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1 July 2021

PUTIN’S UKRAINE COMPLEX AGAIN MAKES ITSELF FELT

The Russian president once again confirmed how painful it is for him to see Ukraine decide for itself and not yield to Moscow’s pressure. Addressing the nation during an annual televised call-in show, Putin came back to an old rhetoric that Ukrainians were not a separate nation, attacking the pro-Western government in Kyiv and claiming the country was “managed from the outside”.

“It is just a propaganda mantra for internal consumers in Russia”, Zelensky told journalists, commenting on Putin’s statements on Ukraine. During an annual televised call-in show on June 30, the Russian leader spared no words that must have caused outrage in Ukraine. The Ukrainian president commented on Putin’s remarks the next day in an interview with the Interfax-Ukraine press agency. One example was that Zelensky allegedly had “entrusted Ukraine to full external management” while officials in Washington, Berlin, and Paris decide on the country’s affairs. Zelensky ridiculed these claims, saying that, as the Geneva meeting has shown recently, the U.S. and Russian leaders cannot make
any decisions on Ukraine in their bilateral talks. Zelensky added he would be meeting Joe Biden in Washington and Angela Merkel in Berlin in the next month. The Ukrainian president also referred to Putin’s claim that Russians and Ukrainians “are the same people.” “If Ukrainians and Russians were one people, then hryvnia, most likely, would circulate in Moscow, and a yellow–blue flag would fly over the State Duma,” Zelensky was quoted as saying. In turn, Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine’s foreign minister, said Putin’s claims on “external management” mean just one: the Russian leader wishes Russian officials would decide on Ukrainian affairs in Moscow. During the call-in show, Putin mentioned an incident involving the HMS Defender, a Royal Navy destroyer that approached territorial waters off Crimea on June 23. The Russian leader said there was some evidence that outside countries “exploited the Ukrainian territory militarily.” He said this was a provocative action. Issues related to Ukraine were probably the most discussed ones during the show of other foreign-related topics though domestic matters dominated the call-in program. This confirms that Putin cannot accept Russia has lost control of Ukraine and treats the whole matter ambitiously. Nor will he lay down his arms—there will probably be more tensions between Kyiv and Moscow, with the latter’s further war threats.

2 July 2021

PUTIN VOWS SUPPORT TO LUKASHENKO AMID EU SANCTIONS

Russia offers comprehensive assistance to Belarus, notably when the European Union introduces sanctions on Lukashenko’s regime, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on July 1. Putin and Lukashenko first had a phone call and then met at the Forum of Regions of Russia and Belarus via video conference.

Vladimir Putin pledged support to Belarus that faces sanctions from the European Union. Some outside forces are trying to destabilize the situation in Belarus, the Russian leader told the Forum of Regions of Russia and Belarus. The Russian president also rebuffed the European Union for its recent sanctions against Belarus and called Belarus “the closest ally of Russia.” The Belarusian leader emboldened how much Russia had helped his country economically. Furthermore, he suggested preparing what he named as a long-term strategy of integration of the Union State of Belarus and Russia till 2030. By saying “long-term,” Lukashenko shows he is unlikely to hand over power in the country or allow Russia to completely absorb its neighbor. On the agenda of an earlier Putin–Lukashenko phone call were also economic issues, including a delicate matter of crude and gas prices. The talks and then the
meeting at the Forum confirm that Lukashenko is having a weaker position in negotiations with Moscow. Putin is taking advantage of the ever-growing pressure the European Union now exerts on the regime of Lukashenko. The latest portion of sanctions has dealt a blow to the core of Lukashenko’s economic model thus possibly Belarus will be relying more on some economic aid from Moscow. Naturally, the Kremlin has no intention of giving its aid to the regime of Lukashenko while getting nothing in return. In addition to economic concessions, Moscow is hoping for some political ones. This is precisely why Nikolai Patrushev, who heads the Russian Security Council, flew to Minsk on June 29. The official is Putin’s right-hand man. No details on his talks with Lukashenko have been made public. Perhaps this was just about cementing ties between Russian and Belarusian power ministries, but Patrushev might have gone on a mission to gently put pressure on Lukashenko to delineate upcoming and controlled shifts in Belarus whose final stage will be the stepping down of Lukashenko as the country’s leader.
14 July 2021

RUSSIA PROPOSES RESET IN RELATIONS WITH FRANCE

Moscow has for years had its strategic goal to break up the European Union. The Kremlin is now struggling to take advantage of a row inside the EU over the bloc’s policy towards Russia. This has been confirmed by top-level political relations between France and Russia and the corruption of the French political elite.

French President Emmanuel Macron and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin had a phone call on July 2 to discuss improving relations between the EU and Russia, the Elysee Palace said in a statement. France focused special attention on the “problems of stability and security on the European continent,” according to the readout. The Kremlin said it was ready to resume “comprehensive and respectful dialogue.” On the agenda was also the situation in Ukraine. The two leaders stressed what they described as “the particularly important role of the Normandy format.” This suits the Kremlin while Kyiv is looking to revise the format. The phone call Macron had with Putin is an occasion for the French president to flex his political muscles. He has no intention of giving up on a new reset with Russia after the defeat at the last EU summit. At that time, some EU countries,
mostly Poland and the Baltic states, rebuffed a joint idea from Germany and France to host an EU-Russia summit, suspended past 2014. Another factor in favor of the rapprochement between Russia and France is the fact that a former French prime minister was offered a job in a Russian company. François Fillon has been named to the board of Russian state oil company Zarubezhneft, the company said on June 28. The French official and Alexey Pavlov, the deputy head of the Federal Agency for State Property Management (Rosimushchestvo), got the job after a Russian deputy economy minister and a deputy prime minister quit the board. Zarubezhneft is a Russian state-controlled oil company based in Moscow that specializes in the exploration, development, and operation of oil and gas fields in Russia and outside. Fillon was in office as the French premier from 2007-2012 at the time when Nicolas Sarkozy, who back then served as the president, maintained cordial relations with Moscow. It was the French leader, as the country was then the holder of the rotating EU presidency, who negotiated a peace plan for Georgia that ended the Russo-Georgian war (2008) and was beneficial to the Kremlin. After his presidential campaign capsized in 2017, Fillon founded his consulting firm, Apterias. In June 2020, Fillon was given a five-year sentence for fraud in a fake-jobs scandal involving his wife and children that were paid for by the state. The former prime minister should spend two years behind bars but he appealed against the verdict. He traveled to Russia on many occasions to attend conferences and summits where Putin was also present, including the Valdai Forum. While attending the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June this year, Fillon called EU sanctions on Russia “stupid and illegal”.

20 July 2021

TENSIONS GO HIGH IN DONBAS AS RUSSIA BREACHES TRUCE

Russia is violating truce in the east of Ukraine as tensions are on the rise on the frontline since late June. Despite the deal in force for a year now, Russian forces and pro-Russian rebels keep firing at Ukrainian positions. The Ukrainian army saw some casualties; there were some wounded, too.

Only on July 18 Ukrainian positions were attacked four times. Russia-backed rebels and Russian military personnel used grenade launchers, mortars, and POM-2 antipersonnel landmines, the last of them near Avdiivka. Marcin Przydacz, Polish deputy foreign minister, said the conflict in Donbas would remain high on the agenda of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as the country prepares to take over the chairmanship of the organization next year. The diplomat visited Ukraine.
where he stayed for a couple of days. While in Donbas, he met with observers from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) working in the region and Ukrainian officials. In addition, Przydacz visited a checkpoint on the demarcation line. But the situation in the east of Ukraine is deteriorating. On July 15, five Ukrainian soldiers were wounded in shelling it blamed on Moscow-backed separatists in the east of the country. Eight truce breaches have been recorded. The enemy opened fire, employing 120 mm and 82 mm mortars. It also engaged Ukraine positions with 122 mm artillery. Ukrainian servicemen opened fire, too. As of July 13, some 13 ceasefire violations were recorded in the area, a Ukrainian soldier died while six were injured. That day Russia-backed rebels breached the truce, in force since July 2020, thirteen times. There were also shootings while unmanned aerial vehicles were flying across the demarcation line. A Ukrainian soldier was killed on July 8 while another one was wounded. That day Russia-backed rebels breached the truce eleven times. The Mission has observed a deterioration of the security situation in the disengagement areas, according to the Special Representative of the OSCE, Ambassador Heidi Grau. There are more and more truce breaches while observers find it difficult to travel around the area. Ukrainian, Russian, and OSCE negotiators reached a ceasefire agreement on July 27, 2020, for a full ceasefire between government forces and pro-Russian separatists. After six months of peace Donbas had not seen since 2015, Russian troops began shelling Ukrainian positions in the spring of 2021 as Russia amassed its troops near the border, thus sending a threat of war. After a phone call, Biden had with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, a kind of de-escalation came, including in Donbas. Yet shortly after the meeting in Geneva, Russia resumed its military provocations along the demarcation line.
21 July 2021

OPEC+ SIGNS DEAL TO RAISE OIL OUTPUT EACH MONTH

Oil producers agreed to increase production at a July 18 meeting by 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) from August. The decision will be beneficial to Russia since its daily oil output is projected to rise by 500,000 barrels beginning in May 2022. The two previous OPEC+ meetings were called off as the United Arab Emirates rejected a proposal.

The OPEC+ meeting decided to raise output by 400,000 bpd each month from August. The grouping will assess market developments in December 2021. The OPEC+ meeting agreed to raise oil output for Iraq, Kuwait, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, a proposal set forward by the last of the countries. The deal was signed, ending a two-week spat between the United Arab Emirates on the one hand and Russia and Saudi Arabia on the other. The United Arab Emirates demanded an increase in oil output from 3.2 million to 3.8 million bpd starting in May 2022. The UAE’s level was eventually increased to 3.5 million barrels a day Saudi Arabia’s limit of 11 million barrels a day would rise to 11.5 million, as would Russia’s. Iraq and Kuwait saw smaller increases, from 4.65 million to 4.8 million
barrels a day as well as from 2.8 million to 2.96 million barrels a day, respectively. The global oil price collapsed sharply back in March 2020 amid the economic slowdown in direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic and a brief price war Russia had waged against Saudi Arabia. Back then, OPEC+ slashed 9.7 million barrels a day of its collective output and rebound it gradually by April 2022. The deal, which was struck on July 18, also extended a deadline on capping output from April next year to the end of 2022. Countries are allowed to raise production by 400,000 barrels a day each month through the end of 2022. The cartel then will assess plans on whether to phase out its current 5.8 million barrels of oil production cut by the end of 2022 as planned by the initial agreement. The new deal should bring some balance to the market if oil trades no more than $70 per barrel. Prices could see some changes in response to any abrupt shifts in market dynamics—such as a return of Iranian volumes in the event of a lifting of U.S. sanctions on Tehran. The group’s ministers are scheduled to next meet on September 1.

23 July 2021

RUSSIAN FSB DETAINS ESTONIAN CONSUL

Russia is keeping up with the espionage and diplomatic war it has waged against Western states. This time Moscow hit Estonia, and more precisely its St. Petersburg-based consul. The incident resembles a provocation staged against a Ukrainian consul a few months ago. Russian counterintelligence outlets thus can take similar steps to target Russian-based diplomats of any state that Moscow recognizes as hostile.

On July 15, the Estonian Foreign Ministry said in a statement it had expelled a Russian diplomat in line with the principle of reciprocity as a response to the expulsion of an Estonian consul from Russia. Russia briefly detained the Estonian consul in St. Petersburg, Mart Latte, and subsequently declared him persona non grata for allegedly receiving classified documents. Estonia called the incident “unlawful.” This is another time when Russia and Estonia expel their diplomats. The Kremlin has already expelled Estonian diplomats twice this year, both in retaliation for Estonia’s expulsion of Russian diplomats. The FSB security service said consul Mart Latte was “caught red-handed while receiving classified documents from a Russian national, unavailable to other Estonian diplomats.” Mart Latte was one of the three Estonian consuls in St. Petersburg. The official was held for some hour and a half by FSB operatives for allegedly “receiving classified documents.” The diplomat
was detained after a working session he had had at the State Polytechnic Institute in St. Petersburg. The next day, the Russian Foreign Ministry said the consul had been declared “persona non grata” and was given 48 hours to leave the country. A similar incident took place in April, also in St. Petersburg. Back then, the FSB detained a Ukrainian consul who had worked there for a long time. He was expelled on spying allegations. Possibly Russian agencies will stage similar operations to target consuls of other countries Moscow deems hostile.

26 July 2021

RUSSIA SELLS TIGR ARMORED VEHICLES AND OTHER MILITARY PRODUCTS TO AFRICA

Russian-made military equipment and weapons are relatively cheap so they attract a great deal of interest in less wealthy countries, for instance in Africa. The MAKS-2021 International Aviation and Space Salon has turned out to be a tremendous opportunity to promote Russian military hardware and thus make inroads into the continent’s defense market.
Russia is selling its Tigr special armored vehicles to some African countries. The Russian state-run arms exporter Rosoboronexport announced it had signed military contracts during the MAKS-2021 aerospace show, according to the company’s CEO Alexander Mikheev. In African countries south of Sahara we have secured contracts to supply Tigr armored vehicles, duty weapons, and automotive equipment, Mikheev said. In May 2021, the chief executive company of the Tigr manufacturing plant showed them to the presidents of Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan. Possibly Mikheev referred to them and other African nations as those that have bought Tigr armored vehicles. He said that foreign partners sought to sign deals with Rosoboronexport also for the supply of civilian products, including oxygen production gear, road construction machines, and others. The Russian-built armored vehicles are not only military products that are gaining in popularity in Africa. On July 22, on the sidelines of the MAKS-2021, Rosoboronexport signed thirteen deals worth over €1 billion for the supply of Russian military products. Those most popular are Su-30SME aircraft, Mi-35M and Mi-17V5 helicopters as well as unmanned aerial vehicles. In June, Rosoboronexport signed contracts worth $1.7 billion with some African countries for the supply of a range of defense equipment. Russian-made products are popular in African states and Moscow has for years extended its influence across the continent, also by hosting Russia-Africa summits.
26 July 2021

U.S. CONCESSIONS ON NORD STREAM 2 ENCOURAGE RUSSIA TO GO TO WAR

A U.S.–German deal on the Russian natural gas pipeline Nord Stream 2 deals a blow to the energy security of Eastern Europe, notably Ukraine, whose military security is at stake, too. As the Joe Biden administration is making new concessions to Russia while France and Germany show a Moscow-friendly attitude, Vladimir Putin feels encouraged to take further aggressive action, also militarily. At the same time, the deal offers no security guarantee to Kyiv.
It became clear as early as this spring that Washington gave up its idea to further obstruct the construction of the pipeline, mainly by imposing fresh sanctions. Biden suggested he and Putin met while the U.S. administration did not hide that Germany was its priority partner in Europe, and then the White House froze some of the sanctions it had introduced against Nord Stream 2. Behind-the-scenes talks were also reported to take place between German and U.S. officials. As details were finalized, the agreement was inked during Angela Merkel’s trip to Washington. Meanwhile, Germany and mostly the United States said neither Ukraine nor Central European countries would sustain losses if the gas pipeline were eventually completed. U.S. and German officials discussed some kind of guarantee. Right after Merkel met with Biden, it was reported that Counselor of the Department Derek Chollet would first visit Kyiv and then Warsaw. It should not be confusing that both meetings have distinct agendas as Chollet had the mission to inform Poland and Ukraine about the details of the U.S.-Germany agreement and possibly more to convince both states not to criticize the Biden-Merkel deal too strongly.

While in the White House, the German chancellor said “Germany will take action should Russia fails to respect Ukraine as a transit country and its rights.” Contrary to what was said before, the deal does not mention any sanctions against Nord Stream 2 in the event of Russian energy-related blackmail or other hostile methods. Nor is there any obligation for Germany to curb or halt gas flows via Nord Stream 2. Plans to invest in Ukraine’s energy projects pave the way to a more stable economic presence of Germany in the Eastern European country. Nonetheless, this is only the only part of the July 21 deal that shows that the main theme of the agreement was not so much Nord Stream 2 and Ukraine, but the role Germany is to play in Central and Eastern Europe, also to somewhat replace the United States in the region. One example is the Three Seas Initiative along with a clear signal from the United States that expects Germany to serve a pivotal role there. Thus Biden is no longer a patron of the initiative that emerged to counter Russian domination on the one hand and German control on the other.

Russia noted the deal with great satisfaction. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the very next day Moscow was ready to renegotiate a deal to extend the current transit agreement with Ukraine as it is set to expire by 2024. Nonetheless, this does not mean the deal will enter into force, let alone its provisions. In the July 21 agreement, Berlin has committed to use all available leverage to extend Ukraine’s gas transit agreement with Moscow for up to a further 10 years, but this is nothing but a pipe dream. If Nord Stream 2 is operational, the Kremlin will hold all the aces. Worst of all, Putin will see Biden’s decision as a sign of weakness, prompting him to play more aggressively. This seems particularly true of Ukraine as most Russian troops have been stationed near its border since April. On top of that are tensions in the Black Sea and troop movements ahead of the Zapad 2021 military drills, scheduled for September this year. Putin may attack as no other situation serves as a better situation to bring Ukraine to its knees. The Kremlin knows that Western countries will fail to deliver a strong response to new aggression.
PUTIN WARNS OF RUSSIA’S HYPERSONIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS AT NAVAL PARADE

An annual parade of warships in the port city of St. Petersburg is traditionally intended to showcase Russia’s military strength. Nonetheless, this does not seem so for the country’s navy as Russia still lags far behind some world powers, including the United States as well as the United Kingdom and China. This year, Putin used a Navy Day parade to deliver his latest reminder of Russia’s military muscle and its successful attempts to develop new weapons, also cutting-edge hypersonics.

Attending the naval parade on July 25 in St. Petersburg, Vladimir Putin said Russia’s navy was capable of delivering lethal strikes against enemy targets. “We can detect underwater, surface or aerial enemies and target them if a lethal strike is necessary,” Putin said. “The Russian navy today has everything it needs to guarantee the protection of our
RUSSIA MAKES MORE AGGRESSIVE MOVES IN DONBAS

Tensions go high along the demarcation line in Donbas while there are more and more cases of the exchange of fire, with an increase in the number of wounded Ukrainian soldiers. In addition, Russia reportedly amasses heavy weaponry in the areas controlled by Moscow-loyal fighters. If the Kremlin launches a new offensive against Ukraine this summer, the eastern region of Donbas will certainly serve a pivotal role in the conflict.

Seven Ukrainian troops were wounded on Monday, July 26 when Russian-backed rebels opened fire in Donbas. They also employ more pieces of heavy weaponry, which is prohibited under the Minsk agreements. The separatists violated a ceasefire eleven times on July 25. Two Ukrainian soldiers were injured. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine spotted heavy weaponry in residential areas in Russian-occupied districts of Donbas. These were five technical support vehicles and two armored personnel carriers. The OSCE mission also noted the use of the ZU-23, an anti-aircraft autocannon. Representatives of the OSCE Mission note all weapons have been deployed not abiding by the line of separation. A pair of 120 mm mortars have been installed in the Luhansk oblast while the Akatsiya howitzer has been deployed in Donetsk. 46 Ukrainian troops have been killed while more than 150 were wounded since the ceasefire deal was concluded last year. “The Mission has observed a deterioration of the security situation in the disengagement areas while the area around Zolote is turning into a hotbed,” according to Ambassador Heidi Grau, the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office in Ukraine. Finnish diplomat Mikko
Anti-government protests in Cuba pose a challenge to Russia. If the Communist regime collapsed, Moscow would lose a crucial ally in Latin America and its security foothold where the Kremlin enjoys influence, too.
Russia dispatched nearly 100 tons of humanitarian aid to Cuba, the Russian defense ministry has informed, following unprecedented street protests over the communist country’s worst economic crisis in decades. The delivery was directly ordered by President Vladimir Putin. Two An-124 cargo planes carrying more than 88 tons of humanitarian support took off from a military airport near Moscow. The cargo included food, personal protective equipment, and more than 1 million medical masks. Putin ordered to dispatch relief to Cuba after the United States had imposed sanctions on Cuba’s defense minister and a special forces unit for quashing peaceful protests. President Joe Biden warned the measure was “just the beginning” of punitive measures against Havana. Russia earlier this month warned against any “outside interference” in Cuba. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov vowed support to the Communist-led country during a meeting with the Cuban ambassador to Russia.

Moscow is fearful that a regime shift in Cuba could push Russian influence out of the Latin American country. This would seriously weaken Russia’s position in the Western hemisphere as Cuba serves a pivotal role for the Maduro regime in Venezuela, notably for security reasons. Venezuela has in fact been deeply engulfed in a long-running political and economic crisis. In addition, Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro is leaning on the protection and support of hundreds— if not thousands—Cuban officers. If the situation in Cuba continues to worsen, Cuban authorities could pull them out to defend the regime, thus causing trouble to another Latin American country, a Russian ally. Also, it was through Cuba that Russia had dispatched its mercenaries to Venezuela. At the Kremlin, a debate is on whether to dispatch
30 July 2021

RUSSIA PLAYS DOUBLE GAME IN AFGHANISTAN

Moscow is involved in military drills in Central Asia, pledging support to its allies in case of Islamist aggression from the south. At the same time, the Russian foreign ministry praised the Taliban for their territorial gains in northern Afghanistan, labeling them as a stabilizing factor. This is not an obstacle to maintain friendly ties with the government in Kabul or to suggest the United States could somewhat use Russian facilities in Central Asia. Moscow is making efforts to carve out a robust position in Afghanistan once the civil war is over in the country.

The Taliban delegation visited Moscow on July 8 to meet with Russian foreign ministry officials where they had “guaranteed the safety” in Afghanistan. Russia said it had received assurances from the Taliban, which is officially considered to be a terrorist organization by Moscow, who claimed they would not allow Afghanistan to serve as a foothold to attack Russia or its Central Asian allies that border Afghanistan. What Moscow, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan fear most are armed Islamist groups that cooperate with the Taliban as part of a diverse coalition. This is why Zamir Kabulov, President Vladimir Putin’s special representative on Afghanistan and senior Russian diplomat, said on July 20 that the fact that the Taliban are taking control of districts in the north because the group is hostile to others that are not interested in Afghanistan affairs, but in Central Asia, Pakistan, and Iran. The question is whether the Taliban’s guarantee is reliable since it is not know how competent

advisers to Cuba to help local officials suppress the protests. But if Russian siloviki arrive in the country, the United States will respond harshly.

In October 2019, Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel flew to Moscow while then Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev had been in Cuba a dozen or so days earlier. Russian exports make up most of the new trade wave and include new-model Lada automobiles, trucks, minibuses, and locomotives. In September 2019, Russia and Cuba signed a trade and economic deal for the supply of liquid fuels to the island. Under the deal, there is a cooperation scheme for transport, energy, and agriculture by 2030. Yet...
At least two large-scale military drills between Russia and its partners near the Afghan border serve as a wake-up call to the Taliban. Although the Taliban told Moscow they would not invade Russia’s Central Asian allies, for the Kremlin, it is better safe than sorry. It is also important for Russia to reassure its allies hence Moscow’s decision to perform drills in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan will hold joint military maneuvers near the Tajik-Afghan border in early August amid increasing security concerns in Central Asian nations over the active situation in Afghanistan. In recent weeks, there were instances of Taliban offensives against government troops in northern Afghanistan. Hundreds of Afghans, including police and government troops, have fled the country and entered Tajikistan and Uzbekistan amid a Taliban offensive. Since May 1, the militant group has held at least one-third of Afghanistan’s 423 districts. Russia’s drills with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan will be held on Tajikistan’s Harb-Maidon military field on August 5–10, some 20 kilometers from the Afghan border. This is not incidental. The Russian military command has made no secret of the fact its personnel would be getting ready to combat possible attacks from Afghanistan-based Islamic rebels (“illegal armed formations that intervene into the territory of an ally country”). Personnel from Russia’s military base in Tajikistan, mountainous vehicular troops, tank and artillery units, as well as the district’s special units will take part in the maneuvers. On July 2, Russia’s Central Military District command informed that tanks stationed at the 201st Russian base in Tajikistan had arrived at the training ground near the Afghan border after having covered some 200 kilometers. Also on July 20, Russian military officials announced joint military maneuvers with Uzbek forces in Termez, involving around 1,500 troops and 200 vehicles and helicopters, from July 30 to August 10. By taking part in the drills, Moscow seeks to pledge support to its Central Asian allies while being in talks with the Taliban, asking them for guarantees not to violate the status quo in the countries north of Afghanistan.
30 July 2021

RUSSIAN PASSPORT HOLDERS IN DONBAS MAY VOTE IN DUMA ELECTIONS

Russian passport holders in parts of eastern Ukraine that are controlled by Russia-backed separatists will be able to vote in the Russian parliamentary elections in September. According to a resolution adopted by Russia’s Central Election Commission on July 20, any person willing to do so will have to register and cast their vote online. This is a step towards incorporating Donbas and part of the Kremlin’s part to improve the election result of the ruling party.

While Russian election law stipulates that citizens living abroad can only vote in Russian consular offices, the Central Election Commission passed a decree which enables Russian passport holders in eastern Ukraine to vote online. In April 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree simplifying the issuance of Russian passports to Donbas residents, sparking harsh criticism from Kyiv and Western governments who accused Moscow of trying to further destabilize the situation in Ukraine’s east. Moscow yet
maintains it is not involved in Ukraine’s domestic affairs. In May, the Russian Interior Ministry said that 527,000 residents of the two Ukrainian regions known as the Donbas had obtained Russian passports. Along with Russian passport holders, this makes up for a significant part of voters in the State Duma elections.

Perhaps Russian officials will make all efforts to convince all voters in Donbas to vote for United Russia candidates. The Kremlin is doing its utmost to polish the election result of the ruling party whose ratings now stand at 40 percent, according to polls. However, the regime is targeting its 2016 result when the party won 76 percent of the vote. To achieve this goal, it will use local administration and resort to vote-rigging, to which online voting is particularly vulnerable. Making Donbas-based Russian passport holders eligible to vote gives United Russia a huge advantage before the elections.

30 July 2021

ALLY OR VASSAL: ARMENIA IS FORCED TO LOOK FOR RUSSIAN HELP

Armenia opted for an alliance with Russia, hoping that Moscow would protect it against the fall of the Soviet Union and taking control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region alongside neighboring Azerbaijani enclaves. For decades, Russia has been the sole, albeit disloyal, ally of Yerevan, as was the case last fall when Armenia suffered defeat in the mountainous enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. At that time, Turkey was actively supporting Azerbaijan. Russia did not offer its support to Armenia but responded with diplomatic measures only when the ex-Soviet country was about to surrender. Russian troops were deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh to secure the deal. Being under pressure from both Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia is more prone to agree on a bigger Russian presence. And that was what Moscow was about.
Recent weeks have brought simmering tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia as the two countries have seen more hostilities since they inked a ceasefire agreement last fall. On July 29, Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan proposed stationing Russian border guards along the country’s border with Azerbaijan. He floated the idea a day after three Armenian troops were killed in cross-border hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia does not feel safe while Azerbaijan is seeking to seize the entire Nagorno-Karabakh region. A visit that Ilham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan, paid to Moscow on June 20 played its part, too. Pashinyan accused Azerbaijan of not being committed to implementing the Russian-brokered ceasefire deal both countries had signed on November 9, 2021. The agreement put an end to hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh in a new chapter of the conflict over the enclave. Under the deal, Russia sent its “peacekeepers” along the demarcation line in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia still controls a chunk of the enclave. Turkey-supported Azerbaijan is also keen to seize these areas, hence the ever-increasing military pressure on Armenia. Yet Baku, which suffered a heavy defeat last year, can count on nobody but Moscow, unable to resist a Turkish-backed attack on its own. As Moscow failed to help Yerevan, Armenia realized it was best to keep its borders unchanged not through allied agreement, a solution that did not work out, but through the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the enclave.
30 July 2021

ANOTHER RUSSIAN OIL GIANT RESUMES OPERATIONS IN LIBYA

Russian oil producer Tatneft is ready to resume oil production in Libya and the company’s specialists are already working on this matter locally. Furthermore, not only does the giant wish to restart work abandoned as hostilities broke out in the country, but it is also looking for new opportunities for exploration. The Libyan government is encouraging Russian companies to come back to the country, seeking to rebuild economic ties both states had enjoyed in the Gaddafi era.
“As soon as it will be possible, we are already working in Libya on production restart,” the CEO of Tatneft Nail Maganov told journalists. “Our specialists are already working there,” he added. In March, Tatneft announced its plans to seal Libyan energy projects hampered by political tensions and violence in the North African country. Maganov said then the company intended to complete work it had been forced to cease after a revolution swept across the country. The chairman of the board of Tatneft and president of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, expected that the total production from the projects in Libya and Syria would reach 50 million tons. These are preliminary estimates that will be updated as exploration work is conducted. Tatneft worked in Libya under the concessionary agreement from 2005 right until 2014, when hostilities erupted in the country. In his meeting with journalists on the sidelines of the Russian Energy Week forum in fall 2019, Maganov said his company was looking for new blocks in Libya. As it later turned out, the contracts between the two sides include four exploration and production sharing agreements in Ghadames and northwestern Libya off its borders with Tunisia and Algeria. In January 2020, the company’s senior geologist and deputy chief, Rais Khisamov, told journalists that Tatneft had employed local companies to carry out research work as none of its specialists had been present in Libya. After a truce was negotiated in the country, the Tripoli authorities have made no secret of the fact that they would like to see Russian businesses return to Libya, notably Gazprom, Rosneft, and Tatneft. In May, Gazprom EP International has resumed crude oil production in Libya under its joint venture agreement with Germany’s Wintershall Dea. Gazprom has been on the Libyan territory since 1966. When in Moscow in February 2021, Libya’s Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Maiteeq said Russia and Libya could renew by the end of this year an intergovernmental agreement on trade, economic, and financial cooperation the two countries had concluded in 2008 under Muammar Gaddafi. The deal was worth between $8 billion and $10 billion and some investment projects have already been completed. Libya’s deputy prime minister estimated the remaining business projects at some $4 billion. The Tripoli-based government would like to achieve this by renewing economic ties with Russia.

30 July 2021

ASTANA TRIANGLE IS NOT YET DEAD

The 16th meeting of the Astana trio – made up of Turkey, Russia, and Iran – on Syria took place in July in Kazakhstan’s capital Nur-Sultan. They all vowed to continue their fight against the Islamic State (IS) and other Syrian-based “rebel groups.” The new round of Astana Syria talks took place amid conflicting interests both Moscow and Ankara have on Syrian soil.
Officials met in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. The Astana Triangle urged to maintain peace in Idlib province in northwestern Syria and fully implement the peace deals. Delegations from the Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition also took part in the meeting. The meeting focused on the situation on the ground in Syria, socioeconomic and sanitary-epidemiological issues, international humanitarian assistance to Syria, prospects for the resumption of work by the Syrian Constitutional Committee in Geneva as well as prisoner exchanges and the release of hostages. Interestingly, the Astana Triangle nations said they opposed “illegal local-led initiatives launched allegedly to combat terrorism,” possibly referring to the U.S.-backed Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria, tasked mainly with combatting IS rebels. Russia also argued that the Damascus government should be responsible for dispatching humanitarian relief within the country’s border. Ahmet Toma, who headed the Syrian opposition in Astana, told Turkish journalists that Syria-Turkey border crossings were crucial as this could be the corridor for mass-scale humanitarian aid. After a year-long hiatus, the Astana Triangle resumed work despite distinct views, mainly these of Turkey and Russia, but also those of Russia and Kazakhstan.
30 July 2021

RUSSIA DEPLOYS MORE MISSILES TO THE BALTIC SEA

The coastal defense missile systems Bal and Bastion were developed to ensure Russia’s control of the Gulf of Finland—–and so was the purpose of similar complexes installed in Crimea nearby Ukrainian Black Sea ports. Intimidating enemies with missile defense systems is in line with Russia’s long-running strategy to build up the Western Military District, notably its positions in the Baltic Sea.

Not incidentally, it was reported that Russia began to strengthen its missile defense in the Baltic Sea shortly after a naval parade took place in St. Petersburg. The Russian Navy deployed its Bastion and Bal mobile coastal defense missile system to the military facility nearby Kronstadt on Russia’s Kotlin Island. From there, they could reach as far as the Gulf
Russia was the world’s second-biggest crude oil producer in the first five months of 2021 only to the United States, according to data from Rosstat, the Federal Statistics Service.

Between January and May 2021, Russia’s output stood at 10.18 million barrels per day (bpd) compared to 11.18 million bpd in the United States. Saudi Arabia came third with roughly 9 million bpd. Russia benefitted greatly from the updated OPEC+ deal allowing the country to boost its oil production without the need to align to an earlier baseline. It was more than 11 million bpd Russia had produced most recently in late 2018 before Russian oil companies saw oil cuts by OPEC+. Despite the eagerness to further increase production, Russian oil producers find it challenging to exploit their old oil wells. Russian oil and gas condensate output declined to 10.42 million barrels per day (bpd) in June from 10.45 million bpd in May, according to Reuters calculation citing an unspecific source.

The federal statistics agency said in a statement Russia had produced 10.43 million bpd in May. According to Reuters sources, Russian producers may have some difficulties drilling in depleted deposits where it is challenging to resume works. This is what made Russian companies reluctant to curb production as it is tough to restart drills that have long been nonoperational due to physical and chemical processes that occur. Probably Russia will not keep up with an increase in production despite the new deal by the OPEC+ to steadily revive the production. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said that the new deal agreed by the OPEC+ group conformed to the situation on the energy market. Raising output by 400,000 bpd each month is not
aggressive to the market, he added. Demand is growing and so is consumption. Although there are new waves of coronavirus, many believe that restrictions are not as strict as in the past while travels are restored. It is seen in terms of consumption thus it is necessary to secure the market gradually and boost output to balance supply and demand, according to the Russian deputy prime minister.

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MOSCOW PLAYS UP DONBAS AS PART OF THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

Since the beginning of the war in Donbas, Russia has depicted the conflict as a Ukrainian civil war. In addition, the Kremlin consequently denies being a party to the ongoing conflict. Yet its recent decisions amid the upcoming State Duma elections and the fight against the coronavirus pandemic clearly show that one-third of Donbas, or so-called “people’s republics,” is in fact subordinated, or controlled, by the Kremlin. Ukraine’s government has banned the registration of Sputnik V in the country.
Russia supplies more Sputnik Covid-19 doses to Ukraine’s breakaway regions. In total, about 86,000 doses of the Sputnik Light vaccine were delivered to the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic. The vaccine will be then distributed as soon as possible among fifty vaccination centers. No details were provided on the number of doses of single-component Sputnik Light sent to the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic. The Russia-occupied part of Donbas received the first shipment of Sputnik V in January. More batches were supplied to Luhansk and Donetsk in February and March, respectively. Mass inoculation campaign commenced despite a ban by Kyiv. Next batches arrived in March as Moscow sought to align deliveries with the launch of an election campaign before the State Duma elections. Now Russia uses its homemade vaccines to boost support for United Russia politicians. The Kremlin intends to use Russian passport holders in Donbas to revamp the electoral score of United Russia. But with its Sputnik deliveries, Russia confirms that it occupies part of Donbas where it can do whatever it wants to.
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