

RUSSIA MONITOR

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SOURCE: TWITTER.COM/NATOMISSION_RU

2 April 2020

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION: RUSSIA SENDS "AID" TO THE US

A statement by the U.S. Department of State shows that what Russia sent to Washington was not "humanitarian aid." Moscow is looking to make a positive PR impression while undermining the effectiveness of Western efforts.

The United States has purchased from Russia medical supplies to fight against the coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. Department of State said in a statement. Its spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus noted that following the call between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, the United States agreed to purchase needed medical supplies, including ventilators and personal protection equipment, from Russia. In the past, both countries have provided humanitarian assistance to each other in times of crisis and will do so again in the future, she added. On March 30, Donald Trump said Russia had sent a jet carrying protective gear and medical supplies to help Washington fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. "Russia sent us a very, very large planeload of things, medical equipment, which was very nice," the U.S. leader

was quoted as saying, yet he provided no details. On March 31, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Trump agreed to buy medical supplies in the March 30 phone call with his Russian counterpart, adding that "Trump gratefully accepted this humanitarian aid."

What the U.S. Department of State said in a statement shows that Peskov was lying when saying about "aid." Washington bought a medical cargo, so this could hardly be referred to as "humanitarian aid." But recent weeks brought some more examples of Russian disinformation in this respect. Moscow is taking advantage of the current conundrum to uplift its positive image worldwide through Putin's goodwill gesture portrayed as a public relations coup, also used to strike a blow to the West. Back in March, Russia sent as many as

15 cargo jets packed with medical gear and military doctors. When the delivery arrived, however, Italian media outlets discovered that the vast majority of the supplies were useless for coronavirus treatment. But the propaganda outcome was massive. And yet Russia is not the only state to have dispatched a cargo plane with masks and medical equipment abroad, despite being itself affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier the United States,

Germany, France, and China provided swift help to other countries in crisis. But of them all, these are China and Russia that are using it as a publicity coup. The Kremlin sees the pandemic as a public relations coup, intended to bolster Russia's image worldwide while convincing at least some Western nations to lift sanctions they had imposed after Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

8 April 2020

CORONAVIRUS IN RUSSIA: NATIONWIDE PAID HOLIDAYS DELIVER SEVERE BLOW TO ECONOMY

Vladimir Putin's latest decision to prolong the non-working period in the country to April 30 poses a grave problem to many Russian companies. Business circles have not yet got further policies or a broad stimulus package to support the economy and businesses. Putin signed legislation to allow the government to declare a state of national emergency to stem the spread of coronavirus, either throughout the country or in some of its regions. The government has introduced a state of heightened readiness for the whole country, which is somewhat between a normal state and a regime of extraordinary measures. It is worth adding that the regime of extraordinary measures is not as strict as a state of emergency and martial law, both enshrined in the Russian constitution. Perhaps the government will enforce a state of emergency in its most vulnerable regions that are unable to fight against the novel virus.

At an April 7 meeting with officials and health experts, Putin said the peak of the coronavirus epidemic in Russia had not passed yet. "It is vital now to avoid others' mistakes," the Russian leader told a videoconference meeting on coronavirus developments. The Kremlin has taken efforts to fight against the epidemic. Their top goal is to enforce social distancing and self-isolation as well as to declare non-working days across the country. Back on April 2, President Vladimir Putin

announced the extension of Russia's nationwide "non-working week" until April 30. The paid week-long vacation was scheduled initially until April 5. Employees will continue receiving their pay while essential industries and healthcare facilities will keep operating, and grocery stores and pharmacies will remain open. In the address to the nation, Putin admitted that the situation is different in different regions. This corroborates that many of the country's entities are not handling the outbreak



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

properly. Therefore, on April 2, the head of the Arkhangelsk region and the governor of the Komi Republic handed in their resignations. In the Komi Republic, local authorities failed to take proper steps on time, thus the area has reported more cases of the virus than many other regions. Most of Russia's coronavirus cases are in Moscow and its surrounding region, the Komi Republic, Buryatia, and St. Petersburg.

In a televised address to the nation, shortly after an April 1 meeting with the government, Putin prolonged the non-working period in the country. Also, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said the government had earmarked 1.4 trillion roubles (\$17.8 billion) for fighting the spread of the coronavirus and carrying out anti-crisis measures. But two days later, at a session of the federal government's coordinating council on the novel virus, the top official said that the coronavirus situation in Russia could yet develop into a worst-case scenario. Longer stay-at-home holidays run the risk of mass bankruptcies. Russia could lose up to 1 million jobs because of the severe disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the country's business group Delovaya Rossiya informed. Earlier,

some of the country's most prominent business lobby groups, including Delovaya Rossiya, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs or the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Russia, sent a letter to the country's prime minister. Russian businesspeople urged Mishustin to offer bigger state support for workers and businesses during the coronavirus crisis. They say this may trigger a wave of mass bankruptcies while leading to a growing unemployment rate and an unprecedented decline in tax revenues. In the letter, they suggested that lawmakers introduce a package of measures to support employers amid the lockdown, requesting subsidies to cover businesses' rent, loan repayments, as well as actions meant to speed up public tenders and lessen the tax burden. Meanwhile, Russia sought to make use of the global economic crisis to soften or even lift restrictions the West had imposed upon it over the past six years. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on April 5 that the global economic crisis is inevitable, and thus everybody must brace for it. "There is no doubt that countries will need to align their anti-crisis measures," the official said.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

13 April 2020

SMALL RUSSIAN OIL FIRMS ASK PRIME MINISTER FOR HELP

Deprived of both big resources and state aid, small oil companies are more affected by plummeting oil prices worldwide, which prompted them to call the government for help. Thus, Elena Korzun, the director general of Assoneft, an independent association of the Russian Federation oil and gas industry, sent a letter on behalf of them to the country's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin.

“We hereby ask the government of the Russian Federation to offer oil and gas companies, whose total output did not exceed 500,000 tons throughout 2019, a mineral extraction tax deferral, either for March-May 2020 or until a barrel of oil hits the price of \$40 on average once a month,” the letter said. According to statistical data, these firms had a combined oil output of 10 million tons back in 2019. Independent oil companies are meant to explore and drill oil and gas condensate to meet the needs of the domestic market. As they lack their own refineries, such firms have a limited room for maneuver for selling their output, especially with a current slump in global oil prices.

“The income of the companies is falling sharply due to the collapse of world oil prices and a demand slip, also amidst the coronavirus outbreak,”

Korzun wrote in the letter, adding that “most independent oil companies lack money to settle their trades, loans or taxes.” Assoneft says independent oil companies have modest capacities to store oil and are practically unable to sell crude volumes once the market situation gets better. Most of these firms will be struggling to meet their tax obligations. Also, small petroleum companies will permit delays in settlements with their suppliers. The same is with loans as these are quite large as the firms carry out exploration and production drillings while they are facing restrained resources. The independent association of Russian oil and gas companies has asked the government for help as many energy companies are now on the brink of collapse. According to its website, the association unites 53 private oil and gas producing companies involved in oil export and production.

14 April 2020

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS HITS HARD RUSSIA'S HEALTHCARE, BUSINESS AND MILITARY

The epidemic outbreak is sending new shockwaves across Russia. On April 14, the country confirmed 2,774 new coronavirus infections, bringing its official figure to 21,000 and marking a one-day record in new cases. Moscow is the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in Russia. The country's capital is seeing further restrictions to come. Meanwhile, independent media outlets say that Russia's weak health system can soon get out of control. While the country's military saw first cases within its ranks, the traditional parade is expected to be postponed from May 9 to September 2. The coronavirus situation in Russia is worsening and the next two or three weeks will be critical for the country.

Russian President Vladimir Putin admitted on April 13 that the situation with coronavirus is developing “in the wrong direction” and that the peak of the epidemic has not yet been reached. The Russian leader was last seen in public on March 26, and since then, he has been working remotely from his country residence at Novo-Ogaryovo outside Moscow. In his latest videoconference, Putin took stock of a deteriorating situation, urging Russian officials not to let their guard down and saying the country would also bring in the defense ministry, including military medics, to help tackle

the outbreak. Meanwhile, in late March, three Russian soldiers were diagnosed with coronavirus. But this could be just the tip of the iceberg. Russia's Defense Ministry said the epidemic situation in the army was somewhat “unstable.” No further details were available, though. The extent of Russian problem with COVID-19 can be exemplified by an unprecedented proposal currently in Duma to postpone the Victory Day military parade from May 9 to September 2. As of February, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that the Red Square parade would feature 15,000 troops and 375

military vehicles and aircraft. Russian authorities underestimate the scale of the coronavirus crisis, also as far as the country's healthcare capacities are concerned. So far, 72 percent of all cases were reported in Moscow and its surrounding region. The city's health department warned that Moscow could face a shortage of ventilators and hospital beds for coronavirus patients in the next two to three weeks. Following the health care reform, there is an acute deficiency of anaesthesiologists of nearly 30 percent.

Meanwhile, the state aid for business is not enough. Former finance minister Alexei Kudrin said it exceeds 5 percent of the country's GDP, or \$18 billion. However, the total support package should be at least seven or eight percent of GDP. Head of Russia's Accounts Chamber thinks it would be reasonable for the government to use the reserves from

the National Welfare Fund that accumulates budget surplus from trading energy resources. Yet the trouble is that the Fund's reserves have been used to make up for losses incurred by falling oil prices. Also, Vladimir Putin recommended employers to pay their employees for a nationwide stay-at-home holiday. Worse enough, more than half of them have no intention of doing so. About 30 percent of companies in Moscow asked their employees to take unpaid leave. One firm in five have already cut wages while another one-third seek to follow suit. One company in three is now on the brink of collapse. Putin has pushed the responsibility for handling the crisis to the regional governors who are likely to call the situation under control. Deprived of federal aid, they see the presidential decree differently while having no other choice but to allow large factories to resume operations.

16 April 2020

RUSSIA WAGES SPY WAR WITH UKRAINE

The Ukrainian counterintelligence services have detained a security service general on accusations of working for Russia as a spy. Many details were revealed about his activities, including an FSB officer who had recruited him. Also, the SBU collected many photos and footage corroborating the traitor's guilt. This is a massive flop of Russia's FSB, especially given who the detainee was. Russia attempted to mask its failure by announcing the next day that the Federal Security Service, or FSB, uncovered a sabotage and terrorism ring in annexed Crimea. Nonetheless, Russia has provided some general details while the narrative it has hinted raises severe doubts whether these were really Ukrainian spies that had been caught.

On March 17, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree setting the date for April 22, 2020, for a nationwide vote on constitutional amendments. Nevertheless, as he said, the referendum may be postponed if the situation with the spread of the coronavirus in Russia turns serious. In the nationwide vote,

Russian citizens will have to comment on updates to the constitution, first initiated by Vladimir Putin in January 2020 and then backed by lawmakers on March 10–11. An amendment to the constitution provides for lifting the term limits for Vladimir Putin once he steps down in 2024. Interestingly enough, the suggestion was



SOURCE: SSU.GOV.UA

not made by a Kremlin-appointed constitutional working group that reunited well-known public figures, including politicians, cultural figures, or sportspeople.

A constitutional amendment that could allow President Vladimir Putin to stay in power for the next twelve years was first put forward by Valentina Tereshkova, who made history when she was the first woman to travel into space. Among those most interested in securing Putin's solid power grip are people belonging to his inner circle. These are the "state oligarchs": heads of state-run firms or owners of private companies yet with close links to the Kremlin. In the second group, there are "political technocrats": Sergey Kiriyenko, Sergei Shoigu, and Anton Siluanov. But those who have most to lose are the siloviki, alongside such businessmen as Gennady Timchenko, Igor Sechin, or Arkady Rotenberg. They are involved in all Putin's crimes, serving or having served as heads of Russian special services. If the COVID-19 disease continues to spread across the country, Putin's popularity

ratings could be in danger, as they have recently dropped compared to what they rose in 2014 in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. Thus, Putin is pressing on. The incumbent president's term was slated to end in 2024, while the rules currently in force forbid him from running for a third consecutive mandate. The update would give Putin the chance to run again when his current term ends, by effectively resetting the clock on his previous presidential terms, so his previous terms would not count. Suffice it to recall that Putin's Russia upholds the tradition of the Soviet Union as the incumbent leader called the 1991 Soviet fall the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the twentieth century. With the new constitution recalling the Soviet Union, Putin made a gesture toward a vast communist electorate as well as those having a nostalgia for the pre-1991 era. Also, the amendments could enshrine the mention of God, which is the Kremlin's nod to the Russian Orthodox Church.



SOURCE: МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

18 April 2020

RUSSIA'S SHOIGU GOES TO A MONUMENT WAR WITH THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Russia has been at odds with Prague municipal officials over the recent removal of a controversial statue of a Soviet World War II marshal in the Czech capital. At the front line of the “monument war” is Russia’s Defense Ministry. While Sergei Shoigu has scoffed at the Czech Republic, his ministry suggested a law to protect memorial sites, including Red Army monuments abroad.

Prague’s removal of the monument irked Moscow. Following a ruling from municipal officials, the Russian state machine began with full steam. First, Russian President Vladimir

Putin signed a federal law to assign criminal responsibility for the demolition or damaging World War II memorial constructions, also to foreign officials. The day after, Russian Defense

Minister Sergei Shoigu appealed to the head of the Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin, asking him to consider launching a criminal case into Czech officials amidst the taking down of a statue of Soviet general Ivan Konev in Prague. Although Russia has no legal jurisdiction in the Czech Republic, this symbolic case may somewhat bring some benefits to Russian top officials. Similarly, Shoigu requested his Czech counterpart to intervene, asking that the statue be sent back to Moscow, and the defense ministry made a proposal to rename Moscow’s Prazhskaya metro station to Marshal Konev. Also, the monument was not erected by the Soviets, but by the communist Czechoslovakian government, back in 1945.

Russia’s vocal criticism over Prague’s dismantlement of the monument may be linked to the mere fact that Konev did not liberate the Czech capital in 1945. Before Red Army troops entered the city,

it was liberated by the Czech resistance force, aided by the Russian Liberation Army, or Vlasovtsy, that had fought under German command. Soviet and then Russian propaganda downplayed them as traitors and thugs, though these did not side with the Nazis. With a deeply rooted myth of the Great Patriotic War, Shoigu is pushing further actions so as to uphold his popularity ratings, thus bolstering his already robust position within the country’s political elites. Moscow’s attacks against Prague over its taking down of the monument to the Soviet marshal who suppressed the 1956 uprising in Hungary and played a role in planning the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 is yet another episode of Russia’s “memory wars” against its former satellite states. Also Poland has seen under severe slanders from Russia following its amendment to the 2017 Decommunization Act that swept Soviet symbols away from public places.

19 April 2020

IN THE BALKANS, TURKSTREAM PIPELINE SEES FURTHER DELAYS

TurkStream, a brand-new gas pipeline running from Russia to Turkey, has been in operation since January, yet only partially. There is one string carrying Russian natural gas to Turkey. Yet its sister line is vital here as gas is projected to flow through it to the Balkans and then Hungary via Turkey. Nonetheless, the project has not yet seen the light of day amid some hurdles at its Bulgarian portion, seen as most crucial one.

On April 16, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov said his country is likely to see some delays in the implementation of the TurkStream pipeline amidst the ongoing coronavirus outbreak. Nonetheless, some of the workers that construct the gas pipeline are foreigners who are put under a mandatory 14-day quarantine. Bulgaria’s state-owned gas provider, Bulgartransgaz, awarded a €1.1-billion contract to Saudi-led group Arkad to construct an extension to the TurkStream gas pipeline. Back in February 2020, Arkad signed a

deal with Russian-based IDC to build the Serbian section of the energy line. Under the agreement, IDC will construct a 100-kilometer link in western Bulgaria and connect it to the Serbian part of the route. To make matters worse, some of the company’s workers developed the Serbian portion of the energy link, and they went under a 14-day quarantine.

TurkStream, or the second gas pipeline under the Black Sea after Blue Stream, became operational in



SOURCE: TURKSTREAM.INFO



SOURCE: LUKOIL.COM

January 2020. The offshore part of the two-string link is 900 kilometers, each with an annual capacity of 15.75 billion cubic meters (bcm). The first line will bring Russian gas to the Turkish market, while the second is planned to deliver gas to the Balkans and further to Hungary. Bulgaria had promised to complete its stretch of the TurkStream gas pipeline by January 1, 2020, as planned, but it saw some hurdles while selecting an investor. Earlier, Vladimir Putin rebuked Bulgaria's government for holding up the project. Before Russia had presumed gas would begin flowing through the Balkan Stream gas pipeline, as Bulgaria names it, from the Turkish border to Serbia in May this year. However,

all signs are that the date will move. The CEO of Bulgartransgaz Vladimir Malinov said that 240 kilometers of pipelines have already been laid, while the route for a further 230 kilometers is now ready. In recent months Bulgaria has ramped up efforts to diversify gas suppliers, possibly irking Moscow. Sofia said it would book some liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the terminal now being built in Greece. In turn, with the IGB gas interconnector from Greece to Bulgaria, the latter country will be able to import Caspian gas flows from Azerbaijan within the Southern Gas Corridor.

19 April 2020

RUSSIAN OIL COMPANIES SQUABBLE OVER NEW OPEC DEAL

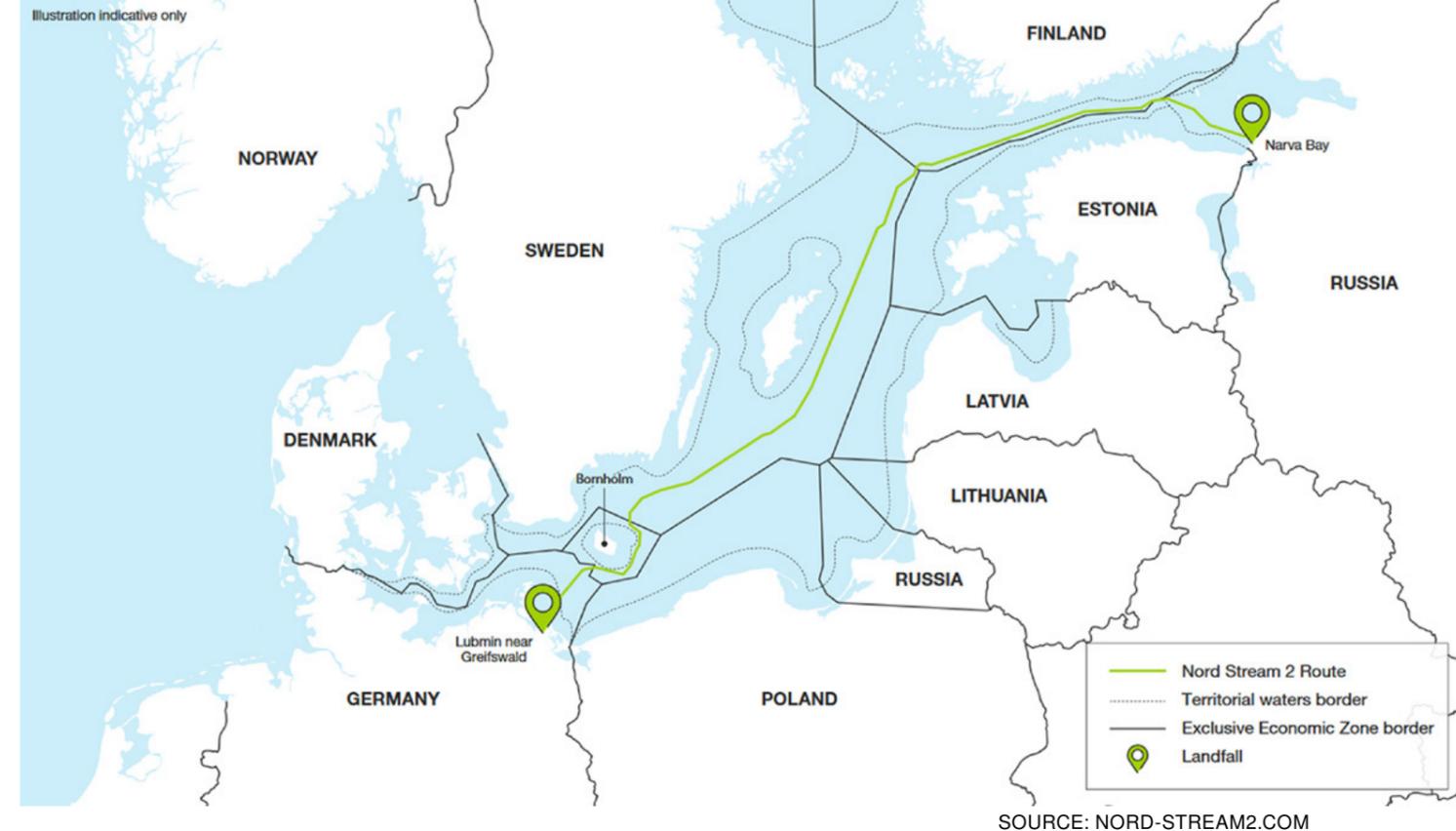
A new deal struck in mid-April between major oil-producing nations to slash production is hugely unfavorable for Russia. But with this may come the closure of some of the country's fields. No wonder that Russian oil companies are now wrangling over how to share out the state's vowed reductions.

OPEC countries reached a landmark deal to diminish oil output starting from May 1, 2020. On April 12, members of OPEC and their allies, including Russia, announced that they had agreed to cut production by 9.7 million barrels a day in May and June 2020. After that, the group will firmly ramp up production by 7.7 million

barrels a day by late 2020 and then by 5.8 million barrels until the agreement expires in April 2022. Almost all states will see a cut in crude output from an October 2018 baseline. Russia and Saudi Arabia will be the only ones to apply its reduction to a production level of about 11 million barrels a day, diminished by 23 percent (by June 2020),

followed by an 18 percent drop by late 2020 and 14 percent by April 2020. Quite differently, Mexico would remove 100,000 barrels a day, and the U.S. would contribute an additional 300,000 barrels a day. Russia agreed to curb its daily oil output by 2.5 million barrels each under the agreement. The targeted cut is about eight times larger than the biggest reductions Russia managed to make by late March this year. And yet Russian oil majors failed to agree over how to distribute the country's reduction quotas. This would, in turn, run the risk of shutting down some oil rigs. The government has not yet settled how energy firms would need to restrain their total output. If shared out proportionally, Rosneft would have to reduce production by 600,000-630,000 barrels per day. In contrast, Lukoil would need to cut by 240,000-270,000 b/d. However, the Russian Energy Minister put forward its idea on how to curb production.

Most companies present on the Russian energy market are in favor of administering OPEC-imposed quotas in accordance with their shares. Nonetheless, some of the Russian crude majors have not yet provided their comments. Those that will suffer most would be oil producers having access to well-designed and dewatered oil rigs. These could find it particularly challenging to resume further mining operations. Soviet-made fields and rigs are particularly at risk of being shut. Thus, several oil firms believe that this should be the top criterion for partitioning OPEC output cuts. The suppliers are now quarrelling about how to share out the country's promised cuts, thus calling Russia's commitments into question. What Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak said about efforts not to close rigs in line with the new deal could be only valid if Russia began abiding by new rules.



20 April 2020

WHO WILL COMPLETE NORD STREAM 2?

In December last year, the U.S. Congress voted to impose sanctions against any company that helps Russia go ahead with the last section of its Nord Stream energy pipeline. Thus, Russia has been left with no choice as the only way to complete the project is to finish pipelaying works beneath the Baltic Sea on its own. Not surprisingly, the most plausible option is to deploy a specialized pipelaying vessel, the Akademik Cherskiy, though its somewhat baffling journey from the Far East to Europe could be a smokescreen as Gazprom is pushing for employing smaller vessels -- although these will need to adapt to meet Denmark's requirements.

The Akademik Cherskiy, a Russian flagship pipelayer meant to complete the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, is expected to reach the Baltic Sea by early May this year. In the Russian exclave of

Kaliningrad, the vessel could be equipped with any tools necessary to finish the pipeline. The Cherskiy is now en route to Kaliningrad, where it is expected by May 10. Just 160 kilometers – or in fact 320

kilometers with its two strands – of the total length of the two-string line is still left to lay. For Gazprom, the Akademik Cherskiy has emerged as the presumptive alternative to foreign pipelayers. The vessel is now heading towards the Baltic Sea from the Nakhodka harbor in the Russian Far East. The trouble is yet that the Russian-flagged pipelayer – instead of going the shortest and thus the fastest way – went the other way round. Akademik Cherskiy left the port of Nakhodka on February 10, heading toward Singapore. Yet it set a new course for the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. Later, the crew set the direction for the Suez Canal though this was disabled as the vessel navigated around Africa instead of traversing the canal off to the Mediterranean Sea. It later corrected the course to Maputo, Mozambique, where it was scheduled for March 23. But once again the Cherskiy betrayed its intended route, sailing further to the south while bypassing the port.

Compared to the Allseas' vessel Pioneering Spirit, the Akademik Cherskiy is a small-scale pipelayer, owned by Gazprom subsidiary Gazprom Flot. Also, the Akademik Cherskiy is the only Russian-flagged pipelaying vessel able to go ahead with the pipelaying work within the Danish exclusive economic zone. Some say that the Cherskiy's peculiar journey to the Baltic Sea seeks to serve as somewhat a smokescreen to steer the media's attention away from the fact that other Russian ships will be deployed for further operations. These could be first and foremost smaller ships that are already operating in the Baltic. They might be engaged in pipelaying works in Denmark's exclusive economic zone once equipped with adequate technologies in line with the country's internal regulations.



SOURCE: MEDIA.GAZPROM-NEFT.COM

23 April 2020

RUSSIA CONFRONTS SERIOUS TECHNICAL PROBLEMS ON THE PATHWAY TO CURB CRUDE OUTPUT

In line with the OPEC+ agreement struck in mid-April, Russia is bound to reduce its crude output by nearly 25 percent from May 1 onwards. But Moscow could be inept for such a large drop in production in just a two-week time. What is to blame is the peculiarity of the Russian crude industry.

Energy experts, as well as Lukoil Vice President Leonid Fedun, say Russia could curb its crude output by no more than 300,000–400,000 barrels per day -- thus with no major harm to the sector. Under the OPEC+ deal, Russia promised to cut oil production in the first two months by about 2.5 million barrels a day. The targeted cut is about

eight times larger than the biggest reductions Russia managed to make until late March this year. This, of course, will deliver a blow to the country's crude oil giants and the federal budget, with oil export revenues accounting for 33 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Russia could see less crude at a record low price. However, while

the level of demand and the level of prices on the global market may improve quite quickly, another consequence of a deep cut in output may have a big negative impact on the Russian oil sector.

Russia has some 180,000 oil wells. Yet they reveal low performance, with 9,500 tons of oil pumped out of a well each day. For the sake of comparison, a Saudi oil rig delivers between 1,000 and 2,000 tons. This low efficiency is due to some geological preconditions. Most Russian fields are in northern Siberia where oil rigs are much more profound than those in Saudi Arabia as they go through a frozen solid, or permafrost. Mostly Soviet era-built

wells contain oil highly tainted with water, where 4 percent is crude and the remaining 96 percent is water. What comes at the surface needs to be separated, though. Should digging operations halt, water flowing through the pipes will freeze. When in shutdown, an oil well becomes covered with paraffin and stearin that require to be removed before resuming further operations. Much time is needed to go ahead with drilling new rigs and replacing damaged installations. In short, Russian energy firms could find it uneasy to reopen production all where they will want to bring it to halt amid the OPEC+ deal.

24 April 2020

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK PUTS RUSSIAN JAILS UNDER SEVERE THREAT

In response to calls from both health experts and the World Health Organisation, most world countries reduced the number of people in detention -- as a coronavirus outbreak in prison walls could make the COVID-19 pandemic worse. Notwithstanding this, so far Russia has taken no action to follow suit. Yet, quite contrary to that, the country's prison officials made some decisions that run a higher risk of the pandemic outbreak in penal colonies, prisons, and detention centers.

The number of prison inmates in Russia could be 600,000, according to the latest data available, published a year ago. But activists warn that over 800,000 people are being held in Russian incarceration facilities. Most of the country's inmates are serving terms in prisons, yet more often they are being kept in penal colonies throughout the country, a Soviet legacy of gulags, or forced-labor camps. These are most susceptible to an outbreak. Whilst cells and rooms are overcrowded, a prison with 1,000

prisoners generally has just one doctor. In penal colonies, inmates sleep in open barracks and eat together in large dining halls. Nearly half of prisoners suffer from severe illnesses, including tuberculosis, hepatitis, and HIV infection. This is a major risk group. On March 31, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin requested the government to immediately provide the Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN) with coronavirus testing kits, essential medical equipment, and personal protective equipment.



SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA.ORG



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

Just three days later, the FSIN said that it had organized “constant monitoring and control” over the epidemiological situation in the country’s jails. Yet no one is measuring the prisoners’ temperatures regularly, according to some. With their thoughtless behavior, some prison guards brought coronavirus into jails. The Russian authorities are making efforts to put detention centers and penal colonies under an information lockdown. Correctional facilities were placed under lockdown, making use of social isolation means amidst the ongoing pandemic. In Moscow, correctional facilities banned

all visits while the prisoners were forbidden to accept packages. They are barred from making phone calls, too. Authorities have no intention of proclaiming pardons, at least for people in-custody on small-time offenses. Perhaps, amnesties before the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II will be put off -- as the military parade is set to take place no sooner than in September. Amid the pandemic, Russia’s Supreme Court temporarily suspended any criminal appeal hearings, with a few exceptions only. So, many prisoners will spend more time behind bars.

26 April 2020

RUSSIAN OIL COMPANIES SQUABBLE OVER NEW OPEC DEAL

Russia’s interior ministry is passing through a difficult time. After four deputy ministers were placed under quarantine -- once their colleague had been tested positive for coronavirus -- two other generals were detained. They were accused of having helped an arrested businessman in exchange for some gains. But this is yet another corruption case that haunted the country’s defense and interior institutions. A senior Russian National Guard official was jailed on bribery charges.

A court in the city of Istra near Moscow said on April 16 that it had sent Colonel Albert Kudryashov, deputy chief of the National Guard’s intelligence center, to pretrial detention. The top official is suspected of extorting significant

amounts of cash from a Moscow-based businessman in exchange for “protection.” Both he and an unnamed man were detained on April 16. A few days before deputy heads of the Investigative Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs,

Major General of Justice Alexander Biryukov and Alexander Krakovsky had been arrested.

The senior investigator for particularly important cases, Colonel Alexander Bryantsev, was also presented with some charges. The three officials were accused over their illegal placing of Albert Khudoyan under house arrest in November 2019, as the real estate developer was accused of large-scale embezzlement, and releasing his land plots. None of them pleaded guilty. They will remain in custody until June 1, at least. Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin opened the investigation himself. Operational activities are carried out by the Department "M" of the Russian Federal Se-

curity Service, or FSB. The three interior ministry generals were reported to have gained substantial benefits from the businessman. First, they were to transfer him to house arrest and then release his land plots. Further on, plans were to ease his charges. What imposed a heavy burden on the officials was the statement of Sergey Govyadin, a businessman and former associate of Albert Khudoyan. The case involves the mobster Zakhariy Kalashov, nicknamed Young Shakro, who used to boast huge influence within the Investigative Committee. Perhaps this is why Bastrykin intervened personally in the case -- as this delivers a terrible blow to Russia's interior ministry and its head, Vladimir Kolokoltsev.

28 April 2020

DOES TURKEY'S S-400 DELAY MEAN NO LONGER CLOSE TIES WITH RUSSIA?

Turkey's Idlib offensive in spring this year and the clash of Russian and Turkish strategic interests display that these two's rapprochement is not unconditional, mainly in Syria. And as an economic disaster is brewing across the country, Turkey sees that a lasting alliance with Russia means less than if it remained within the Western orbit, through both NATO membership and cooperative links with the United States.

Ankara is dragging its feet over activating the Russian-made S-400 systems -- officially amid the coronavirus pandemic. Turkey's plans to switch on its new Russian missile defense systems -- a somewhat sensitive topic for the United States and NATO -- have been delayed reportedly by the coronavirus outbreak. According to some unofficial reports from the Turkish government, it could be several months before the Russian system is operational. Turkey took delivery of the Russian missile system in July 2019. The United States says

the S-400s are incompatible with NATO defense and would imperil U.S. F-35 stealth jets that Turkey planned to buy. When Turkey got the S-400 systems back in 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared these would become operational in April 2020. That is what he reiterated many times later on. So far Russia has supplied Turkey with four batteries of S-400s under the \$2.5 billion deal.

The United States yet has grown critical of Turkey's buying of Russian-made S-400 systems. Their ac-



SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

quisition by Turkey indicates Ankara could risk U.S. sanctions under legislation meant to punish countries that buy military equipment from Russia. Thus, Turkey is racing against the clock, which could come from its fears of a business crackdown. Russia will not help as it is fighting against the pandemic at home. And Turkey cannot afford to get embroiled in a fierce conflict with the United States and other Western nations as only these could offer economic relief. The reason for Ankara's decision to delay the activation of the Russian-made S-400 regiment is not technical. The continuing COVID-19 pandemic has not disrupted any

Turkish military operations in Syria and Iraq. Any sanctions under CAATSA would heighten the economic risks the pandemic is posing to Turkey. Ankara has also asked the U.S. Federal Reserve for currency swap facilities to help resist the economic impact of the disease, asking for \$10 billion from its assets. Also, Ankara is seeking help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Another reason for postponing S-400 activation is the turmoil in Syria. The Turks see that their strategic interests in the country's Idlib and Rojava will be better if they join the United States -- instead of nurturing ties with Russia and Iran.



28 April 2020

RUSSIA IS OPEN FOR TALKS WITH U.S. ON NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Kremlin strategists have taken some steps to mend ties with the West, especially with the United States, since the coronavirus outbreak. Thus, Moscow is sending signals to relax -- or even lift sanctions, and, from time to time, makes an offer to launch disarmament talks with Washington. This is yet somewhat a trial balloon, at least for Russia's foreign ministry. There is a slim chance for an agreement -- even if Russia and the United States sit at the negotiating table.

“Russia is ready to discuss hypersonic missiles and other arms control issues with the United States outside the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START),” Russian Foreign Minister said on April 28. Speaking at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University), the top Russian diplomat said Washington and

Moscow had been in talks on strategic stability means back in January, yet the U.S. delegation displayed no desire to seek what he named “constructive decision.” This is what he echoed on April 14. “Russia is ready to discuss hypersonic missiles and other arms control issues with the United States as part of wider discussions about

strategic stability. We are open to talks about the future of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START),” Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was quoted as saying. Three days later the top Russian diplomat had a phone call with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The latter official reiterated the official U.S. stance on a new vision for a trilateral arms control agreement that also includes China, both in regards to the New START deal and the broken Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. But this may be a barrier -- as neither does Beijing have the intention of curbing its arms stockpile, nor does Moscow seek to exert pressure on China. Yet another issue is orbital around U.S. military presence in Europe. On April 28, Lavrov said talks should include a U.S. nuclear

withdrawal from Europe. Interestingly, he had never spoken about that.

In 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump suggested that the U.S., Russia, and China launch talks on a new arrangement that could substitute the New START deal, signed by then U.S. and Russian leaders, Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, back in April 2010 in Prague, the Czech Republic. The document entered into force in February 2011 to reduce the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads on both sides. This is the last arms reduction deal that binds Washington and Moscow. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty will expire by February 2021 unless the U.S. and Russian presidents choose to extend it.

29 April 2020

RUSSIAN OIL COMPANIES HIT BY “BLACK APRIL”

With huge crude amounts on the global market and amid its record low prices, world oil producers are in big trouble. What has recently grabbed the headlines around the globe was when West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude oil prices fell below zero in short-term contracts. But Russian crude oil exports are in a much worse position. In April, companies in Russia will have to pay extra instead of making money from selling crude abroad. Possibly, they could start earning in May, yet under the OPEC+ deal, Russia agreed to trade less crude. Russian groups now have to share out the country's pledged reductions. Lukoil was the first to provide more details on its planned output cuts.

Russia's biggest private crude company is lobbying against a proportional calculation: the more oil a company produces, the more it has to curb its production from early May onwards. Thus, Lukoil says it will curb output by 300,000 per day down from the February and March

2020 baseline. Yet a decision about how to share output cuts will be taken at the least minute. The country's energy ministry is in talks with crude oil companies -- and it is no secret that Rosneft, the biggest Russian oil firm, is most reluctant to see any reductions. Also, its CEO, Igor Sechin, has



SOURCE: MEDIA.GAZPROM-NEFT.COM



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

been at odds with OPEC+ from the very beginning. Russian companies are dogged by a major problem as the global oil crisis continues. In its estimates, Argus, a leading oil price reporting agency, said due to low Urals price throughout April, its export profitability went into the red and will drop to minus \$3 per barrel. In April, Urals crude will be trading at a price of \$16 per barrel, of which \$6 will cover shipping-related costs. Also, from that price, producers must shell out \$7 on oil export duties, and an extra \$5 on the oil-production tax, the so-called MET. So, with all duties and fees, Urals crude is trading minus \$3 per barrel. With

operational expenses, or OPEX, this will be even worse, as the price will fluctuate between minus \$6 and minus \$8 per barrel. This should be over until May, as oil export duties will tumble. Their April figures are so steep as they were determined earlier in the month, based on higher Urals prices from back in February and March. In May, Urals crude is expected to trade at \$7 per barrel while \$9–10 in June. The trouble is that Russia will have to curb its oil output most at this time.

29 April 2020

AMID CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND OIL CRISIS, RUSSIAN ECONOMY IS SUFFOCATING

The coronavirus situation is not getting any better in Russia, with the growing number of both the infected and deaths. Russian President Vladimir Putin said the peak of the epidemic had not yet been reached and ordered Russians to remain under lockdown through May 11. Also, the government has not done enough to mitigate the coronavirus's impact on the economy. The next chapter is the oil crisis.

On April 28, President Vladimir Putin has prolonged the national paid holidays through May 11. Addressing heads of Russia's regions and government officials, the Russian leader confirmed that the country had not yet seen

the peak of the epidemic while it would gradually relax restrictions. Yet coronavirus statistics is far from optimistic. On April 28, the number of deaths rose to 108, a daily record. Russia confirmed 6,411 new coronavirus infections a day before,

denoting a new one-day record jump. As of the morning of April 29, there have been 99,399 cases of coronavirus infections reported in Russia and 972 deaths. More than 10 percent of the country's all confirmed cases already recovered from the virus. The capital has been worst hit by the novel virus, with more than half of the country's number of confirmed cases and two-thirds of its total number

Speaking on April 28, Vladimir Putin said the coronavirus pandemic caused a terrible blow to the country's economy and business. Russia is standing on the brink of a far more acute recession than that it had suffered back in 2009. The country's economy minister Maxim Reshetnikov said

that due to the novel virus, the economy loses 100 billion roubles (\$1 billion) a day. In addition to the pandemic-related crisis come falling oil prices and a drop in demand for Russian goods worldwide. Also, the program of support unveiled by the government so far provides support of less than 3 percent of GDP. This is far less than elsewhere in the world. Moreover, Russian state relief is dedicated to big companies and state-run megacorps, leaving little to small and medium enterprises. Russia's Central Bank predicted that the country's gross domestic product would fall by 4-6 percent in 2020. A few months before, its analysts said the country was likely to mark a rise by 1.2-2 percent of GDP.



SOURCE: GAZPROM.RU

29 April 2020

RUSSIA'S GAZPROM SEES FALL IN GAS OUTPUT AND EXPORT VOLUMES

The company's results were hit by weakening demand for Gazprom's gas in Europe. Also, with lowering export numbers, Russia's biggest gas firm must curb output. The company has experienced a sharp fall in natural gas demand this year due to the economic fallout from non-flexible contracts, Europe's huge gas excesses, mild winter, and the global spread of the novel coronavirus.

In March 2020, Russian natural gas production nosedived to 59.4 billion cubic meters (bcm), marking a 12.3 percent decrease year-on-year. This is yet another month when the energy major saw a cut in its whole production by 5.3 percent in February, and by 6.5 percent in January. Lower output figures are linked to a decrease in export volumes. In January, thus before the coronavirus pandemic gripped the world, Gazprom's export

revenues plunged by 40 percent. This came from Europe's large amounts of stored gas — amassed in fear of a plausible Russian-Ukrainian energy spat — and the probable halting of Russian gas flow through Ukraine. Also, Europe witnessed a particularly mild winter. In February, Gazprom shipped less than a year before. A decrease in export volumes is equivalent to fewer energy deliveries through Ukraine. Yet Kyiv incurs no

losses, as, under its last year deal with Gazprom, the Russian firm will have to pay for transit volumes even if these do not occur physically.

In 2019, the company's European gas exports edged down 1.3 percent last year to 199.2 bcm from a record high in 2018. Gas analysts at the Energy Center of the Moscow School of Management Skolkovo said Gazprom's energy exports into Europe would shrink by 15-30 bcm throughout 2020. In their analysis, the scholars drew conclusions from the company's results in the first quarter of 2020 and the drop in energy demand across

Europe. Gazprom's deliveries into Europe remain at the same level as they did back in 2015. The company is faced with a sharp decline in revenue from selling gas amid its too high prices. Gazprom's pricing conditions will not be more competitive until late autumn this year. Also, Russian oil-indexed long-term contracts will involve the current drops in oil prices. Before, European customers would then get cheaper-to-source gas from the spot market. Gazprom is trading 60 percent of its commodities supplies under long-term deals.



SOURCE: TATNEFT.RU

30 April 2020

OPEC+ DEAL: CRUDE OIL COMPANIES AGREED WITH THE GOVERNMENT

All Russian crude oil companies would comply with the deal and curb their output figures, Russia's energy minister said. On the same day, Vladimir Putin held a videoconference with government officials and heads of the country's biggest oil and gas companies. High on the agenda was a historic settlement to cut global petroleum output from May 1 onwards.

The country's energy minister Alexander Novak admitted on April 29 that "all companies have endorsed the mechanism, methodology for the distribution of volume or quotas for reduction." According to the energy official, Russian crude firms vowed to cut its production from a February 2020 baseline. "None of the companies objected," he said. Yet Russia's oil producers were at odds over their roles in the world's largest crude reduction agreement. Rosneft

spoke out against this policy as it had to curb its output most. Yet Gazpromneft, an oil arm of Russia's gas giant Gazprom, argues it should be granted some relief as it is pumping much money into new fields. In February, Russian crude oil output edged up to 10.5 million barrels per day, according to Novak. As part of the global supply pact, Russia must cut production to 8.492 million barrels a day throughout May and June, thus slashing its output by 19 percent from February 2020. The government official confirmed what energy analysts have long warned against, saying that big cuts will pose a severe threat to the Russian oil industry. Novak said Russia is facing more challenges to slash production. "Conditions are far more complex than in the Gulf," he said, adding that the country's oil majors will find it

compelling to limit their production so as not to lose the possibility of increasing output sometime soon. "Today, companies related to geology, technology, and economics are trying to solve this issue on the instructions of management. The goal is to ensure minimal risks for recovery in the future," the minister said. With discrepancies over output structures, Russian crude majors wrangled over how to share out the country's pledged cuts, arguing that the proportionality principle is not fair and will cause a blow to some companies that will need to close more rigs than others. Also, any companies that hold oilfields in northern Siberia or those operating Soviet-era obsolete deposits could suffer way bigger hurdles than their peers.

30 April 2020

RUSSIA'S FEDERAL AUTHORITIES SEE FALLING RATINGS OVER CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Russian people have delivered somewhat ambiguous assessments of the state's measures to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. They seem to trust more low-ranking officials who have direct contact with society. Yet Vladimir Putin is experiencing a fall in his trust figures, possibly as an outcome of some poor image-related strategies taken shortly after the plague broke out.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on April 29 that there is no telling when exactly the pandemic in Russia will end. On April 30, Russia's coronavirus case tally surged past 100,000. The World Health Organization said Russia was the epicenter of the pandemic in Eastern Europe. A new survey by the independent Levada Center reveals that 46 percent of Russians approve of the

president and the government's measures to fight the coronavirus epidemic. However, 48 percent of respondents remain unhappy. In the late April poll, 50 percent of people said the actions of mayors and regional governors are satisfactory while their handling of the situation is better than that of the federal authorities. Trust in federal and local authorities in the country's largest cities is



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

lower than in rural areas. Perhaps, the president's popularity ratings nosedived as he is self-isolating himself from both society and his associates. Numerous photos of Putin sitting alone in front of a computer do not make a positive impression. The governors are more precise in their actions as they seem closer to the nation. The president's actions are too "virtual", people seem to say, as Putin is shifting everything to the governors. The drop in Putin's trust ratings causes a severe blow to the president as his counterparts across the globe are seeing rising popularity numbers. The nation usually tends to consolidate around the country's top officials as hard time comes, yet not in Russia. A survey by VTsIOM, a state pollster, found that when asked whether or not they trusted Putin in

mid-April, 69.8 percent of respondents said yes. Yet even if the president's trust ratings are going down, these still remain at a high level. That is a sharp drop from 72.1 and 70.5 percent Putin was used to seeing before. The nation's dissatisfaction with the government's inaccurate economic relief is now rebounding on the Russian president. In a sign that Putin may be bowing to public pressure, he postponed the April nationwide referendum on constitutional changes (yet he did not set an alternative date) or a landmark military parade to mark the 75th anniversary of Soviet victory over Nazi Germany (early September). These were in vain, though.

30 April 2020

IS PRIME MINISTER MISHUSTIN A FAILED EXPERIMENT?

No other Russian politician named as the country's next prime minister suffered such bad luck as the new incumbent, Mikhail Mishustin. The Russian economy got a terrible blow after oil prices slashed globally, and it was only shortly after that the coronavirus pandemic gripped the world. While Mishustin can blame no one but himself for the oil war -- as he did not hurdle Sechin's calamitous intention to exit OPEC+ -- he could yet do nothing about the plague that spread throughout Russia. Mishustin was named Russia's next prime minister to bring Putin's social promises into life -- or perhaps just to find money to do so. Instead, he was doomed to perform some crisis-management tasks, while Putin's poorly assessed political moves soon rebounded on him.

Mikhail Mishustin was given the role of prime minister on January 16. After the official's first 100 days in office, only one in three Russians says he is doing his job well, according to data from the state-run VTsIOM pollster. The poll found that 38.9 percent of respondents gave him a positive rating -- while echoing the same figures for his government officials. The trust in Dmitry Medvedev, the previous prime minister, was comparable, hitting 38.3 percent, right before he resigned. Around 23.2 percent of Russians complain about the government's actions. In it, the prime minister has scored better, though. Yet the difference is that Mishustin -- unlike Medvedev -- has no sizeable negative electorate (8.3 percent). Nevertheless, Mishustin boasts slightly higher trust ratings. Roughly 52.1 percent of Russians named him when asked to name a politician whom they trust, marking the second-best result after the president (69.8 percent). Interestingly, the survey gave Mishustin and Putin a mistrust rating of 23.6 percent and 25.5 percent, respectively. Back in the past, 56.1 percent of Russians said they did not trust Medvedev. Now these figures grew to 64.6 percent. A poll by FOM agency produced comparable numbers. According to a late March independent Levada Center survey, 48 percent of

people said they approved of the government's steps, with another 48 percent saying the opposite. Around 51 percent of Russians say they approve the prime minister, while 39 percent of respondents have a negative opinion toward Mishustin. But the survey was conducted before the coronavirus pandemic took a firm grip on the country. A new Levada Center survey will offer worse results -- as the share of Russians who view the federal authorities with negative emotions is somewhat significant. Though at the dawn of the novel virus pandemic in Russia Mishustin competed with Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, he lost, as the city official is now a leading figure in the country's fight with the coronavirus. While Sobyenin is taking adequate anti-crisis measures that Moscow residents see as positive for their overall safety, Mishustin and other government officials have made fewer efforts to offer a firm economic relief package. So if Mishustin had an appetite to occupy a pivotal role in Russia's domestic politics, the ongoing turmoil discounts this possibility. Instead, the new incumbent, just like Medvedev in the past, is likely to turn into a technical prime minister and a politician that could take all the heat for the Kremlin's further moves.

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