

# RUSSIA MONITOR

MONTHLY

October 2020



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SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

13 October 2020

## DAGESTAN HAS A NEW “GENERAL-GOVERNOR”

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**Dagestan, one of Russia’s most volatile republics, has a new acting leader. Yet the replacing of the governor does not mean any tilt in Vladimir Putin’s current policy course in Dagestan.**

The Kremlin said in a statement on October 5 that Putin had signed a decree accepting Vladimir Vasilyev’s “request to relieve him from his duties.” It gave no reason why the former governor submitted his resignation. The statement added that Sergei Melikov, a member of the parliament’s upper chamber, the Federation Council, was appointed as Dagestan’s acting leader. Dagestan is one of Russia’s poorest federal districts. Ethnically

diverse, in recent years, it has been at the whirlwind of organized criminal gang violence, clan rivalries, and the spread of militant Islam. In October 2017, Putin made a surprise move by appointing Vasilyev, who at the time was 68, the head of the republic. Vasilyev’s nomination was considered a move to enforce attempts to eradicate deep-rooted corruption in the republic. Vasilyev had no personal links to the republic; earlier, he had served as a police

lieutenant-general and a deputy interior minister. He replaced Ramazan Abdulatipov, a member of the local elite. With Vasilyev in office, the republic saw a series of political purges. Many local officials were arrested and sent behind bars, among whom former prime minister, two deputy prime ministers, former minister, or mayor of Dagestan's capital city of Makhachkala.

Many signs are that Vasilyev, 71, stepped down due to health issues. Recently he has been appointed presidential aide. Dagestan's new acting leader represents the group of "siloviki," he also has the rank of general. Melikov, 55, served as presidential envoy in the North Caucasus Federal Territory between May 2014 and July 2016. Last year he was a senator of Stavropol Krai. Also, Melikov had been the

First Deputy Director of the Russian National Guard since 2016, serving alongside General Viktor Zolotov. The latter official has long been amongst Putin's closest associates. Melikov is well familiar with the Caucasus; he also happens to be an ethnic Lezgin (Lezgins are an ethnic group native to the Caucasus). He climbed up the career ladder in the military forces of the Russian Interior Ministry and fought in the First Chechen War. Melikov's nomination means that Putin seeks to maintain his political course towards Dagestan: to hand the republic into the hands of Moscow newcomers having the first-hand experience in power structures. The reshuffle in Dagestan might bring about a series of shifts in the regions, a typical move every autumn. Many say that now the heads of the Volodymyr Oblast and Khakassia may share the same fate.

14 October 2020

## **RUSSIA RECORDS THE SECOND WAVE OF CORONAVIRUS**

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**It is the third straight day that Russia has registered over 13,000 new infections and has seen a surge in new fatalities. The country is struggling with the highest number of coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic. Also, its authorities show no idea how to tackle the virus. Perhaps they will decide to impose a partial lockdown yet the regime will avoid taking any decision that might harm the economy.**



SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

**A**nna Popova, head of the Russian health watchdog, said on October 13 Russia saw no need to impose restrictions on economic activity. Four days earlier Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said “extra decisions” would refer to something else. Peskov added the official coronavirus task force, as well as its regional agencies, would have to consider the issue if the number of new infections continued to rise. The Kremlin allows certain control measures for people traveling inside the country yet says it will not close the borders of the Russian regions. In many parts throughout the federation, local officials are already closing public areas or planning to do so. The second wave of coronavirus might deliver a bigger blow

to the regime than the first one did. Roughly one in five Russians is keen to get vaccinated against coronavirus. Yet Russia became the first country in the world to approve a vaccine against coronavirus. The problem is that it was registered before completing critical, late-stage clinical trials. Also, total deaths from Covid-19 are said to be twice as high as official data in what might undermine Russians’ trust in the state authorities. Paradoxically, the alleged success of the Russian vaccine might cripple the country’s fight with the pandemic. Since officials boast about Sputnik-V, an average citizen is right to ask why to impose restrictions like face coverings if the vaccine itself can tackle the virus.



SOURCE: MINOBORON

15 October 2020

## **RUSSIA, EGYPT TO HOLD JOINT DRILLS IN THE BLACK SEA**

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**Russia and Egypt are set to hold the Bridge of Friendship 2020 joint military maneuvers in the waters of the Black Sea before the end of this year. This is set to be their first joint military game in the area, a step that confirms Moscow's ever-closer cooperation with the el-Sisi regime. The joint exercise Bridge of Friendship 2020 takes on real importance in the light of the Caucasus war and Turkey's role. It is vital to remember that Turkey and Egypt clash one with another – in Libya or the race to exploit gas reserves in the Mediterranean.**

**I**n early October, delegations of the Russian and Egyptian navies held a three-day conference in the Russian city of Novorossiysk, one of the two main bases of the Black Sea Fleet, and agreed on arrangements for the drills set to take place by the end of the year. For the

first time, the two countries will participate in joint drills in the Black Sea. The exercises will include aircraft from both countries. The navies will conduct training, launching missiles and artillery using shipborne weapons. The maneuvers will also hold an inspection of

“suspicious vessels.” The Bridge of Friendship 2020 exercises prove Moscow’s good ties with Cairo, also in the military. Russia is seeking the best possible alliance with Egypt, also as part of a strategy to push U.S. influence out of the Middle East. Russia and Egypt conduct the first-ever joint naval drill in the Mediterranean back in 2015. With Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in power, Cairo focuses on military cooperation and buys weapons from Russia. Both countries have a similar stance on the Libya conflict, too. Egypt

lends support to the authorities in Tobruk and General Khalifa Haftar while Russia is trying to play both sides yet has undoubtedly offered much aid to the Libyan strongman. Turkey is on the other side of the fence, though. Ankara is involved in the ever-increasing competition with Egypt in the Middle East. Thus Egyptian vessels in the Black Sea may introduce new strains and influence the Turkish-Russian ties in the context of the ongoing war in the Caucasus.

17 October 2020

## DESPITE NAVALNY CASE, GERMANY DEFENDS NORD STREAM 2

**Germany no longer sustains its decision to pull out of the Nord Stream 2 after the attempted poisoning of Alexey Navalny. Germany’s Foreign Minister Heiko Maas believes the pipeline will be completed and so does the German ambassador to Poland. Berlin did not want to quit the project from the very beginning. Although Angela Merkel felt pressure from some of her fellow party members, she would rather stall and she achieved her goal. Now Germany pretends that the issue of halting Nord Stream 2 does not exist.**

**F**or Germany, it is little important that it seeks to boost gas flows from the state following the policy of killings, as exemplified by the purported poisoning of Alexey Navalny. Instead, as Berlin thinks, it is far more comfortable to attack the United States. The top German diplomat Heiko Maas is pursuing a policy that both favors Russia and criticizes Washington. It was him who stressed that “the construction of the Nord Stream 2 natural

gas pipeline system will be completed,” but added he does not know when it will happen. “We decide on both our energy policy and supplies in Europe,” Maas told the RND website, referring to the U.S. pressure. According to what Maas said, Berlin is unlikely to change its stance on Nord Stream 2. Likewise, a new German ambassador to Poland hit the same tone, arguing that the gas pipeline does not harm Europe’s energy security, it complies



SOURCE: NORD-STREAM2.COM

with EU law, and Poland basically agreed to all that. Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven even added that if the project has a political aspect behind, Berlin is doing its best to neutralize it. What he said goes well with Germany's policy. It is worth remembering that as soon as Alexey Navalny had been poisoned with a chemical agent from the Novichok group, officials in

Berlin wondered how to react. Some CDU party members opted for cutting off cooperation with Russia. Merkel announced that as the European project (!), this should be discussed in the European arena. However, the summit was postponed a week. What is now clear is that Austrian and German business circles care about nothing but defending Nord Stream 2.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

19 October 2020

## TWO-THIRDS OF RUSSIANS SEE US AS THE BIGGEST ENEMY

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Although the Cold War ended three decades ago, the attitude of Russian authorities and citizens remains the same, with the United States still being the country's number one enemy. Other listed countries might swap places, but the United States as the Main Adversary, a term coined by the Soviet KGB has an overwhelming advantage over other nations, regardless of current propaganda campaigns in the Kremlin-controlled media.

The independent Levada Center pollster published the results of its September survey on Russia's top enemies. Some 70 percent of respondents pointed to the United States, a similar result as that in a November 2018 survey. Ukraine came second, with

14 percent of Russians saying they view it as an enemy. Two years ago, 34 percent of Russians had a negative opinion of Ukraine, a considerable slump compared with September figures. Among their country's top antagonists, Russians also saw the United

Kingdom (10 percent), however, there has been a positive decline in the number of negative opinions, compared with 14 percent in 2018. Those that came next, the pollster revealed, were Poland and the European Union, with 7 percent of Russians seeing them as a foe. 82 percent of respondents said that country had enemies. It is interesting to compare the poll with a February 2020 survey where almost 80 percent of Russians believed that Russia and the West should become friends and partners, and only 3 percent of Levada's respondents said they saw the West as Russia's enemy. As it turns out, Russians viewed the European Union more favorably than the United States, with 49 percent expressing positive opinions toward the former and 42 percent toward the latter. Negative views of the EU and the United States were split among Russian respondents at 37 percent and 46 percent, respectively.

The latest Levada Center poll showed that 52 percent of Russians believe there are reasons to fear NATO countries. Conversely, 35 percent of the respondents told Levada that members of the Western military bloc should fear Russia. The poll results come as little surprising as the Kremlin-controlled media outlets have the biggest influence on what Russians think about other countries. Some get a heavier blow while others not, depending on the current political needs. Fewer and fewer Russians recognize Ukraine as a foe as the Ukraine conflict fell into the background of Russian propaganda messages. On the other hand, it is little shocking to find Poland amongst Russia's top enemies, mainly amid attacks staged by the state propaganda machines, media, and Russian politicians, including Putin himself, as part of the struggle for historical truth.

19 October 2020

## AS RUSSIAN POPULATION DECLINES RAPIDLY, KREMLIN FACES DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS

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**The Russian government has modified its predictions, projecting a far bigger decline in the country's population, according to the National Development Plan by 2030. The population of Russia is forecast to drop by 352,500 people this year, a far more pessimistic projection than the August one that expected the country's population to decrease by 158,000 to see its biggest decline in fourteen years.**

The only time the country saw a larger drop was 2006 when the figures fell by 373,900. But what is most striking is that it is ten times more than projected last year. Yet it is not the only bad news. In its papers, the Russian government forecasts a decline in the

country's overall population also in the coming years. By 2021, the country could lose 290,000 people, followed by the loss of 238,100 nationals in 2022, 189,100 in 2023, and 165,300 in 2024. In total, Russia could lose 1.2 million people in just four years. According to government



SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

estimates, the country would see sustainable population growth only in 2030. What are the reasons for the natural population decline? This is due to falling birth rates, bigger death rates, and fewer immigrants settling in Russia. The great-grandchildren of the “wartime generation” now reach their reproductive age. There are fewer women able to have children those born during the 1990s demographic low reach their prime childbearing age. Besides, the second reason for the population drop is the country’s extremely high death rate, mainly due to alcoholism, HIV/AIDS epidemic, and poor health care services. In the first six months of 2020, Russia saw a 5.2 percent in new births compared year-on-year, while the total number of deaths grew by 3 percent. In 2019, the fertility rate in Russia shrank to 1.504 children for a woman of childbearing age. Meanwhile,

to prevent the population rate from dropping any further, it would have to equal 2.1. Two years ago, it stood at 1.579. Most importantly, ethnic Russians are witnessing the most rapid population decline. If the death-to-birth ratio stands at 1:4 for the whole nation, it comes as much as 2.5:1 for ethnic Russians. If the negative demographic trend continues, the Russian natural population will drop from 146 million to 106 million in eighty years. Were it not for the influx of millions of economic migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as Russia’s annexation of Crimea (an extra 2.3 million people), the demographic balance of Vladimir Putin’s rule would come definitely negative. But that is changing, too. Fewer and fewer foreigners are eager to settle in Russia, a tendency that will continue at least throughout the next decade.



SOURCE: SYRIA.MIL.RU

20 October 2020

## MOSCOW'S GAME WITH SYRIAN KURDS

**Russia's policy towards the Syrian Kurds has its clear-cut goal: to convince them to sign a peace deal with the regime in Damascus and force the United States to quit Syria. Moscow officials are trying to convince Kurdish circles to cooperate albeit these are hoping to forge an alliance with the United States. Gaining influence over Syrian Kurds is of key importance as the Kurd-controlled regions of the country hold the lion's share of its crude oil reserves and crop fields.**

Russia is seeking to torpedo the delicate U.S. diplomatic game towards the Syrian Kurds as Washington is making efforts to convince Turkey to somewhat ease its stance on Kurdish autonomy in Syria. On September 20, U.S. Special Envoy for Syria James Jeffrey visited northeast Syria for a meeting with delegations

of the Kurdish National Council (allied with Turkey and the Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan), over twenty allied Kurdish parties, and most importantly the Democratic Union Party (PYD; its military wing is the YPG, the pillar of the SDF coalition). Russia has been outraged by Jeffrey's visit to northeast Syria, saying that the United

States is further igniting Kurdish insurgency. Moscow is fearful of losing influence on the Syrian Kurds, whom it urges to start cooperating with the al-Assad to determine the scope of their possible autonomy. The Russians are trying to serve the role of defenders of Syrian Kurds against Turkey's aggression. U.S. diplomatic talks with the Kurds and Turks may be disastrous to the Russian policy. Moscow remains concerned about what influence the United States might exert on Kurdish autonomy. Instead, it seeks to achieve the goal of the Kurds' agreement with al-Assad and keep the areas under their control within the borders of post-war Syria yet with the current regime in power. Russia is seeking to include the Kurds in the talks held under the auspices of Moscow. One incentive for that is that Turkey does not have the right to veto initiatives. An element of the deal between the Kurds and al-Assad that Russia wants to see is to incorporate the SDF into the Syrian government army. Once brokered, the agreement would make U.S. forces which support the SDF leave Syria. Shortly after Jeffrey visited Syria, Ahmad Jarba, leader of the new Peace and Freedom Front coalition that includes the KNC, visited Moscow to meet with Lavrov. Jarba is widely known for advocating Russian interests in northeast Syria. Russia seeks to restore the trust of the Kurds they had lost by allowing Turkey to invade Afrin in 2018, at the cost of cooperating against Jihadi

insurgents in Idlib. After the Turkish offensive in October 2019, Russia took control of nearly two-thirds of the Kurd-administered territory in northeast Syria. Also, Russian military police started to deploy on Syria's border with Turkey. Both Russia and al-Assad are doing their utmost to weaken the Kurds and push them into talks by sparking frictions between the SDF and some local Arab tribes. The Syrian intelligence agency is making intense efforts there while it is the American influence that keeps those tensions from flaring up. Moscow has chided at the July deal brokered between the Kurdish Autonomous Administration and an American oil company to exploit crude oilfields. Both joint and sharp reaction from Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran prompted the Kurds to take steps to appease Russia. In late August, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and the pro-Russia Popular Will Party (PWP) reached an agreement in Moscow. What Syrian Kurds need to be aware of is that Moscow will give Turkey the green light for new military operations. Yet the Kurds take Russian offers with a pinch of salt, remembering that Moscow sides with Turkey in the Syria war. Also, Russia-sponsored reconciliation deals between the regime and regions in southwest Syria destroyed the local institutions. Thus, Lavrov's statements that dialogue with the al-Assad regime is the only way to safeguard the rights of the Kurds are seen as mere political statements.



SOURCE: MEDIA.GAZPROM-NEFT.RU

22 October 2020

# **RUSSIA, OPEC+ SHOW CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM ON CRUDE VOLUMES**

Oil cuts in force under the OPEC+ deal will remain unchanged for the time being, at least until November 17, 2020, thus the next meeting of the ministerial monitoring committee on crude oil limitations. “We reached an agreement to continue executing the deal in full scope,” Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak informed.

The current prices correspond with the situation while the market estimates them adequately, according to the Russian government official. There are neither “black swans” nor special factors that would prompt prices to either rise or fall sharply. “The OPEC+ deal actually allows us to keep abreast with the situation, monitor it, and react swiftly to any fluctuations. We also noticed that as crude inventories climbed towards their five-year rolling average, another positive highlight of the today’s meeting,” Novak added. OPEC+ members see that the second wave of COVID-19 is slowing demand. Thus the oil-producing cartel expects more uncertainties to come in the winter. Novak also said the global oil market could face a shortage of a million barrels per day, adding the situation is close to stabilizing. “Of course, we monitor the whole situation while assuming the oil market will likely see more uncertainty in winter when demand for fuel typically declines,” the Russian energy official told journalists. But a baseline scenario on the market development, the theme of the OPEC+

ministerial committee meeting, holds more or less optimistic assumptions for oil producers. Such is a projection that OECD stocks in Q4 will be only 142 million barrels above the five-year average. In Q1 2021, their volumes are likely to drop to 85 million barrels above the target level. Importantly, the forecast says Libya’s oil output will almost quadruple in Q4 2020, to 600,000 barrels per day, a tendency that is likely to remain in place throughout 2021. Under the baseline scenario, the oil market will see some shortages next year. Maximum demand levels may exceed supply in Q2 2021 even by 2.8 million barrels per day. The alternative scenario looks worse but is still quite optimistic. It assumes that the coronavirus pandemic might not end before spring 2021, while Libya could boost its oil production to 1.1 million barrels per day. Thus the oil market will witness crude surpluses in the first half of next year, with 4 million barrels per day, a volume expected to drop to 0.4 million barrels per day by late 2021, according to OPEC estimates.

22 October 2020

## **HRW SYRIA REPORT: PUTIN RESPONSIBLE FOR WAR CRIMES**

**In its report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has accused the Syria-Russia alliance of committing possible war crimes and crimes against humanity by attacking civilians in Idlib province. The watchdog also called for sanctions against people behind the joint Russian-Syrian raids. Among the blacklisted is also Russian President Vladimir Putin. Human Rights Watch submitted evidence that the strikes are war crimes and might indeed be classified as crimes against humanity.**



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

The watchdog published a report examining 46 joint Russian-Syrian attacks conducted between April 2019 and March 2020. They deliberately targeted mostly civilian infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and markets. The strikes killed at least 212 civilians, wounding a further 560. Since the dawn of the Syrian civil war, Damascus and Moscow have consistently denied carrying out purposeful attacks on both civilian people and infrastructure. Al-Assad and his Russian allies insist they only target extremist groups in Idlib like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. However, the HRW report found no evidence of the opposition's weapons, equipment, or military personnel near where the attacks took place. Civilians were not given advance warning of the attacks and most importantly the strikes mostly took place far from regions where al-Assad forces fought against opposition militants. As HRW wrote in the report, the strike campaign sought to terrorize civilians, forcing them to flee massively. More than three million civilians are now in Idlib, many of whom in crowded refugee camps, where they fled their homes in other Syrian regions, pushed by Syrian regime forces.

In April 2019 the Russian-backed government army launched a major offensive to seize the last rebel-held enclave. It managed to capture roughly half of its territory before signing a fragile ceasefire in March 2020, negotiated by Russia and Turkey. Ankara wants to prevent the fall of Idlib; the country has its proxies amongst the rebels throughout the region and earlier it had deployed its military posts in the area. The 167-page report is based on interviews with more than 100 civilian witnesses and rescue workers, as well as experts on the Russian and Syrian armed forces. Researchers also analyzed satellite imagery of the strike locations and examined videos and photographs taken during or in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. The report also named ten senior Syrian and Russian civilian and military officials, who may be “command responsible” for the war crimes. The listed included the Russian and Syrian presidents Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad as well as defense ministries Gen. Sergei Shoigu and Gen. Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, or the commander of the Syrian Air Force Gen. Ahmed Balloul.



SOURCE: NORD-STREAM2.COM

22 October 2020

## U.S. WIDENS SANCTIONS AGAINST NORD STREAM 2

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**The U.S. administration is making consistent efforts to annihilate the Russia-to-Germany gas link across the Baltic Sea. As eliminating other-than-Russian-flagged vessels from the game proved little effective since Russia deployed its own fleet the United States stepped up sanctions against companies having anything to do with those vessels.**

On October 20, the U.S. State Department broadened the scope of sanctions targeting the unfinished Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline. The new guidance says that companies providing facilities or equipment or funding for such work also face potential punitive measures. The U.S. document mentions in particular those offering services, technical, or financial aid to “upgrade or install equipment for those vessels” dispatched to the

Baltic Sea to work on the gas link between Russia and Germany. It is first and foremost about the Akademik Cherskiy, a Russian pipelay vessel that has been anchored in the Baltic Sea for a few months by now. It went through several upgrades allowing it to perform pipelay works in the offshore part of the gas link. As of December 2019, when all works were brought to a halt, the pipeline was 94 percent complete. Following the announcement of the sanctions

roughly a year ago, Switzerland-based offshore pipelay and subsea construction company Allseas immediately suspended all activities. Now Russia seeks to complete the construction using its own means. But having a fleet is not enough. This also entails a whole range of subcontractors and service providers that face U.S. sanctions. If these quit the construction, Russians are left to their own devices. It is even problematic to cover the whole project with insurance. In September, the International Group of Protection and Indemnity Clubs, a leading maritime insurance and indemnity group, announced that due to the U.S.

sanctions threat, “there will be no club cover for any activity involving or related to Nord Stream 2.” The company said in a statement that the widened U.S. sanctions could directly hit more than 120 companies from more than twelve European countries, including investors and subcontractors. The Kremlin delivered a response, too. “We believe such aspirations are nothing but a demonstration of unfair competition while the United States is pursuing a rather hostile and destructive policy of permanent restrictions against Russia,” presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov noted.

23 October 2020

## GRU HACKERS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES OF RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE CHIEF

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**There are more and more strains appearing in U.S.-Russia ties. First, the U.S. Justice Department announced an indictment against six Russian GRU officers charged with engaging in a series of hacking and malware deployment operations to attack the United States and the whole civilized world. Shortly afterward, the head of Russia’s civilian intelligence agency accused Washington of working behind the scenes to overthrow the government in Moldova in what he named as an attempted “color revolution,” suggesting U.S. efforts to spark political crises in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, two of which friendly to Moscow.**

**S**hortly before the U.S. presidential vote, Washington’s relations with Moscow are even worse than a year or two years ago, with more and more contentious issues piling up. U.S. officials are now particularly sensitive to any Russian attempts to meddle in the campaign. Perhaps this has something to do with the indictment specifically accusing the

six alleged hackers of engaging in computer intrusions in the United States, France, the Netherlands, Georgia, Ukraine, South Korea, and Japan. As back in 2016, the Russian side is trying to reverse the role, accusing the United States of interfering with political affairs in other countries being Moscow’s allies. “Now we clearly see that the Americans are preparing a



SOURCE: OSCE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY (CC BY-SA 2.0)

revolutionary scenario for Moldova,” the head of Russia’s SVR said. Moldovans head to the polls on November 1 to elect the country’s next president. The main challenger to pro-Russian President Igor Dodon is the former prime minister Maia Sandu, known for her pro-Western stance. Dodon is notorious for his servitude to the Kremlin, and he is now a top politician in Moldova after his socialist party used pro-Western groups to removed oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc and his team from power, and then also ousted the coalition partner. Sandu is now seen as the top challenger to Dodon. The former politician defeated Sandu and allies in the European Union and the United States with the help of

Moscow. According to Naryshkin, who said Dodon was most likely to win the ballot, “the U.S. State Department ordered its embassy in Chisinau to organize mass protests in case of his reelection demanding the cancellation of the voting results.” The United States made similar attempts to influence the post-election situation also in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, the head of Russia’s spy agency said in a statement. Naryshkin also pointed to Washington decrying “the unacceptability of any external interference in the internal American election campaign, but immediately forgets about any right to self-determination when it comes to the White House’s opportunistic interests around the world.”



SOURCE: MINOBORON

23 October 2020

## **U.S., RUSSIA PLAY CAT AND MOUSE OVER NEW START TREATY**

Concluded by the Barack Obama administration, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is the last remaining U.S.-Russian arms control treaty. It will expire in February 2021. Moscow has long been keen to extend the treaty yet Donald Trump demands some extra commitments. Russian President Vladimir Putin has refused, suggesting a one-year extension of the existing deal. The Kremlin believes that even after Joe Biden's victory, the Democrats candidate will at least remain the New START treaty in force – according to what he said. It will be far worse for the Kremlin if Trump wins the ballot, throwing the last remaining pact constraining the arsenals of the world's two major nuclear powers to the rubbish bin and thus impairing Russia's position.

The Russian propaganda machine makes continuous efforts to convince both nations that Trump's victory would mean the lesser evil for Moscow. But notwithstanding this, the Kremlin is looking for bright sides even in Biden's triumph. One of them is his declared readiness to extend the New START treaty. Perhaps this was the reason for Russia's blocking the ongoing nuclear arms control talks with the Trump administration. What the incumbent U.S. leader is offering is far worse for the Kremlin than the extension of the current agreement. Why so? The point is that the U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear stockpiles are not of utmost importance in this context. Similar in size, they have seen a gradual reduction in size since 2010. What is more important is non-strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, with Russia having many more pieces than the United States. This is why Trump suggested extending the New START treaty, adding somewhat an appendix to freeze the development of other nuclear weapons. The Kremlin could not nod to that, a move that would strike a blow to its new nuclear program

that Putin often likes to boast about, saying no one else around the world has them. The second reason why Russia turned down the American offer was its reluctance to take any steps that might be badly received in China, notably those taken jointly with Washington. Extending the New START treaty with an extra option of encouraging China to join the nuclear arms control deal would come as such a move. Besides, Russia has rebuilt and even expanded its non-strategic nuclear arsenal, including field artillery capable of firing small-sized nuclear warheads or other ground- or submarine-launched missiles tipped with such warheads. In recent decades, while Russia was making efforts to build them up, the United States dismantled roughly its entire non-strategic stockpile. As a result, today Russia has thousands of non-strategic and tactical nuclear warheads, and the United States has only a few hundred nuclear bombs deployed throughout Europe. As Russia's top diplomat Sergey Lavrov put it briefly, the United States must get rid of them from Europe to start any talks on tactical nuclear weapons.

25 October 2020

## **LUKASHENKO PLAYS AGAINST TIME IN RUSSIA GAME**

**Alexander Lukashenko has no intention of handing full power to Russia. Regardless of what he agreed on with Vladimir Putin during the September visit to Sochi, it is still challenging to imagine Russia taking control of Belarus, a scenario many projected until quite recently.**



SOURCE: PRESIDENT.GOV.BY

The head of Russia's foreign spy agency, Sergey Naryshkin, flew to Minsk last Thursday, October 22, to hold a high-profile meeting with Alexander Lukashenko. Following the talks, the Belarusian president said the situation around the Union State, an organization consisting of Belarus and Russia, was quite difficult. Lukashenko also thanked Naryshkin for exchanging information with both Belarusian special services and him. The Russian official informed about the joint meeting of the boards of Russian and Belarusian special services, held on the same day in the capital of Belarus. With Naryshkin's trip to Minsk, Moscow expressed deep concerns over how the events might further unfold in Belarus. Meanwhile, it is worth remembering what the head of Russia's spy agency has said quite recently when arguing that the United States is seeking to foment

color revolutions in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova. However, Lukashenko's words about the difficult situation around the Union State suggest that Minsk is reluctant to meet Russian expectations. Perhaps it is about forging a dialogue with the opposition and passing through mock constitutional reforms. Despite an unexpected meeting Lukashenko held with political opponents in the jail before these were transferred to house arrest, Belarus has still a long way to go to form a systemic opposition whose members will be able to start talks with the current regime. Lukashenko has achieved his number goal by gaining Russia's support in the first stage of social unrest. Of course, he probably made a number of promises in return yet he is in no hurry to keep them now. It seems that Lukashenko has yet again outplayed the Kremlin, at least for now.



SOURCE: FLICKR/PERETZP (CC BY-SA 2.0)

26 October 2020

# LUKOIL FREEZES CRUDE PROJECTS OVER LOW OIL PRICES

The situation on the global oil market has taken its toll on crude projects, also in Russia. As there are huge crude stocks whilst oil price is stable at roughly \$40 per barrel, oil output is little profitable and so is looking for new fields. The CEO of Lukoil Vagit Alekperov said that the low oil price resulted in a sharp decline in the number of new oil projects, a situation that forced his firm to end some of them, too.

Lukoil has frozen a total of \$1.5 billion in crude projects. Alekperov noted that if the stagnation period went further on, his company would review crude projects to assess whether to prevent any. According to the CEO of Lukoil, among halted projected were those being less

profitable, either due to depleted fields or amid considerable distance one from another. The situation looks different for Lukoil's Caspian oilfields. Alekperov yet assured that OPEC+ cuts did by no means affect the company's drilling works. Lukoil prioritizes some projects

and continues to develop them. The company has launched phase two of the development drilling campaign on the Vladimir Filanovsky offshore field in the Caspian Sea. The second stage is aiming to keep oil production at the planned rate of 6 million tonnes a year. Lukoil is planning to construct two shafts and the fixed ice-resistant platform (LSP-2). Northern areas of the Caspian Sea have been the domain for Lukoil's geological exploration since 1995, whilst the energy firm launched deep drilling back in 1999. With its licenses, the energy company drilled twenty-six exploration and appraisal

wells. In total, Lukoil discovered ten fields in the Caspian Sea with ultimate recoverable reserves of hydrocarbons amounting to 7 billion barrels of oil equivalent. Some of them include large multi-layer deposits such as the V. Filanovsky, the Y. Korchagin, the V. I. Grayfer, the Sarmatskoye, and the Khvalynskoye oilfields. For instance, the V. Filanovsky field had initial recoverable reserves of 129 million metric tons of oil and 30 billion cubic meters of gas. Lukoil launched full-scale operations there in the fall of 2016.

27 October 2020

## **BALKAN STREAM OR TURKSTREAM: BULGARIA IS UNDER U.S. PRESSURE**

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**U.S. sanctions targeting the Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream natural gas pipeline may have severe repercussions for Bulgaria that is now building the Balkan leg of the latter energy link. The authorities in Sofia say that the Balkan Stream gas link is a separate project to TurkStream. The United States, however, believes something different.**

**T**he Bulgarian government has no intention of quitting the leg of the TurkStream natural gas link running from Turkey to Serbia through its territory. The 470-kilometer gas pipeline is poised to carry Russian gas flows to Turkey along the Black Sea. The Saudi-led group Arkad is now working on the pipeline but Bulgaria's Prime Minister Boyko Borisov argues that the project is 100 percent Bulgarian as part

of the country's national gas infrastructure. What reinforces the narrative of the Bulgarian origin of the project is the fact it was named Balkan Stream. Bulgarian Energy Minister Temenuzhka Petkova recently reiterated that it is "a purely Bulgarian project," implemented under all EU procedures and rules. The project is wholly financed by Bulgaria, Petkova added, saying it would probably be operational by



SOURCE: PIXABAY.COM

the end of this year. Petkova's words came two days after the U.S. Department of State announced new sanctions against Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream gas lines and their extra legs. But Washington implies that it sees the Balkan Stream pipeline differently than Sofia does. Earlier, on October 1, the Bulgarian energy official met with Francis Fannon, a U.S. Department of State envoy, who said that from the U.S. point of view, there was nothing like Balkan Stream, but the Bulgarian string

of the TurkStream pipeline. The U.S. diplomat suggested in a veiled manner that Bulgaria could face possible sanctions. Nonetheless, Fannon praised Bulgaria for constructing a gas interconnector between the country and neighboring Greece. Once complete, it will deliver Azeri natural gas as well as U.S. and Qatari liquefied gas flows – both competitive to Russian energy commodities – into the Bulgarian market.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

28 October 2020

## **RUSSIA PROVOKES TURKEY IN SYRIA'S IDLIB**

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**Russian aircraft have carried out a strike – the bloodiest surge in violence – in the stronghold of Syria’s rebel forces, also targeting rebel proxies siding with Turkey. What Russia has done might prompt the escalation in Syria’s Idlib. Perhaps Russia seeks to get upsides with Turkey over the latter’s involvement in the Azerbaijan-Armenia fighting.**

**R**ebel groups promised Russia to take revenge on the airstrikes that killed 78 insurgents. Following the Russian airstrike, the rebels slaughtered at least fifteen supporters of Bashar al-Assad. On October 26, more than 78 people were killed and 90 wounded when Russian warplanes targeted a training camp of the Faylaq al-Sham faction in the Jabal Duwayli

area in the town of Kafr Taharim, some 10 kilometers far from the Turkish border. Failaq al-Sham is a Sunni Islamist faction whose members fight in the Turkish military offensive in Syria and are also believed to be present in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. The National Liberation Front, an umbrella group of Ankara-backed rebels based in Idlib that includes

Faylaq al-Sham, says it seeks revenge. NLF spokesman has accused Moscow of violating the ceasefire deal. Also, Damascus-loyal militias shelled rebel position in southern Idlib and neighboring Hama province. The strikes were the deadliest since the Russian-Turkey ceasefire in northwestern Syria came into force nearly eight months ago. It halted the offensive by forces loyal to al-Assad and Russian aircraft against the last rebel-held enclave in Syria. The opposition forces currently control roughly half of Idlib province as well as some small areas in neighboring Hama and Aleppo. The jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant faction in Idlib province,

encompasses Islamist insurgents led by the former Syrian leg of al-Qaeda. Another Jihadi group is an al-Qaeda affiliate, Hurras al-Din. In turn, Turkey has for years helped far more moderate factions. When hammering out the truce deal, Moscow and Ankara agreed on to deploy military outposts throughout the enclave. A few days before the Russian airstrike against the training camp, Turkey evacuated one of its biggest observation stations that had been encircled by Syrian government forces. The outpost in Morek is in Hama province, right to Idlib. Perhaps Turkey assumes a joint offensive from Damascus and Moscow.

28 October 2020

## PUTIN, ERDOGAN DISCUSS CAUCASUS WAR AND MERCENARIES

**Armenia and Russia have blamed Azerbaijan for using Muslim mercenaries in the current phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from its beginning. Turkey is believed to deliver hired guns from Syria. In their phone talk, the presidents of Russia and Turkey broached that topic, too. Many signs are that their conversation failed to bring any breakthrough to the whole case.**

Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a phone talk on October 27. The conversation was held on the Turkish side's initiative, the Kremlin press service informed. Putin expressed deep concern over the ongoing hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kremlin said in a statement. This topic was brought to the spotlight. Although Putin did not directly

accuse Ankara of deploying mercenaries to the Caucasus, he insisted that more and more "terrorists from the Middle East" are taking part in the war, thus implicitly pointing to Turkey. The Putin-Erdogan talk has had no impact on the conflict – at least not for now. The next day, Azerbaijan accused Armenia of killing people in a missile strike near the city of Barda. The



SOURCE: TWITTER/MODOFARMENIA

separatist authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh blamed Azerbaijan for attacking the capital city of Stepanakert and killing at least one person. Several dozen separatist fighters died, bringing the total death tally to 1,068 since September 27 when the fighting broke out. So far, both sides to the conflict made three attempts to broker a ceasefire, also after the U.S. and Russian mediations, yet each truce did not last even a day.

Moscow does not take such a firm stance on the Armenia-Azerbaijan fighting as Ankara did. While Turkey lends full support to Azerbaijan, offering military hardware and perhaps also mercenaries, Russia remains far more cautious. On October 22, Vladimir Putin said that Moscow would benefit from the trust of both

sides, adding Russia had in the past had special relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. But in this conflict, Baku is hoping to side with Turkey. When Putin held talks with Erdogan, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev gave an interview to the Italian TV broadcaster RAI. The leader dismissed allegations from Russia, the United States, and France – all three being part of the OSCE Minsk Group – that Azerbaijan has deployed foreign fighters. “After all, we do say how many weapons Russia send to Armenia,” Aliyev told journalists, implying Russian moral and political aid to Armenia. “From the Russian military base in Gyumri, Armenia, the Armenian side regularly receives supplies,” he added. Aliyev also denied any Turkish involvement as an Azeri proxy in the war.



SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

29 October 2020

## **MORE LIBYAN OIL CAUSES HEADACHE FOR RUSSIANS**

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**With Africa's largest proven oil reserves, Libya took a major step toward reviving its oil industry by reopening its biggest field, presenting a new headache for OPEC+. The alliance of major producers and its allies hopes to be able to boost production next year yet without price drops. The new wave of coronavirus and the risk of the economic slowdown are again on the table. Now Libya, a top oil producer, is coming back on track. Perhaps OPEC+ will not trim output limits by at least mid-2021. This is also true for Russia that sees more modest revenues from oil exports this year, a situation that poses a threat both to its oil companies and the federal budget.**

**L**ibya is gradually lifting force majeure on fields shut due to the civil war. As the fighting went on, Libyan oil exports shrank dramatically since January but now, it could

boost to 1 million barrels per day in just a month. Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) has lifted a force majeure on what it deemed secure oil ports and facilities. Unblocking oil

output and exports came after a month and a half ago when Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar announced he would lift the blockade on oil production after reaching an agreement with the rival Tripoli-based Government of National Accord. These two hammered out a permanent truce. The pace at which Libya is now restoring its oil output and exports sent shockwaves across the market. In just a month and a half, crude production boosted nearly sevenfold, to roughly 700,000 barrels per day. Libya has Africa's biggest crude oil reserves. Although a member of the oil-producing cartel, it is exempt from cuts in crude output – so is the Russia-led group of other countries.

Libya's comeback to the oil market is a headache for OPEC+ whose countries are seeking to raise oil prices in the face of the new wave of coronavirus and fresh economic restrictions. Not so long ago, representatives for OPEC+ states met and decided to ease oil output strifes starting from early January. The alliance planned to ease the curbs by 2 million

barrels a day. Yet with virus cases accelerating in many countries, the cartel faces a difficult decision – with no new changes. The price of crude oil began to drop sharply, standing at 60 percent of the price in the early months of this year. Bringing more oil to the market is another factor that forced OPEC+ to wait before easing the limitations. Speaking at the Vaidai Club meeting on October 22, Vladimir Putin said for him, there was no need to change anything in the current oil production curbs. OPEC+ has “proved to be an effective instrument to ensure long-term stability on global energy markets,” he told the meeting. Interestingly, Igor Sechin, the CEO of Rosneft – Russia's biggest oil firm – delivered his stance. An arch opponent of OPEC+, he admitted that the cooperation of oil-producing countries was a must, calling to take actions to stabilize the market. It is worth adding that Sechin was behind the price war in the spring of this year, which resulted in a slump in oil prices amidst the coronavirus pandemic. Back in March, he said Russia might quit the cartel.

29 October 2020

## SERBIA IS MOST ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT TURKSTREAM

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**The Russian ambassador to Serbia announced that the Serbian stretch of the TurkStream natural gas pipeline running from the Bulgarian border to the country's border with Hungary would be ready soon. But before this happens, there is still the Bulgarian leg to be complete. Yet Moscow's ties with Belgrade are now very cordial.**

Russia's Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko said it would be ready by the end of the year. “The remaining parts are

gas metering and compressing stations,” the diplomat added. Russia says that the Serbian leg of TurkStream – interestingly no one in Serbia



SOURCE: TURKSTREAM.INFO

dubs the pipeline Balkan Stream as Bulgaria does – has been built at a record-breaking pace. This was confirmed by the Belgrade-based company Infrastructure Development and Construction (IDC), the main contractor for the pipeline construction. The Serbian string of TurkStream was built at a pace of six kilometers per day. A total of 400 kilometers of pipes were laid in six months despite harsh geological conditions, with sapper works being conducted in the mountainous area of Serbia. Another challenge was to conduct pipelay works along the Danube River where the river was 1,402 meters wide while the pipeline was built across there in just thirty-two days.

Swift efforts to build TurkStream – a gas pipeline carrying Russian gas flows to Europe – is just one of the signs of the Russian–Serbian friendship as the Balkan country has become Moscow’s top partner across the region. Both countries are having joint economic and

security-related issues. The authorities in Belgrade exclude joining NATO, but Belgrade is still seeking to become an EU member state. Russia wants to take advantage of this by building up its military presence in Serbia. According to the latest news, Russia is moving toward opening a Defense Ministry office in Serbia. The deal would allow a Russian military representative to inspect Serbian military units armed with Russian weapons. Serbia would first need to consent to the inspections. Serbia has recently purchased Russian-made MiG-29 fighter jets, Mi-35 helicopters, T-72 tanks, and armored personnel vehicles. Although Belgrade suspended its participation in the Slavic Brotherhood 2020 military drills with Russia and Belarus, pointing to pressure from the EU, the country’s army conducted on October 10 the exercise to demonstrate the combat use of Russian weapons, including the Pantsir anti-aircraft system.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

30 October 2020

## ROSNEFT PLANS OIL PRODUCTION ON TAYMYR PENINSULA

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**Russian oil giant Rosneft and Neftegazholding are planning to produce up to 50 million of liquefied natural gas on the Taymyr peninsula. Rosneft is a state-run company while its partner – a privately owned firm belonging to a former Rosneft president Eduard Khudainatov. This is not their first joint project.**

**T**he LNG facility on the Taymyr peninsula would be part of the Vostok Oil project. So far, the CEO of Rosneft has revealed neither its capacity nor the date of launch. What is yet known is that the projected Bukhta Sever

port is expected to hold between 30 and 50 million tons of liquefied natural gas per year. Sechin submitted this idea in June 2020 in a letter to Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. The mere fact that the head of Rosneft did

not write implicitly about the construction of LNG plants, but asked Mishustin to auction three gas fields with total reserves of 128 billion cubic meters (bcm) and include the obligation to ship commodities via the Northern Sea Route. Back then, analysts argued it would be most convenient to liquefy gas commodities and transport them by tankers elsewhere in the world. Vostok Oil is a brand-new project of Rosneft and Neftegazholding that includes both already operating fields as well as new unexplored areas. The project also got state tax exemptions to stimulate Arctic upstream oil and gas development. Rosneft estimates Vostok Oil's resource base at around 5 billion tons of oil while the port in Bukhta Sever has an estimated annual capacity of 100 million tons. Analysts from Vygon Consulting believed that with new deposits, the Vostok Oil reserves

estimated at roughly 600 bcm are enough to extract between 25 and 30 bcm of oil a year and build LNG plants consisting of three or four production lines, each with a projected output of 5.5 million tons. The facility could be ready in at least six years and cost between \$25 and \$30 billion. There are currently two Russian energy companies having the country's biggest liquefaction plants. In 2019, Novatek's Yamal LNG project produced 18.4 million tons of oil while Gazprom's Sakhalin-2 had an output of 11 million tons throughout 2019. Rosneft aspires to hit the top three Russian LNG producers. For years the company has been working on the construction of LNG facilities as part of the Sakhalin-1 project, operated by the U.S. energy firm ExxonMobil. Rosneft also intended to build the Pechora LNG plant jointly with a private investor, yet these two failed to agree on details.

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