

RUSSIA MONITOR

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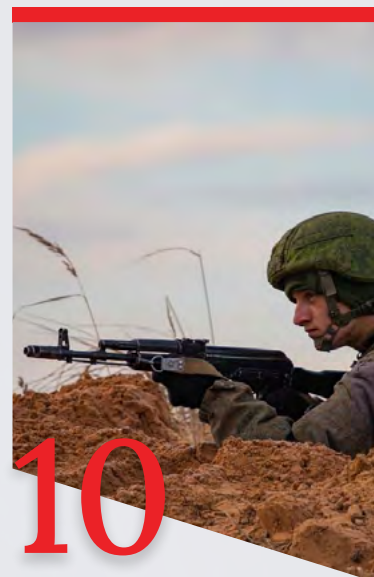
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SOURCE: DUMA.GOV.RU

6 April 2021

RUSSIAN ESPIONAGE SCANDAL IN ITALY

Two Russian diplomats flew back to Moscow on April 1 as Italy expelled them shortly before. Employees of the Russian embassy's military attaché were involved in a spy scandal as an Italian naval officer was detained on March 30 on spying charges, marking the most serious espionage incident since the Cold War. This may bring severe consequences since Italy is one of the countries within the European Union and NATO with the warmest relations with Russia. Another nation having such a cordial link to Russia is Bulgaria whose authorities smashed a Russian spy ring a dozen or so days ago.

The navy captain, identified as Walter Biot, 54, passed secret files to a Russian military attaché in return for cash. He was detained on March 30 after police had caught him allegedly selling secret files stored on a flash drive to an

employee of the Russian embassy's military attaché in return for €5,000 in cash. The Russian, an embassy official, was also detained but avoided custody thanks to diplomatic immunity.

If convicted, Biot faces a minimum of 15 years in prison. His wife told journalists from one of Italy's biggest newspapers that she had been unaware of her husband's alleged actions, adding he might have done so as he was desperate to support their large family and repay the mortgage. All signs are that he handed over sensitive military documents to the GRU. Two Russian diplomats were expelled from the country, said Italy's chief diplomat Luigi Di Maio on March 31.

Russia's foreign ministry expressed "regret" for the expulsion of two members of its military

attache office, hoping the incident would not affect relations between the two countries. The two Russian officials named as Dmitry Ostroukhov and Alexei Nemudrov flew back to Moscow on April 1. The espionage incident involving Russian diplomats may introduce strains into Italy-Russia relations, all the more so that Italy is one of few EU states with cordial ties with Moscow. Mario Draghi, Italy's new prime minister, is a proponent of a robust Euro-Atlantic alliance, with his stance toward Russia being far more moderate than that adopted by his predecessor, Giuseppe Conte. ■

8 April 2021

PUTIN'S DISMISSAL. TUVA LEADER CHANGE

The resignation of the governor of Tuva seems surprising at first glance. Sholban Kara-ool ruled the republic for over a decade, enjoyed great popularity and, above all, ensured political stability and excellent election results for Vladimir Putin. Tuva is traditionally an area of political influence of the Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu, which, moreover, comes from there.

It was in the company of Shoygu that President Putin spent a short vacation in Tuva at the end of March. It was probably then that personal decisions were made in consultation with the Minister of Defense. As a result, on April 7, Putin accepted the dismissal of Sholban Kara-ool and acted as p.o. the governor was appointed by Vladislav Chowaldyg – with whom he had a videoconference on the same day. Kara-ool was one of the longest-

serving heads of the regions of the Russian Federation. He ruled Tuva for the last 14 years. Before that, he was a deputy of the regional parliament from 1998 and until December 2001 he sat in the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament. In 2002-2007 he worked in the government of the republic. Kara-ool, 54, ruled the region since April 2007. He was Putin's candidate. He won the second term of office as a candidate for president



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

Dmitry Medvedev. In September 2016, he won again. In the last election, Kara-ool won with 85 percent. votes with an attendance of 90 percent. There was speculation about his resignation in March. His term of office ended this year. Formally, it was Kara-ool himself who applied for his resignation, but given his quite recent declarations, it is obvious that he was forced to do so by the Kremlin and his patron Shoigu. Shoigu's man is, of course, also p.o. Governor of Tuva, 53-year-old Vladislav Chovaldyg. He was the mayor of the capital of Tuva in 2008-2018. Then he became the general director of Tywaenergosbyt, part of the Rosseti corporation. The elections of the

leader of Tuva will be held on September 19, 2021. There is no doubt that Chovalg will win it. Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova called Tuva the poorest region of Russia. According to Rosstat data from 2019, as much as 34.1 percent. of the population has an income below the subsistence level. Tuva is also a leader in the Russian Federation in terms of the lowest life expectancy. In Tuva, however, the Kremlin could always count on excellent election results. Putin won almost 92 percent in the presidential election in 2018. with the highest turnout in the country of 93.66 percent. In this respect, Tuva even surpassed Chechnya. ■



SOURCE: MSZ.RP

8 April 2021

WHO ARE UKRAINE'S RELIABLE AND FAKE ALLIES

A friend in need is a friend indeed, a popular saying goes. Growing tensions between Moscow and Kyiv and the mounting threat to Ukraine make a good test checking true intentions of Kyiv's Western partners.

Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau on 8 April paid an urgent visit to the capital of Ukraine. Poland's chief diplomat headed to Kyiv as Russian forces are massing on Ukraine's border while rumors are that Moscow might be planning possible military aggression. Rau received an invitation from his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, who insisted

on Poland being "a longtime ally and reliable friend" of his country. On the agenda was also a meeting of Poland's top diplomat and a Ukrainian delegation to the trilateral contact group in charge of settling the Donbas conflict. This is a very significant fact indeed and a signal from Kyiv that it is dissatisfied with the Normandy format and its Minsk talks. Officials

in Kyiv say they no longer want to conduct talks in Belarus amid the events in the country, Lukashenko's rapprochement with Russia, and the crisis in Belarus-Ukraine relations. Also, Ukraine reportedly wants to conduct talks elsewhere, possibly in Poland.

Thus Rau's visit to Kyiv and his meeting with Ukrainian negotiators may not be incidental. Ukraine's ruling elite is not as submissive to Germany as Petro Poroshenko, the previous Ukrainian leader, used to be. President Zelensky is ready to make efforts to change the negotiating formula to see a bigger involvement of countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, and their Central European allies, with Poland at the helm. Since its creation seven years ago, the Normandy format consisting of Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France was not even close to ending the Donbas conflict. Furthermore, Paris and notably Berlin prioritize relations with Moscow far more than their aid to Kyiv. The best example is Nord Stream 2, an energy project that is disastrous to Ukraine. Also in recent weeks when tensions

escalated on the Russian-Ukrainian border, neither Paris nor Berlin is in a hurry to show support for Ukraine and chide Russia for what it is doing.

Today Kyiv can count mostly on the United States and other NATO allies somewhat skeptical towards Russia-Poland, Lithuania, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Now Poland and Lithuania are top NATO members while U.S. close allies, both having robust ties with Ukraine. Notable examples are U.S. gas supplies through the Świnoujście LNG terminal to Ukraine within a trilateral deal inked sometime ago or the Lublin triangle, a political alliance of Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania, or a joint military unit of these countries.

Defense ministers from Poland and Lithuania took part in a videoconference on the situation in Ukraine, an event held by Britain's defense minister, in which U.S. and Canadian officials also participated. It was a meeting of countries making a key contribution to the security of Ukraine, said a statement published by Pentagon. ■

9 April 2021

PUTIN SIGNS LAW ALLOWING HIM TO STAY IN POWER UNTIL 2036

Russian President Vladimir Putin has given final approval to legislation allowing him to hold office for two additional terms. However, this is not certain whether this will happen. The recent legal update is of huge political importance as it has sent shockwaves to the Russians and notably the ruling elite that got a strong signal that Putin felt strong while keeping the situation under control.

On April 5, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov announced that the president would deliver his annual address to the

parliament, the Federal Assembly, on April 21. Yet he preferred to keep quiet about the themes of the forthcoming speech. In January 2020



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

address to Russia's two-chamber parliament, Putin said the country's constitution should be amended. The constitutional amendments also emphasized the primacy of Russian law over international norms and the consolidation of the status and the role of the State Council in the constitution, said the president.

The latter update provoked a debate whether the Russian leader seeks to retain power as head of the State Council after he steps down. As it later turned out, the president had no intention of leaving the Kremlin and his status would not change, or possibly would even grow in importance. Furthermore, the constitutional reform allowing resetting Putin's term-limit clock to zero was suggested at the end of the State Duma legal proceedings. Once some legal changes are adopted, the total number of terms in office (as Putin is now holding his fourth, with a break when he swapped posts with Dmitry Medvedev) is no longer relevant, a solution that opens the door for Vladimir Putin to serve two more.

The amendments were finally adopted in March 2020 and then approved by a nationwide referendum in late June and early July 2020. With the constitutional updates, the State Duma had a tough work to adapt hundreds of provisions to make them align with the amended constitution. The corresponding amendments have been introduced to the law on presidential elections in the Russian Federation. Both chambers of the Russian parliament adopted the constitutional changes that mean that any person holding the office of president has now their term-clock reset to zero. Thus Vladimir Putin could stand for the next presidential election and stay in power until 2036.

One of the most significant constitutional changes resets Putin's term-limit clock to zero. It was announced among other updates in January 2020 and came into effect on April 5, 2021, upon its signing by Vladimir Putin. Under the previous constitution, Putin would have been required to step down after his second consecutive term ends in 2024. ■



SOURCE: PRESIDENT.GOV.UA

9 April 2021

TENSIONS IN THE BLACK SEA: TURKEY SUPPORTS UKRAINE

Countries bordering the Black Sea are carefully observing tensions going up between Russia and Ukraine and the threat of war posed by the former state. It is notably Turkey that has in recent years built cordial ties with Russia. Also, it is a NATO member and most importantly it has boosted its position throughout the region. Turkey made an entry into the Caucasus where it sided with Azerbaijan that defeated Armenia while making efforts to forge closer cooperation with Ukraine. This might be worrisome for the Kremlin as the Turkish and Ukrainian leaders held a lengthy meeting in Istanbul at the time of the biggest tensions between Kyiv and Moscow.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Istanbul on April 10 where he had a three-hour talk with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan. At a joint

press conference, the Turkish leader indeed avoided any statements targeting Russia, but what he said could be somewhat a signal for Vladimir Putin. Turkey is resistant to see any

Russian attempts to boost its already significant military presence in the Black Sea basin.

Speaking alongside his Ukrainian counterpart, Erdogan called for a peaceful and diplomatic solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine through peaceful and diplomatic means, based on the territorial integrity of Ukraine and international law. For his part, the Ukrainian leader said that both his country and Ankara showed a similar stance on the threats in the Black Sea and the response to them. What stands out is a joint statement in which Erdogan and Zelensky expressed support for Ukraine's membership in NATO and accelerated integration efforts, "in particular its [Ukraine's] intention to adopt the Action Plan for NATO membership soon."

It has been a year that Turkey and Ukraine started to tighten economic and defense cooperation. That is a novelty that Zelensky introduced during his tenure, indicating also that Erdogan is no longer eager to continue his country's close cooperation with Moscow. Furthermore, Turkey does not recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea.

It was known from the outset that both Moscow and Ankara expressed a pragmatic approach to their cooperation. The Kremlin may feel concerned over potential shifts in Turkey's policy; a day before Zelensky's trip to Istanbul, arranged much in advance, Putin had a phone call with Erdogan. ■

9 April 2021

A STAB IN UKRAINE'S BACK? RUSSIAN EXERCISES IN BREAKAWAY TRANSNISTRIA

With the number of Russian troops hoarding on Ukraine's border and the growing threat of war, Kyiv is in a somewhat perilous position. It sees threats alongside its whole eastern border with Russia, as well as in the north (from Belarus), and in the south as the Russian forces sit in Crimea whereas a far stronger Russian flotilla is operating in the Black Sea. Furthermore, the Russian military is massing on Ukraine's western border, thus along the breakaway region of Transnistria where Russia has been very active in the past few weeks, posing an immediate peril to Ukraine. It is easy to move from the training phase to the real combat operation.



SOURCE: MIL.RU

The defense minister in Moldova's interim government while the country's pro-Western leader Maia Sandu is seeking early elections to appoint a new government Victor Gaiciuc downplays the whole situation. And it is nothing sort of amazing as he is a Soviet veteran. He was recommended for the post by Igor Dodon, the former president of Moldova and the Kremlin's top ally in the country.

"Such exercises happen regularly," said Gaiciuc, a member of the still-socialist government, adding he was not concerned over Russian drills in Transnistria. The problem is that Russia kicked off the war games at the time of the flare-up in tensions between Moscow and Kyiv. The exercises were held by the Operational Group of Russian Troops, or OGRT, in the breakaway region of Transnistria. The Russian military on April 7 carried out the final stage of their combat preparations. The combat

exercises scenario included the destruction of armored vehicles and low-flying vehicles of an imaginary enemy.

Russian armed forces held a similar exercise in Transnistria on April 2. Besides about 1,500 OGTR soldiers, Russia keeps another 500 "peacemakers" in Transnistria. What Russia is doing in Transnistria resembles the situation back in 2014 and 2015 when Ukraine had to face a possible subversive attack from the west, thus from Transnistria.

According to the scenario, Russian troops would move from the region towards Odessa while the Black Sea Fleet would dispatch its navy near the city. Now this threat is looming if Russia goes to war with Ukraine, of course. It is known that Russia is moving its Baltic Fleet and Caspian Flotilla landing boats from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. ■



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

16 April 2021

RUSSIA RESHUFFLES GOVERNORS AHEAD OF ELECTIONS, SHOIGU TRIUMPHS

In just a week, four Russian regions saw changes in leadership. Ivan Belozertsev, the governor of the Penza region, was arrested while three others resigned following a phone call from the Kremlin in which they were hinted to do so. It is just the prelude to more reshuffles among regional heads ahead of the State Duma election in September this year. The departures come as the Kremlin gears up for this fall's key regional and State Duma vote, where it seeks to maintain a majority for the ruling, pro-Putin United Russia party. So far it was Sergei Shoigu who has gained the most as the three new heads of the regions are his protégés.

One of them is Sergey Menyaylo whom Vladimir Putin nominated as the new acting governor of North Ossetia after Vyacheslav Bitarov had left his post. The parliament of North Ossetia will elect a new governor on September 19. Menyaylo comes from North Ossetia and is half-Ossetian. A former military serviceman and vice-admiral, he served as deputy commander of the Black Sea Fleet from 2009 to 2011. In August 2008, he took an active part in the navy operation in the Russia-Georgia war. He returned to North Ossetia's political life as in April 2010 he was shortlisted among other candidates for a new leader but lost to Taymuraz Mamsurov, appointed by Dmitry Medvedev. Menyaylo was one of the top figures in the Russian operation of annexing Crimea. He was appointed the governor of Sevastopol but resigned amid a spat with the members of the local elite. Menyaylo, a former military officer, is believed to be an associate of Sergei Shoigu, Russia's defense minister. Right after he quit Sevastopol, he took up the post of presidential plenipotentiary envoy to the Siberian Federal District where he got involved in a conflict with Valentin Konovalov, the communist leader of Khakassia. Konovalov features the list of regional heads that Putin wants to dismiss. Bitarov, now-former governor of North Ossetia, was in charge of the region since February 2016. He was then appointed the acting head of the republic, and in September 2016 he became its leader upon his election by the North Ossetian parliament. Rumors about Bitarov's resignation went around in April 2020 amid mass rallies against coronavirus restrictions in the republic. Demonstrators urged officials to help those who lost their jobs amid lockdown measures. Bitarov's political standing was also damaged by a high-profile road accident in December 2020 involving his brother Kazbek who was found guilty of the death of four people while five were injured.

Personnel reshuffles in North Ossetia are not the only ones in recent days. On April 8, Sergey Morozov, the governor of the Ulyanovsk region, handed his resignation while on April 7, Sholban Kara-ool had done the same. Morozov had been in power since 2005. Back then he had been at constant war with local communist politicians. Once Morozov was relieved from his duties, Ramzan Kadyrov, who has led Chechnya since 2007, is now Russia's longest-serving regional leader. Alexey Russkikh has been nominated the acting governor of the Ulyanovsk region. Interestingly, he is a member of the communist party. He was a member of the Communist Party faction in the State Duma and from 2018 he served as a Moscow representative in the Federation Council. He voted for the constitutional updates allowing Putin to stay in power until 2036 though the Communist Party abstained from the vote. The Kremlin takes into account the widespread popularity of the communist party in the Ulyanovsk region. It is a safe bet to put up Russkikh in the election run-up, a solution allowing the Kremlin to get rid of Alexey Kurinny, another Communist Party lawmaker and local communist leader, who is far more critical towards the Kremlin. It is said that one of the sons of Gennady Zyuganov, the Communist Party leader, used to work in a company founded by Russkikh. But more importantly, Russkikh has ties to Shoigu; from 2018 he was a senator from the Moscow region headed by a member of the "Tuva clan" and a son of Shoigu's friend. Rumour has it that Konovalov will lose his post to bring the whole game to an equal status as Russkikh, a Communist Party member, got a region, his party will lose another one. Those placed in the red zone, or the most likely to resign sometime soon, are the governor of the Volodymyr region, the leader of Krasnoyarsk Krai, and that of Stavropol Krai. ■



SOURCE: MEDIA.GAZPROM-NEFT.RU

16 April 2021

THREE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR RUSSIA'S OIL PRODUCTION

Russia's oil production will grow for some ten years while noting a decline afterward, according to the Energy Ministry estimate drafting oil production in the country. The difference is in the possible scale of the increase and that of the decline and when the peak will take place.

The Energy Ministry predicts Russia's oil output will fail to hit the record output of 2019 amid a decline in demand and prices, depleting stocks, and the state tax policy. The Russian Energy Ministry submitted a strategy document outlining prospects for Russia's critical oil and gas industry for its meeting scheduled for April 22, according to the Kommersant business paper. It encompasses three scenarios. The most probable is the

inertial scenario, saying oil production will grow before peaking in 2029 with 554 million tons (in 2019 this was 561 million tons) while declining until 2035 by 18 percent, to 471 million tons. The Energy Ministry strategy outlines that government tax cuts to high-potential oil fields such as those by the Kremlin-endorsed energy giant Rosneft in the Arctic region, with the Vostok Oil mega-reject at the forefront will be crucial in helping the country maximize

the potential of the vast energy resources. In its most optimistic outline, the ministry says production will peak a year later while standing significantly at 641 million tons before starting to decline to 551 million tons by 2035, thus far more than in the first scenario. The third possibility, labeled as moderately favorable, sees the peak at 596 million tons in 2028 before hitting 493 million tons in 2035. In every situation, energy officials assumed that the

OPEC+ cut deal would be in force until at least 2022. In every option presented, the ministry expects a boost in oil output in fields in eastern Siberia from 35 percent now to 43 percent in 2035 and an increase in gas condensate production from 38 to 57 million tons while the Arctic shelf is an experimental area. The Energy Ministry says tax breaks should be given to fields in eastern Siberia where output is set to go up. ■

16 April 2021

TENSIONS RISE IN THE BLACK SEA. RUSSIA MAY BLOCKADE UKRAINE'S PORTS

The entire Black Sea Fleet, 15 units of the Caspian Flotilla, 5 units of the Northern Fleet and the Baltic Fleet – the concentration of Russian naval forces in the waters bordering Ukraine translates into a further escalation of tensions in this part of Europe. It's possible that it is at sea that Moscow is planning the most important part of the operation against Ukraine.

On 20 April, the Black Sea Fleet reported that more than 20 of its vessels went to sea for military exercises organized in the northern part of the Black Sea. Assault aircraft and air defense units forming part of the Southern Military District are also taking part in the exercises. Earlier, more than 50 aircraft from the Southern Military District were redeployed to Crimea. In recent days, the Russian fleet has noticeably increased activity in the Black Sea – which is related to the concentration of ground troops near the border with Ukraine. Temporary flight restrictions over parts of Crimea and the Black Sea are in place until 24 April. It is from this date that

Russia intends to restrict in parts of the Black Sea the navigation of foreign military ships and civilian vessels until the end of October. It is an important port through which Ukraine exports much of its output from the eastern part of the country. However, the concentration of Russian forces on the Black Sea may also lead to future attempts to blockade other Ukrainian ports located west of Crimea, with Odessa at the forefront. On top of that, there is the risk of a Russian landing on the Ukrainian coast – should Moscow decide to take more serious military steps. It is no coincidence that most of the 15 units of the Caspian Flotilla deployed to the Sea of Azov (they sailed from Makhachkala



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

through the Volga river, the Volga–Don Canal and the Don river) are small landing boats. They are ideally suited for use in the shallow waters that are characteristic of the coasts of the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, which are full of coastal limans. Russian naval forces will also be supported by several larger landing vessels that have already arrived or will soon arrive from the Northern Fleet and the Baltic Fleet. On 19 April, deep concern about Russia's plans in the

Black Sea was expressed on behalf of the US by a State Department spokesman. However, it was the United States that opted out of sending two US Navy destroyers to the Black Sea – had it not been for the US government's decision, these vessels would already be deployed in the area, demonstrating support for Ukraine, which is currently alone in the Black Sea. A larger NATO force will not arrive there until May, with two vessels being sent by the UK. ■

26 April 2021

RUSSIA'S FSB AIRCRAFT STIRS TENSIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND COLOMBIA

Russia's military and intelligence activities in Moscow-friendly states neighboring the Caribbean Sea raise concern in others as Russia breaks the existing rules. The latest example is a protest note from Colombia whose airspace was violated by a Russian aircraft.



SOURCE: FLICKR

Kfir fighter planes of the Colombian Air Force were scrambled on April 19 to intercept a plane belonging to Russia's intelligence agency that violated Colombia's airspace, according to the Colombian military. The Russian aircraft was flying from Moscow and earlier had notified services about its passing through Colombian airspace. However, the jet deviated from its flight path. Little is known what the aircraft assigned to the country's top security agency, or FSB, did in this part of the world but presumably it flew to Nicaragua through Venezuela's airspace. Colombia's foreign ministry presented a letter to Russia's ambassador in Bogota, Nikolai Tavadumadze, to protest the unauthorized overflights. Russian aircraft carried out such incursions twice in 2020 and twice in 2013, with strategic bomber jet making a showy trip to Venezuela. The latest incident renewed tensions in Colombia-Russia ties. In December,

Colombia expelled two Russian diplomats, saying they had been engaged in activities that were "incompatible" with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. In a tit-for-tat move, Moscow asked two diplomats from Colombia to leave the country. Citing sources in local security agencies, Colombian media outlets said that the expelled diplomats were intelligence officers reportedly tasked with collecting military data and this on the energy sector and the country's natural resources. Why is Moscow so interested in Colombian military affairs? Perhaps it is about the state's vital role in the Venezuelan conundrum. The Moscow-endorsed Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro stays in power in Caracas. Colombia has tense relations with Venezuela and has long had a reputation as a U.S. ally in the region, or even as a foothold to launch a possible military action to topple the Maduro regime. ■



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

26 April 2021

MORE COUNTRIES EXPEL RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS IN SOLIDARITY WITH CZECH REPUBLIC

Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are among states that on April 22 and 23 said they had declared *persona non grata* seven Russian diplomats in solidarity with the Czech Republic that accused Russian secret services of being behind a fatal explosion at an arms depot in 2014. The government in Prague urged NATO and the EU to take similar steps against Russian intelligence agents operating under diplomatic cover as those three years ago after the attempted poisoning of Sergei Skripal.

Slovakia asked three Russian diplomats to quit the country, Lithuania ejected two, while Latvia and Estonia each expelled one. The ejected people abused their diplomatic status for spying. “The EU should have fewer undercover Russian spies. Our Czech colleagues shed light on their unprecedented activities,” Lithuanian foreign affairs minister Gabrielius Landsbergis told reporters. What is worthwhile is that the chief diplomats of the three Baltic nations arrived in Kyiv in mid-April to show support for Ukraine facing Russian military aggression. On April 17, the Czech Republic ordered 18 Russian diplomats to leave the country, accusing Russia’s military intelligence agency, or GRU, of orchestrating an explosion at an arms depot in 2014, killing two Czech nationals. In a retaliatory move, Russia said 20 Czech diplomats would be ejected. Among the Russian diplomats kicked off from the Czech Republic were at least two GRU officers having ties to the unit that masterminded the 2014 blast. Solidarity with the Czech Republic that some NATO and EU countries showed comes as all the more important as Moscow went for escalated tensions with Prague. It kicked off more Czech diplomats than the Czech Republic ejected its Russian colleagues, thus crippling the political and economic section of the Czech embassy in Moscow. The Czech Republic said that Russia had been given until the end of May to cut the number of its embassy’s personnel in line with those at the Czech Embassy in Russia. Currently there are just five Czech diplomats in the embassy in Moscow including the ambassador and 19 administrative and technical staff members. Russia’s Embassy in Prague now has 27 diplomats and 67 other

staff. Since mid-March, the following nations asked Russian diplomats to quit: Bulgaria (2), Italy (2), the United States (10), and Poland (3). Bulgaria made this decision after smashing a Russian spy ring in which Bulgarian military intelligence officers were involved. Rome expelled two Russian officers on accusations of espionage after investigators say they observed an Italian Navy official giving the envoys classified information. The United States expelled ten Russian personnel amid sanctions against Russia in response to what it says are cyber-attacks and other hostile acts in 2020 while in solidarity with its ally, Poland asked three Russian diplomats to leave the country. Perhaps the ejected diplomats were seen as harmful enough to Poland’s security that state authorities grabbed the opportunity to get rid of them. Interestingly, Russia did not stick to the reciprocity principle in all cases. Moscow ejected the same number of U.S. and Bulgarian diplomats but expelled two more Czech and Polish diplomatic workers each. Russia will make the diplomatic activity even more difficult for some countries. President Vladimir Putin signed a decree barring countries seen as “hostile to Russia” from employing Russian nationals in their embassies and consulates. The government will draft the list of such countries. Earlier the Russian foreign ministry said it would not allow Russian nationals to be employed in the U.S. embassy in Moscow. This ban will cripple any diplomatic mission of these countries as they will need to bring technical and cleaning staff from home. Also, this implies fewer diplomatic personnel in charge of political, economic, or consular affairs. ■



SOURCE: NOVATEK.RU

27 April 2021

CZECH REPUBLIC, BULGARIA, UKRAINE: RUSSIA'S GRU HAD A SPECIAL MISSION

Russia's largest private natural gas producer seeks to reduce its LNG exports and is planning to add some shifts to its Arctic projects. Novatek just like another Russian energy giant Gazprom is looking for some fresh solution as Europe is reviewing its energy strategy by quitting oil and gas. One idea might be to go for ammonia instead of liquefied gas.

In the first three months of 2021, Novatek reduced its liquefied natural gas sales abroad by 23.7 percent year-on-year. Between January and March 2021, the company saw its export figures standing at 1.87 billion cubic meters, or bcm. Novatek sent fewer LNG shipments and

Yamal LNG shareholders decreased its sales on the spot market while selling more under long-term deals. Novatek is Russia's largest private natural gas extractor and liquefied natural gas producer. It has a top asset the Yamal LNG liquefied natural gas production facility. The

giant is also going ahead with the construction of Arctic LNG 2, its second Yamal plants. Arctic LNG 2 is expected to start up its first train in 2023; the second and third trains will be launched in 2024 and 2026, each producing 6.6 million tons of liquefied natural gas per year. The Arctic LNG 2's resource base is located at the Utriennoye field. Novatek holds a 60 percent stake in the project with the remaining 40 percent split equally between France's

Total, China National Petroleum Corporation, China's CNOOC, and the Japan Arctic LNG consortium, made up of Mitsui and state-owned Jorgmec. Many signs are that Novatek will quit its production of liquefied natural gas in Ob LNG, its third energy project across the region. What is known is that the company is seeking opportunities for producing ammonia, along with Germany's Siemens, for instance.. ■

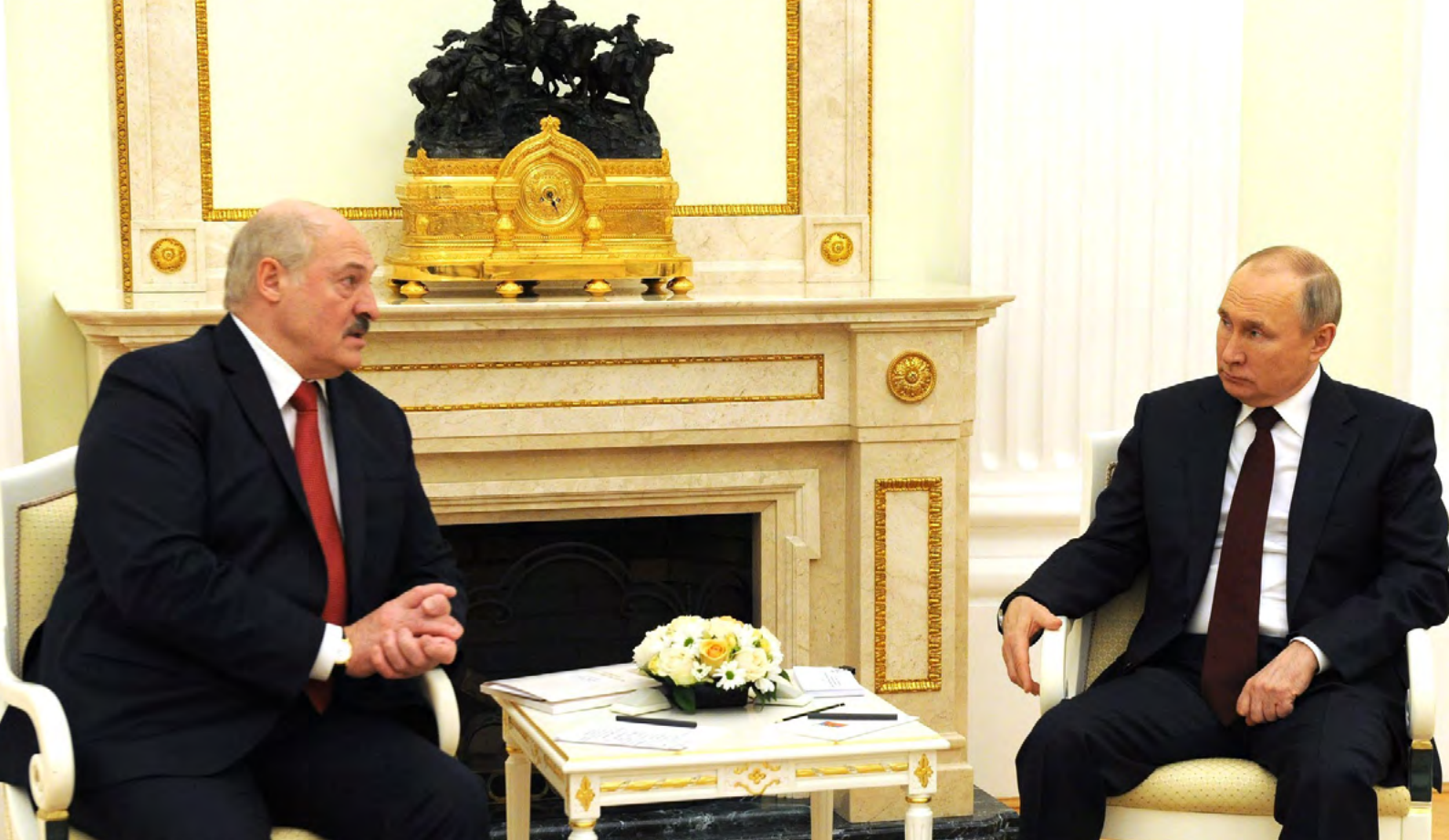
27 April 2021

COUP PLOT IN BELARUS IS LUKASHENKO'S PROVOCATION

New details on a purported plot to kill the Belarusian leader confirm one thing: this is nothing but a provocation made up by Belarusian and Russian services. What Lukashenko said is somewhat unbelievable while any evidence submitted so far seems neither credible nor coherent.

The Russian and Belarusian presidents discussed the alleged planned plot at their latest meeting. Also while addressing the Russian parliament, President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed Lukashenko's claims of an assassination plot and earlier had mentioned them in a phone call with Joe Biden, according to what the Belarusian leader said. A story of alleged plans to kill Lukashenko surfaced on April 17. According to the FSB statement that came out first, Russian authorities detained Yuri Zenkovich, a lawyer who has dual American-Belarusian citizenship, and Alexander Feduta, a well-known Belarusian literature scholar and political commentator, accusing both of planning an assassination plot against Alexander Lukashenko. The Belarusian president confirmed these claims shortly after while the Belarusian state broadcaster aired footage to add credibility to the whole story.

In a nutshell, from what Moscow and Minsk said, a group of Belarusian opposition members reportedly made a deal with some army officers to conduct a coup, topple or even assassinate Lukashenko, detain his associates, and siege the capital to stop riot police and interior troops. What served to authenticate the plot were some excerpts of some supposedly revealing footage showing a meeting between Feduta, Zenkovich, and reported Belarusian "army generals" who say nothing and whose faces are blurred, thus it is not known who they are in a Moscow restaurant. Subsequently, the televised footage presented captured fragments from a Zoom conference where Feduta and Zenkovich talked with five other Lukashenko opponents, based mostly outside Belarus. What both Minsk and Moscow showed as evidence is little convincing. The video showing a conversation between Lukashenko's opponents and



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

an alleged discussion on the leader's fate are mere speculations and not proof for the purported coup. Perhaps Belarusian agencies used some minor opposition activists like Feduta and some others to discredit the opposition. Many signs are that some officers played their role as willing to talk about the toppling of Lukashenko just to hear an intention

to stage a plot against the president. That looks like a provocation that tricked Feduta and a few other people. The regime will make use of the footage to trigger a fresh wave of repression against the opposition while more importantly reported "opposition" members in the state army could unleash purges among its top officers.. ■

27 April 2021

CZECH REPUBLIC, BULGARIA, UKRAINE: RUSSIA'S GRU HAD A SPECIAL MISSION

The 2014 blast at a munitions depot in the Czech Republic was linked to the Russia-Ukraine war as the arms were reportedly supposed to be sent to the frontline in Donbas. Another link was the attempted assassination of Emilian Gebrev, the Bulgarian arms dealer, in 2015.



SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA

War in Ukraine broke out in 2014. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the rebellion in Donbas revealed how fragile the Ukrainian military was at that time. Thus Kyiv was looking for weapons and munitions wherever it could. Russia, in turn, has made efforts to intimidate arms manufacturers to make them not export weapons to Ukraine, saying it would destroy export-bound arms. The involvement of Russia's GRU agency in the Vrbetice blast in 2014—as recently disclosed by Czech state authorities—is not the only example of Russian activity in this respect. Also that year, Bulgaria saw four blasts in its weapon factories while two others took place in March and April 2015. Also in April, Emilian Gebrev, a Bulgarian arms dealer believed to have links to the Vrbetice arms depot, who barely survived a near-fatal

poisoning with nerve agent Novichok. People notorious also for the attempted assassination of Gebrev and being present in Bulgaria when arms depot blasts occurred are also linked to the Czech explosions. Three years later some of these men were involved in the attempted poisoning of Sergei Skripal. The top key figure is Denis Sergeyev (aka Sergei Fedotov in Bulgaria and the United Kingdom). More details on these GRU officers surfaced following their failed operation in Salisbury. The attempted poisoning of Sergei Skripal and some new information in this case allowed investigators to resume the probe into the attack on Emilian Gebrev. The 2014 Czech blasts now make it possible to connect the attacks on Skripal and Gebrev as well as the explosion in Vrbetice. ■



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

28 April 2021

ZEMAN FAVORS MOSCOW AMID GRU SABOTAGE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Only after a week did Czech President Milos Zeman speak to the nation to comment on some reports that the government believed the Russian military intelligence agency had orchestrated the arms depot explosion in Vrbetice in 2014. Zeman, who has often expressed his pro-Russian views and hostility to his country's counterintelligence service, did Moscow a service with what he announced, sparking a reaction from the state government. The Czech interior minister said that his country is probing into the Vrbetice arms depot explosion as a GRU sabotage scheme despite the president's words that there are two possible theories on the blast.

On April 26, Jan Hamacek, the Czech deputy prime minister and interior minister, said that investigators from security services take into account just one possible line related to Russian military intelligence officers standing behind the 2014 weapons depot blast in Vrbetice. The Czech official denied what Czech President Milos Zeman had said that there were two theories about what had caused the incident. One version of events was that the blast was caused by inexperienced handling of ammunition while according to the other, foreign intelligence was involved in the deadly explosion. The only line of investigation now being under scrutiny is that related to GRU officers and their moving across the country, Hamacek added. Speaking for the first time about the 2014 incident during a televised address to the nation, Zeman weakened the credibility of the Czech special services. Citing the report by the Czech Security Information Service, or BIS, the Czech president said

that there was no suspicion that GRU agents masterminded the blast. By stating this, Zeman has undermined the strong stance of the Czech government, an example of which was the expulsion of 18 Russian diplomats. Zeman claimed that there is no unequivocal evidence that any GRU officers were present in Vrbetice when the incident occurred, a statement that Russian news agencies have already used to impair Prague's position. Zeman's televised speech he delivered on April 25 was warmly received by Russian state officials. What Zeman said about "fully trusting" the police and the state's chief prosecutor is another element of his fight against the BIS. Also, the Czech president twice refused to promote the head of the Czech counterintelligence service to the rank of general, most recently on April 25. The Security Information Service has at least once informed Czech ministers and the prime minister about Zeman's secret meetings with Russian senior officials. ■

28 April 2021

YES TO NORD STREAM 2, NO TO SANCTIONS: GERMANY TAKES A COURSE ON RUSSIA

As Alexey Navalny ended his hunger strike while Russia pulled back its troops from the border with Ukraine, this was enough for Berlin to redisplay its Moscow-friendly policy. Germany's top officials openly say that Nord Stream 2 should be completed while the country's foreign minister criticized those in the West who ask for a more resolute stance on the Kremlin.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas on April 25 rejected calls for harsher sanctions against Russia and emphasized that a dialogue is necessary to improve strained

ties between Berlin and Moscow. Germany's chief diplomat also added it is essential to talk with countries that have opposing viewpoints. In regards to Alexey Navalny, Maas



SOURCE: FLICKR

said he believes tougher sanctions would be counterproductive in getting the Kremlin to improve his situation. Thus he indirectly criticized any countries and politicians that call for harsher measures against Russia. Nonetheless, many claimed that Russia went on deescalating tensions with Ukraine amid a tough stance of the West—notably the United States—by forcing Putin to retreat. In addition, Maas did not respond to whether he agrees with Biden’s characterization of Vladimir Putin as a killer, claiming he had never said that and he would never deliver a response to this. In this way, he gave what was one of his most Russia-friendly interviews in years. It is also worth looking at an interview that Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for the Russian foreign ministry, had with the German editorial office of the

Kremlin RT broadcaster. “It is a key project for Germany. I heard this from German officials and I read some papers by German specialists,” said Zakharova. She yet added that the Navalny case was detrimental for Germany-Russia ties. Maas’s remarks go in line with the position of the German government that seeks to tighten cooperation with Russia regardless of other issues. Germany’s defense minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer told twice that it is vital to complete the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and then to make the gas flow dependent on “Russian behavior.” In an appearance before the Council of Europe, Angela Merkel said she knows that there is controversy about Nord Stream 2. Yet she added that the gas to be soon delivered through the link is no worse than the one flowing through Ukraine or Turkey. ■



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

29 April 2021

RUSSIA SETS THE STAGE FOR PUTIN-BIDEN MEETING

Senior Russian officials are confirming efforts to prepare the Putin-Biden meeting while at the same time threatening to respond to what they name as Washington's additional "unfriendly steps". However, the Kremlin seems very keen on the meeting, which explains its relatively moderate reaction to a fresh batch of U.S. sanctions and perhaps also the decision to pull out some troops from its border with Ukraine.

On April 25, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said his country was ready to take extra action against the United States if U.S.-Russia ties "escalate further." "Washington is taking "unfriendly steps" toward Russia", Lavrov was quoted as saying. Moscow said it would put the United States on its list of "hostile countries," a document poised to bring some negative

consequences for their diplomatic missions. Russia is considering a proposal from Joe Biden to hold a summit with Vladimir Putin, Lavrov told the Russian state broadcaster. According to the top Russian diplomat, Moscow positively welcomed the U.S. proposal. On the same day Yuri Ushakov, a top Kremlin foreign policy aide, said Vladimir Putin might hold a summit with his U.S. counterpart in June. It is not known where the two leaders will meet yet for sure a third country will host the summit. One of the potential places is Helsinki. U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan a few days earlier discussed with his Russian counterpart Nikolay Patrushev the prospects of the summit between the U.S. and Russian presidents. Moscow is in talks with Washington about Biden's meeting offer though the next day the United States imposed a fresh round of sanctions against Russia amid a 2020 cyberattack targeting U.S. entities performed by Russian intelligence

service hackers. Other measures include the expulsion of 10 Russian officials and expanded prohibitions on U.S. banks trading in Russian government debt. The U.S. Treasury sanctioned six individuals and 32 individuals carrying out Russian government-directed attempts to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential election. In a tit-for-tat measure Russia ejected the same number of U.S. diplomats and in fact forced the U.S. ambassador to travel to Washington for "consultations." Yet at the same time, the Kremlin did not cease its talks with the White House on the Biden-Putin meeting. For the Russian leader, this meeting is of huge importance, evidence that the United States treats Russia as an almost equal partner. Also, once held, the summit can corroborate Russia's position as one of the world's biggest powers while paving its way for any potential deals with Washington, also on Ukraine, which is what the Kremlin is hoping for. ■

29 April 2021

GAZPROM SPEEDS UP GASIFICATION SCHEME

Throughout 2021 Russia's gas giant Gazprom is planning to spend twice as much to gasify Russian regions as the year before. The company has hurried up to connect customers across the country to the gas grid at the request of Vladimir Putin. Last year the Russian president declared this as one of the top priorities of the state's social policy.

Vitaly Markelov, deputy chairman of Gazprom's management committee, said the firm would spend 1.8 times more to gasify Russia than in 2020. It is expected that Russia's gas penetration rate hit 72.1 percent by the

end of this year. To this end, Gazprom plans to allocate 128.8 billion roubles, or \$17 billion, of which 73 billion roubles are earmarked to construct gas pipelines. In 2021, Gazprom intends to deliver 238.2 billion cubic meters



SOURCE: GAZPROM.RU

(bcm) of gas to Russian customers via its gas pipeline network provided that temperatures in the fall and winter will be typical for these seasons, according to the vice-president of the management board. Throughout 2020 the Russian gas company sent 225.9 bcm of gas to domestic customers. In June 2020 Vladimir Putin asked Gazprom and some institutions to close the gasification plan for Russian regions first by 2024, and then by 2030. The country's gas penetration rate should then stand at 83 percent, with the remaining 17 percent of its territory being offered access to other sources of energy. Gazprom's new gas supply and gasification scheme for 2021–2025 spans sixty-seven regions. A total of 24,400 km of pipelines is to be built while 3,632 towns and villages will

be connected to the gas supply system. By 2025, the country's level of gasification will stand at 74.7 percent, up from 71.4 percent now. Both gas supplies and the federal budget will possibly pay for connecting households to the gas grid. Putin asked the company to bear all costs so as not to push them onto customers. It is yet not known how to distribute the financing. Perhaps in the end, customers could indirectly bear part of the costs, for instance by paying more for gas as state authorities could temporarily switch on what they refer to as an "investment tariff" in their utility bills. However, this would be less costly as the current solution—any person seeking to connect its household to the grid faces costs ranging from several hundred to thousand dollars.. ■



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

30 April 2021

RUSSIA'S ROSNEFT PLANS LOWER DIVIDENDS THAN LAST YEAR

Russia's biggest oil company Rosneft is planning to spend 50 percent of its 2020 net profit on dividends. In this way, shareholders will have their payout five times lower than the year before. The general shareholders meeting of Rosneft will take place on June 1, 2021, in absentia.

The board of directors of Rosneft, with former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder at the helm, recommended the general shareholders meeting the decision to pay out 6.94 roubles per share in dividends on 2020 results, or five times less than the year

before. In 2019, Rosneft attributed a record-high dividend of 33.41 roubles per one share. At a February meeting with Vladimir Putin, Igor Sechin, the CEO of Rosneft, informed Vladimir Putin about his company's intention to pay out half its net profit to shareholders.

Rosneft's board of directors recommended a payout of dividends for 2020 amounting to 73.55 bln roubles after the April 22 meeting. The conference discussed items related to the annual general shareholders meeting of the company. The board of directors resolved to call Rosneft's annual general shareholders meeting and vote in absentia on June 1, 2021. The record date for the list of eligible participants of the annual general shareholders meeting of Rosneft is May 7, 2021. The board of directors preliminarily approved Rosneft's annual report for 2020 and recommended that the annual general shareholders meeting passes the

resolution to pay dividends at 6.94 roubles per one share of Rosneft, thus using 50 percent of the company's net profit, attributable to Rosneft shareholders. In 2020, Rosneft had a net profit of 147 billion roubles, down 79.1 percent than in 2019. However, the company's move has been met with a positive market reaction, even amid the coronavirus pandemic, a decline in demand for hydrocarbons, and OPEC+ output cuts. The company's profitability came essentially from its sales of a 10 percent share of the Vostok Oil project to Trafigura, a transaction worth €7 billion. ■

30 April 2021

WILL RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT LIMIT EXPORT OF PETROL AMID GROWTH IN PRICES?

People in Russia have to spend more on petrol for a couple of months now. State authorities believe this comes from the policy of petrol-producing companies that prefer selling their commodities abroad to leaving them on the domestic market. The government is considering some measures to restrict the export of petrol, but its market-controlling attempts may prove little helpful.

Between April 19 and 26, petrol saw a slight drop in prices for the first time in a long time. After a steady four-month increase in price, a liter of 92-octane (AI-92) petrol cost 45.23 roubles per liter, or one kopeck less on average. A liter of 95-octane (AI-95) petrol had the same price as the week before, at 49.82 roubles. Nonetheless, the price of 98-octane (AI-98) petrol went up by 4 kopecks, to 56.42 roubles per liter. The price of diesel fuel remained unchanged at 49.28 rubles per liter. Little indicates that prices begin to slump any

time soon. Petrol prices in Russia have risen continuously since mid-December. Thus the government is considering a mechanism to temporarily curb or even halt the export of petrol beyond the Eurasian Economic Union, the bloc encompassing Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Officials seek to stop any further increase in retail prices through some administrative steps. By curbing export figures state authorities want to see more petrol stay in Russia. Yet this may prove little helpful. As state authorities

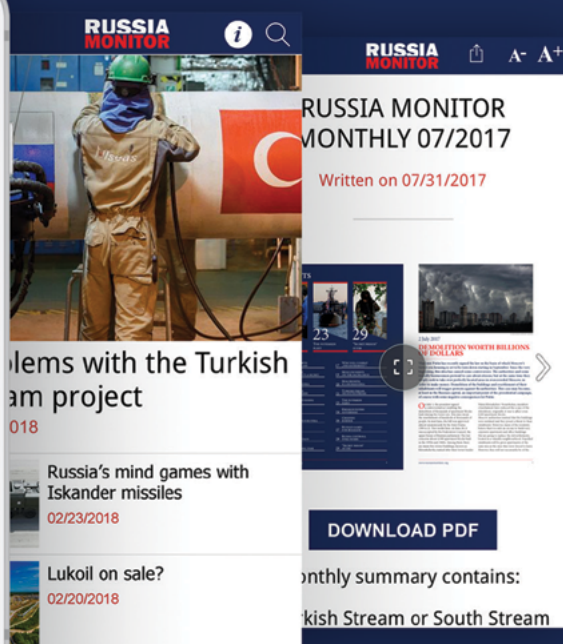


SOURCE: MEDIA-GAZPROM-NEFT.COM

announced a non-working period from May 1 to 10, oil companies cannot trade part of their commodities on the stock exchange. If this is possible only from May 11, the profit will not come until May 18 while almost all production is sold by the 20th of each month. In May, refineries will be forced to freeze up to 60 percent of their production. On the other hand, also for the same reason, which

is the May holidays, people will seek to buy as much petrol as possible before May 1, a move bringing an inevitable rise in prices. As state officials could make an effort to put a cap on petrol volumes and encourage oil-producing companies to boost their export of kerosene which is the first product of petroleum refining. European refineries purchase kerosene to produce gasoline already at home. ■

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