia has assured me: We'll have everything you need, just come here". In the presence of presidents of both countries, bilateral agreements on defense related issues are to be signed. The Filipino president assigned the ministry of defense to explore the possibilities of getting modern military equipment from Russia, such as unmanned aircrafts, night observation equipment, sniper rifles and even helicopters. President is to be accompanied by general Oscar Taclao of Central Command of the Armed Arm Forces of the Philippines.

26 April 2017

MOSCOW FUELS A CONFLICT IN THE BALKANS

The idea of Greater Albania has for decades been a nightmare for Albania's neighbors, in particular Serbia, which after all already lost Kosovo (now Kosovo is dominated by the Albanians) after a bloody war and the NATO intervention.

Historical grievances and ethnic reality make it easier for the Russians to set Balkan nations and states against each other. This time the pretext has been provided by a press comment of Albanian Prime Minister. Edi Rama stated that a union between Albania and the province of Kosovo cannot be ruled out if the prospects of the European Union membership for the Western Balkans fade. Both Serbia and Albania have declared many

times their intention to join the European Union, and both have the candidate statues. Belgrade reacted violently. Serbian authorities have warned of a new Balkan war if Albania attempts to unite with Kosovo, and the West fails to condemn such plans. Belgrade government officials demanded from the EU and NATO to denounce such statements. Otherwise, they threaten, another war in the Balkans may break out, adding that also



© EPA/VALDRIN XHEMAJ PAP/EPA

Macedonia and Montenegro with sizeable ethnic Albanian diasporas would get involved.

Also Russia, the chief ally of Serbia, condemned the Albanian prime minister. Moscow, same as Belgrade, doesn't recognize the independence of Kosovo, which broke away from Serbia in 1999. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that "under the guise of hypocritical talks about stabilization in the region under the NATO 'umbrella,' the fundamentals of stability are being shaken and a course has been adopted toward re-carving the Balkan borders, which is sharply increasing the degree of the conflict potential". Moscow has used the occasion to assail the United States and European Union for keeping silent in the face of attempts to revive the "Greater Albania project. In the face of fiasco of the operation to stop the march of Montenegro towards NATO, Russia is seeking to seize every opportunity to provoke conflicts in this part of Europe. In January, the so-called train provocation almost led to an armed confrontation between Serbia and Kosovo. Russians were also involved in this case,

having a wider plan to destabilize Western Balkans. It all started in the neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, or more precisely in the Republic of Serbia, which is a part of the federation. Serbian President Milard Dodik has openly talked about creating a Greater Serbia, comprising the Serbian part of Bosnia, Serbia and the Serbian enclave in Kosovo. In Montenegro, as mentioned above, during recent parliamentary elections, radicals sent from Serbia, assisted by Russian special services, attempted to overturn the government and block Montenegro from joining the NATO.

Moscow is exploiting the fact that Serbia is rather isolated in the region and it is in conflict with its neighbors (in particular the Croats and the Albanians) to pursue its own agenda. Its main objective is not so much to extend Russia's sphere of influence in the region, as this would be quite difficult, except for Serbia and Macedonia, but rather to maintain a constant level of tension, thus hindering the expansion of western structures (EU and NATO) in the region.



© EPA/SERGEI ILNITSKY PAP/EPA

27 April 2017

IS SOMEONE BEHIND NAVALNY?

On April 25, Alexei Navalny presented more evidence of prime minister's corruption. This has been yet another blow at Dmitry Medvedev from the well known anti-corruption blogger, currently considered as a natural opposition leader.

Earlier, on March 2, a report was published presenting corruption schemes in which the prime minister had been involved. The video had 20 million hits on YouTube and it led to massive street protests in March. Will the blogger, harassed by the authorities, lead to prime minister's dismissal? It seems doubtful, for the time being. However, the campaign targeting Medvedev brings up a question about the role of Navalny. Irrespective of Navalny's demands which, no doubt, are legitimate, it's hard to ignore the fact that the blogger is once again taking part in a political game at the top of Russian government.

It's not a secret that Navalny has good relations with some of Russian oligarchs. It was Alexander Lebedev, a former KGB colonel and co-owner of a Russian opposition paper, Novaya Gazeta, who had once placed

Navalny in the supervisory Board of Aeroflot. The blogger has also had ties with other oligarchs as well, from Mikhail Fridman to Roman Borisovich and Alexei Savchenko (Alfa Group). Navalny, even if he doesn't have permanent bonds with certain oligarchs and politicians, certainly has entered into short-time alliances with, wedged wars against, or been simply manipulated by various clans of the ruling elite. There are allegations, that in fact Navalny is to be a new Zhirinovsky, that is an ostensible opposition to the government. Indeed, considering some of Navalny's views, it seems surprising that for western media he is an icon of war against the Putin regime. The blogger doesn't conceal his nationalistic views. In 2008, he supported the Russian invasion of Georgia and attacked Georgians on his blog. Navalny is also a declared enemy of immigrants from the Caucasus and

Central Asia. He urged for introducing visas for them, accused them of crime, and once even compared people from the Caucasus to “cockroaches”. Navalny condemned the annexation of Crimea by Putin, and in March 2014 he called upon the West to introduce

sanctions against Putin’s people. In mid October, however, Navalny changed his mind on Crimea. He stated that if he were to rule the country, he would not change Putin’s decision on Crimea, which, according to Navalny, is irreversibly a part of Russia.



© EPA/YURI KOCHETKOV PAP/EPA

27 April 2017

MEDVEDEV UNDER FIRE

The pressure on Vladimir Putin to dismiss his chief of government is mounting. The poll by Levada Center, released on April 26, shows a growing dissatisfaction of Russians with their prime minister. As much as 45% of respondents believe that Dmitry Medvedev should resign. On March 2, an oppositionist and blogger Alexei Navalny presented a report in which he accused the prime minister of using charity and non-profit organizations to accumulate funds from oligarchs and from state banks, and purchase exclusive properties with such funds. Later, Navalny led thousands of people demanding Medvedev’s dismissal to the streets.

Medvedev’s spokeswoman Natalya Timakova stated that the said poll of Lavada ha been conducted on political orders. She didn’t specify on whose orders. Medvedev’s chief opponent is said to be Igor Sechin, the chief of an oil giant Rosneft.

Personal conflict between Medvedev and Sechin reflects the clash between two concepts of economic policy under Putin’s rule: the first one provides for state dominating economy whereas the second is more market-oriented. The first one is supported by the siloviki,

the second one by the technocrats. Recently Medvedev has lost confrontation with Sechin one by one. He didn't manage to block the sale of Bashneft to Sechin's oil giant, and siloviki led to the arrest of the minister of economic development. There are rumors that the chief of Rosneft allied with the financial and political group of Kovalchuk brothers who belong to Putin's inner nexus, and that together they strive to put Sergey Kiriyenko at the head of the government. Another coalition, of Rotenberg brothers and Sergey Chemezov, is said to be lobbying for Anton Vaino. Candidates to replace Medvedev include also Valentina Matviyenko, a highest ranking woman in the hierarchy of power today, always loyal to Putin.

Putin is said to have promised to Medvedev in 2011 that the latter would be the prime minister until 2018. This isn't the only reason for not dismissing Medvedev, who's been loyal to Putin for many years. His dismissal would in fact imply that Navalny was right and that demonstrations in March were legitimate. It would also be a manifestation of fear of yet another wave of demonstrations, planned for June 12. Medvedev's dismissal will take place only when Putin decides that Medvedev is harmful for his popularity. At the moment, however, it looks as if the prime minister has become a "whipping boy" and he gets the blame for all the corruption in Russia.

Exposing Medvedev's corruption diverts public attention from other top officials, including Putin.

It cannot be ruled out that Putin may decide to dismiss the increasingly unpopular (even though absolutely loyal) prime minister and get rid of this political baggage right before the presidential elections. Removal of the discredited prime minister would be a culmination of the ongoing operation, whereby governors and top officials and administration members are being dismissed on a one-off-basis, sometimes also accused of corruption. Putin could also put the blame for poor economic performance on the prime minister and his government. Some people in Putin's circle, however, may not want to wait with the dismissal of Medvedev until the elections. According to the constitution, if anything happened to the incumbent president, the prime minister would take over the office. Such a scenario would be disastrous for Medvedev's enemies. Surely, Putin himself is aware of that. That's why he hasn't dismissed Medvedev. If he did, and if for example someone supported by the siloviki became the prime minister, the probability that something might happen to him would increase ... Thus it should be expected that if the current prime minister is to be removed, it will not happen now, but closer to the elections in March 2018.

28 April 2017

A SHOWCASE SENTENCE FOR A GENERAL

A former top official of Russian Interior Ministry, Denis Sugrobov, has been sentenced to 22 years in prison. This is the most severe verdict passed in the contemporary history of Russian law enforcement on its officer. Sugrobov's case shows that the war between Russian siloviki is getting harsher. The heavy sentence demonstrates that nobody in the ruling elite may feel secure nowadays.

Sugrobov was unlucky to fell victim to revenge of his personal enemy from FSB at the very moment when the regime wanted to

demonstrate to the public that it was fiercely fighting corruption. Convictions of the former general (he was stripped of the title by the



© EPA/SERGEI ILNITSKY PAP/EPA

court) and his subordinate officers prove the growing influence of a group of FSB officers who have ties with Igor Sechin. The Moscow City Court issued the verdict on April 27, soon after it found Sugrobov guilty of having abused his powers and organized a criminal group. Seven subordinates of the former head of Central Board of Economic Security and Anti-Corruption of Interior Ministry were sentenced for between four and twenty years in a strict regime penal colony. Sugrobov's lawyer announced that he would appeal the sentence.

This sentence is the crowning of the operation against Sugrobov, mounted by general Oleg Feoktistov, deputy chief of the FSB's Interior Security Department who is one of the most influential among the Russian siloviki. In recent years, he has supervised arrests of a whole range of high-ranking officials, including the arrest, last fall, of the minister of economic development Alexey Ulyukaev. Recently, Feoktistov has returned to Lubyanka, after holding a high post in Rosneft for around six months. He has links with Igor Sechin.

A majority of operations carried out recently by the 6th FSB's Interior Security Department (USB) and supervised by Feoktistov have been in the interest of Sechin. The "Oprichniki" followed different tracks, hitting corrupted officials and functionaries, including from Interior Ministry and FSO. Attempts of other power structures to stand against them usually ended disastrously for the former. General Denis Sugrobov and his deputy, general Boris Kolesnikov, learnt about it first hand, when attempting to catch the deputy chief of 6th FSB's USB, Colonel Igor Demin accepting bribes. Setting a trap for Demin, Sugrobov sought to discredit Feoktistov. The hostility between the two had lasted for a few years. A counterattack was launched in February 2014, but it was officers from the Interior Ministry who were arrested and charged with corruption. Sugrobov was convicted. But his deputy ended up even more dramatically. According to an official version, Kolesnikov – once seen as a young rising star of law enforcement – jumped out of a widow of the building of Investigative Committee and died on the spot.



© EPA/SERGEY VAGANOV PAP/EPA

30 April 2017

A TIE IN THE HAGUE

The ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the case filed by Ukraine against Russia proves that it will be difficult for Kiev to successfully fight Moscow on the international law arena. The Hague Court has found that Ukrainian claims are legitimate only in half – a less important half from Kiev’s perspective.

In January, Ukraine filed a lawsuit in ICJ, accusing Russia of violations of two international conventions, namely International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. As for the first one, Ukraine accuses Russia of supplying weapons to armed rebel groups operating in Donbass, and in the case of the second convention – of discriminating non-Russian groups in Crimea, in particular Ukrainian and Tatar minorities.

The International Court of Justice ordered Russia to allow teaching in the Ukrainian language in Crimea and to refrain from blocking the activity of Tatar representative institutions there. The ICS ruling, however,

doesn’t satisfy Ukrainian demands to take measures preventing Russia from supporting the rebellion in eastern Ukraine. As the judges have pointed out, at the current stage of the proceedings the evidence isn’t sufficient to prove the thesis that rebels in eastern Ukraine receive money and weapons from Russia.

It’s noteworthy that 13 judges, some of whom are considered pro-Russian, voted for (3 against) on the Crimean issue. For the time being, however, Donbass is of key importance, not Crimea. And Kiev failed to convince the judges in this point. Anyway, the tactic employed by Russians was to “challenge jurisdiction”. They argued that ICJ had no power to try the Ukrainian case. However, this argument was rejected by The Hague. Nevertheless, the final decision on Donbass

was unfavorable for Ukraine. In any case, bringing a case concerning the events in Donbass was considered doubtful from the beginning, as the main accusation against Kremlin was not terrorism but military intervention in Ukraine. Moscow doesn't deny that weapons are delivered to separatists in

Donbass from Russian territory, but it claims that there's no evidence for such weapons being used for terrorist attacks. The current ruling is of provisional character, and the case may still take years. Yet, it'll be hard for Kiev to force a ruling that would block Russian aid for the rebels.

All texts (except images) published by the Warsaw Institute Foundation may be disseminated on condition that their origin is stated.

© COPYRIGHT 2017 The Warsaw Institute Foundation

The opinions given and the positions held in materials in the Russia Monitor solely reflect the views of authors.
The Russia Monitor is founded exclusively by private means.



The Warsaw Institute Foundation
Wilcza 9 St., 00-538 Warsaw, Poland
+48 22 417 63 15
office@warsawinstitute.org
