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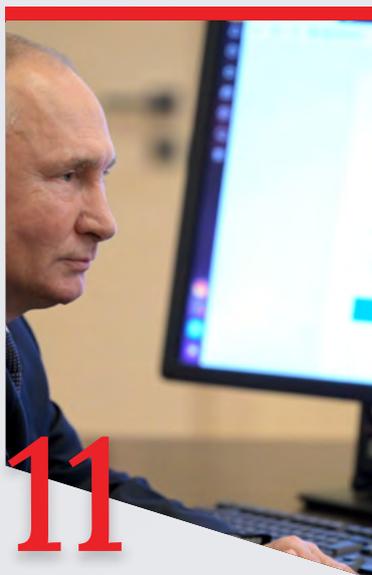


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SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

10 September 2021

THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF PUTIN'S TRUSTED GENERAL

An unfortunate accident was supposed to be the cause of death of the Minister of Emergency Situations, General Yevgeny Zinichev, official statements say. For many years, Zinichev was a trusted man of Vladimir Putin, who guided his career. Zinichev was a personal security officer, the Governor of Kaliningrad Oblast, the Deputy Director of the Federal Security Service, and the Head of one of the important state power ministries.

According to the official statements, Yevgeny Zinichev, aged 55, died on the morning of September 8, 2021, during a visit to Russia's Far North, when he was rescuing a member of a film crew who had fallen off the edge of a cliff into the water. Vladimir Putin awarded Zinichev the Hero of Russia title

posthumously the very next day. However, the actual circumstances of the accident could have been different, unofficial reports say. According to them, it was the Minister who fell into the water and the filmmaker attempted to rescue him. Most probably, we will never know what actually happened. However, the sudden

death of Zinichev is a major political event in Russia. After all, this veteran of the KGB, the Federal Protection Service (FSO), the Federal Security Service (FSB), and finally the Ministry of Emergency Situations, was considered for even higher state posts. Indeed, Zinichev was one of few Putin's most trusted officers. Zinichev served in the FSO between 2006 and 2015. He was also one of the president's aides. Additionally, he accompanied Putin during working visits around the country. In 2013, he underwent courses at the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. In June 2015, he became the Chief of the Federal Security Service of Russia in Kaliningrad Oblast. In the summer of 2016, he was appointed the Governor of Kaliningrad Oblast. After returning to Moscow, he became the Deputy Director of the FSB in October 2016. In May 2018, Zinichev was appointed the Minister of Emergency Situations. Zinichev's nomination

may have threatened the influence of the former Minister of this institution – Sergey Shoygu, who was earlier appointed the Minister of Defense. But the war between siloviki did not happen. Instead, Zinichev was perceived as a potential successor of the current FSB Chief Alexander Bortnikov. Especially since Zinichev was promoted to the rank of Colonel-General by Putin. Zinichev's death affects the balance of the power apparatus in Putin's Russia. This event provides a relief not only to Bortnikov, but also the incumbent Head of the FSO Dmitry Kochnev. Recently, it was speculated that Zinichev could replace him. It should also be noted that the General's death narrows the pool of candidates to succeed Putin. Moreover, it strengthens the position of Shoygu, who may now want to take over the best assets of the Ministry of Emergency Situations and incorporate them into the Ministry of Defense. ■

14 September 2021

PROGRESSIVE “INTEGRATION”: LUKASHENKO GIVES BELARUS INTO RUSSIAN HANDS

The presidents of Russia and Belarus met in Moscow yet did not sign chapters to a union state between the two countries. Nonetheless, the two leaders spoke of most thorny issues, notably energy, and adopted a somewhat common stance. Integration between Russia and Belarus—or rather pushing the latter country into Moscow's clutches—is gaining momentum. Possibly by the end of the year Russia and Belarus will take some critical decisions that those in favor of an independent Belarus will find challenging to reverse in the future.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko met in Moscow on September 9 for the fifth time this year. None of these face-to-face meetings were held in Belarus. Ahead of the talks in Moscow, Vladimir Semashko, the Belarusian ambassador to Russia, had said all road maps could be ready for signing when Putin and Lukashenko met. But no documents were signed. A few days later Lukashenko also said the union treaty could be signed on November 4, when the Supreme Council of the Union State is due to meet. After their Moscow meeting Putin and Lukashenko said there was no final agreement to harmonize the financial and energy policies. Speaking of the former, Lukashenko is afraid of making Belarus dependent on the Russian

federal bank as he could be no longer able to control the state budget. For the latter, Minsk seeks to buy oil and gas at the Russian market price. But Putin is more than reluctant to see so. Yet Russia and Belarus intend to sign documents establishing a unified gas, energy, and crude market. Furthermore, the two planned to unify Russia's military space with Belarus but offered no details on what it means. Step by step, Lukashenko is making bigger concessions to Moscow, giving his green light to Russia to integrate the Belarusian army. For the Belarusian dictator, it is far less significant than being in charge of a mighty state security apparatus. But Lukashenko needs money to stay in power. Russia will provide its neighbor Belarus with around \$640 million in loans. ■



SOURCE: TWITTER / MSZ.GOV.PL

14 September 2021

RUSSIA IS COMMON THREAT TO POLAND AND BALTIC STATES

The Zapad-2021 drills and the EU-Belarus border crisis are both the reminder that it is the northern section of NATO's eastern flank that is most vulnerable to any threat from Russia. Due to their location and military weakness, the three Baltic countries may feel particularly fearful of Russian pressure. It is only with the continued military support from the North Atlantic Alliance that these states could hope to deter Moscow. One example is the Air Policing Mission that aims to preserve the security of the airspace of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

While on September 13 in Riga, Poland's chief diplomat Zbigniew Rau said that Poland and the Baltic States were faced with the same challenges once confronted with Russia

and Belarus. Estonian, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Polish defense and foreign ministers met in Riga, Latvia, to discuss the security situation on NATO's eastern border in the face of Belarusian

hybrid activities and joint Russian-Belarusian military drills. It was the first meeting within this format. On the agenda were also efforts to create a NATO deterrence strategy and the Alliance's Strategic Concept. Poland's membership in the North Atlantic Alliance is a pillar of its security and even more so of the Baltic States that are left to their allies once confronted with the Russian threat amid their military weakness. One example of NATO's presence in the Baltic states is the Baltic Air

Policing Mission, dispatched to the area in parallel to multinational NATO battalions. While Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonia defense and foreign ministers met in Riga, the Spanish military command said it had scrambled in the Baltic Sea its jets twenty-six times in the last four months against unidentified Russian military jets. Spanish aircraft have the operating base for the Baltic Air Policing mission in Šiauliai, Lithuania. ■

20 September 2021

RUSSIAN “ELECTIONS” OVERSHADOWED BY DONBAS WAR

Ukrainian state officials informed that possibly hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian residents in the occupied part of Donbas are being forced to cast their ballots in Russia's parliamentary elections. But pro-Russian rebel fighters violate the ceasefire each fire, shelling Ukraine positions with weapons banned under the Minsk agreements. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky does not rule out that Russia would start a regular war with his country.

Ukrainian residents in the Russian-controlled part of Donbas are being forced to vote in the Russian State Duma elections, Ukraine's foreign ministry said on September 17. Kyiv said that it is illegal for Russia to hold elections in occupied Crimea while their results will take no legal effect. Russia has given out between 500,000 and 700,00 passports to Ukrainian citizens in what is known as the separatist states in Donbas, according to estimates. They could vote online while some of them were taken to polling stations in Russia. Over 800 special buses and 12 trains would be provided to take Donetsk residents to access polling stations in Russia. According to

Ukrainian state authorities, Russian passport holders were forced to vote otherwise they would be made redundant or their refusal could trigger other penalties. Meanwhile, the last few days have seen intensified shelling along the demarcation line. In the Donetsk region, from September 11 to 12, the OSCE Mission recorded more than 400 ceasefire violations. A week earlier, this was twice as less. One Ukrainian serviceman was killed and three others were wounded on September 12, according to the Joint Forces Operation of Ukraine. A Ukrainian soldier died in shelling on September 14. He was one of the four Ukrainian troops killed in three days. On September 16, rebel fighters twice



SOURCE: FLICKR

fired Shchastia, a town along the demarcation line. They used 82 mm mortars, a weapon banned under the Minsk agreements, to target civilian infrastructure, including a state office. A local resident was injured. OHCHR recorded 18 conflict-related civilian casualties and 55 wounded in eastern Ukraine between January and late August this year. At least 54 Ukrainian personnel have been killed since the beginning of this year. Ukrainian President Volodymyr

Zelensky does not rule out that Russia would start a regular war with his country. Asked on September 10 at the Yalta European Strategy (YES) summit if there could really be all out-war with Russia, Zelenskiy said: “I think there can be.” Ukraine is most vulnerable until late October when Russian forces are supposed to return to their home bases after the Zapad-2021 drills wrap up. ■

20 September 2021

PEACE MISSION-2021: CSO COUNTRIES INVOLVED IN JOINT DRILLS

Russia and China are taking part in yet another military drill. The Peace Mission-2021 joint anti-terrorism military exercise is centered on the threat from the Taliban. As a couple of Central Asian countries are involved in the drills, they seem to be more afraid of an Islamic Afghanistan more than they are reluctant to see China’s growing reach with tacit consent from Moscow.



SOURCE: МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

The drill named Peace Mission 2021, involving member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), is being held in Russia from September 11 to 25. This year's edition is being hosted by Russia in the Orenburg region. The exercises involve servicemen from Russia, China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. China sent to the drill site some 550 troops plus 130 vehicles and pieces of equipment from the Northern Theatre Command. The scope of the exercises encompasses the response of SCO states to such threats as terrorism, separatism, and extremist, all of which are what Central Asian countries are now facing. The drills are held each year though this year's edition encompasses some key operational and strategic issues. The drill will help the Chinese military learn to enhance their training level

in combat scenarios from more experienced partners like Russia and Pakistan. Although the war games cannot replace combat experience, they help the Chinese army make up for not participating in the war theatre since the 1979 China-Vietnam war. The exercises help China undertake joint drills to integrate military capabilities on the ground and in the air as well as for special operations, reconnaissance activities, and electronic warfare. For Beijing, the drills are an opportunity to develop its ability to respond to potential threats to foreign-made investments in low-security areas. The fact that the exercises involve Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, indicates that these four are still willing to accept China's anti-terrorist policy despite their concern over Chinese deeds in Xinjiang, including human right abuses against Uighurs or combatting separatist groups. ■



SOURCE: DUMA.GOV.RU

22 September 2021

UNSURPRISING STATE DUMA “ELECTIONS” IN RUSSIA

The three-day State Duma vote was nothing but a meaningless ritual as its results are consistent with the Kremlin’s earlier objectives. Russia’s United Party won a strong majority in a parliamentary vote while making up for a slight loss of seats in the lower house of the parliament by a new systemic opposition faction in the State Duma seated by parties loyal to the Kremlin.

Russia’s ruling party got 324 of the 450 seats in the national parliament election, losing 19 seats compared to the 2016 vote. It is just 19 if to consider that the ruling party could enjoy support that is possibly half as much as the result in the recent rigged vote. The Communist Party came second, winning 57 seats, or fifteen more than before. The third place looks somewhat noteworthy as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party is no

longer Russia’s number three political force, pushed by A Just Russia, so far the country’s number four. The latter party secured 27 seats in the State Duma compared to 23 in the past while the national-populist option got 21 seats, down from 39. A newcomer party, New People, gained 13 seats; the liberal center-right party was founded by businesspeople. But it is a Kremlin project. The regime somewhat sought to equalize the balance of power in the

State Duma, where the systemic opposition had rather left-wing agendas (Communist Party, A Just Russia). The aim was also to steal voters of parties like Yabloko or Navalny-associated movements. In addition to these five that passed the 5 percent electoral threshold needed to gain Duma seats, some independent or other party candidates became new lawmakers. The September 17–19 vote could be successful for the regime. It could push the real

opposition away from the vote, curb access to information on the vote, and frauds while mass-scale forgeries took place, possibly distorting the final result by as much as 50 percent. Never before in post-Soviet Russia have there been such rigged elections. This is yet another effort to transform Putin's populist and authoritarian Russia—and its democratic remnants—into a typical dictatorship. ■

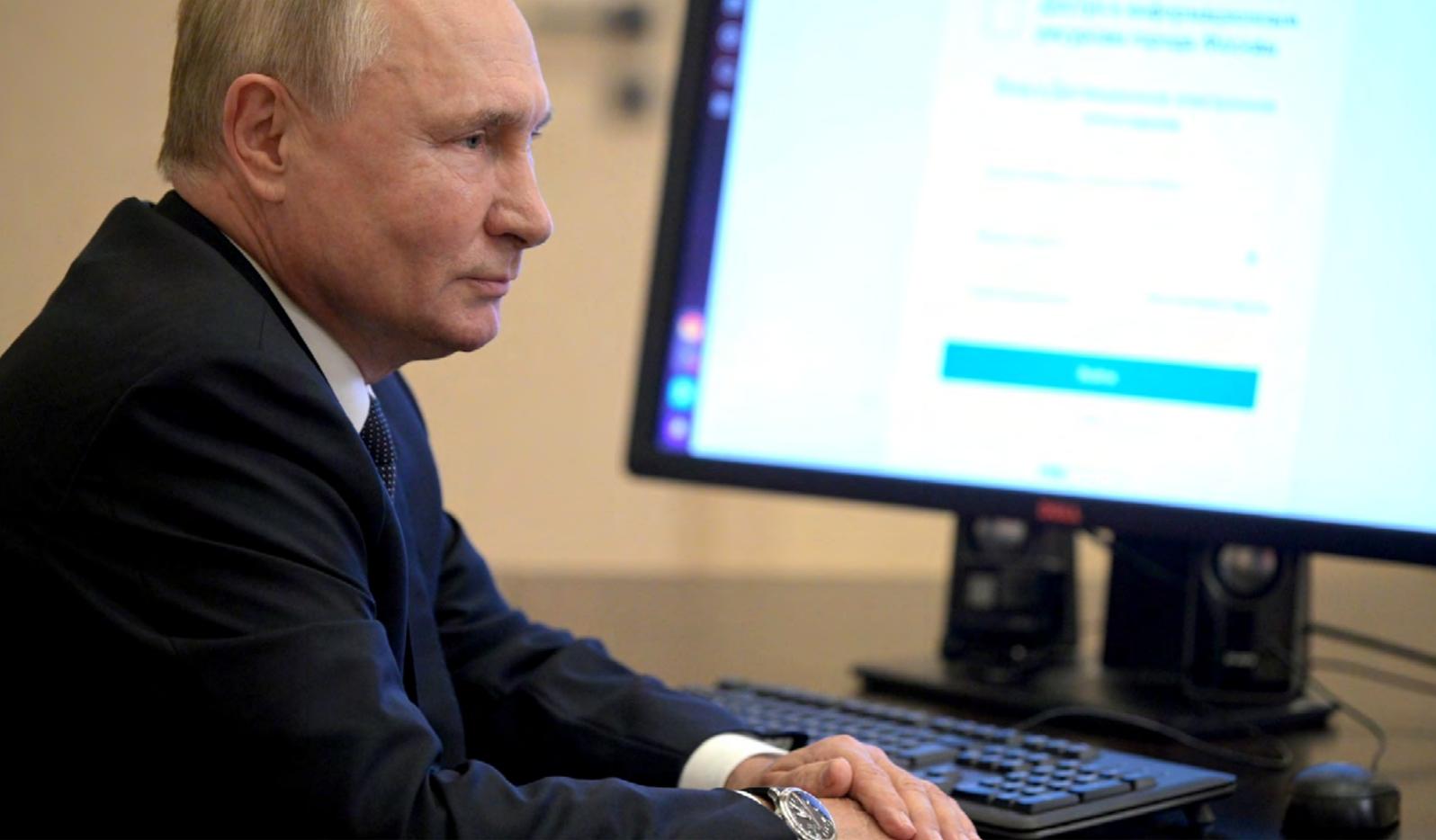
22 September 2021

STATE DUMA VOTE: TEST BEFORE RIGGING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The State Duma vote on September 17–19 was a testing ground for the regime that tested new methods of voter fraud in addition to well-proven practices. What seems most important in this respect is allowing for voting online in some Russian regions. Possibly this method will be extended to most places, or even the whole country, making it easier for the regime to falsify the vote.

The three-day vote paved the way for more voter fraud procedures. It is unknown who had access to the polls during the nighttime voting breaks. There were some claims of ballot stuffing and cases of carousel voting when busloads of voters—mostly young men—were driven around to cast ballots multiple times. But what sparked the most controversy was online voting. Moscow was one of the seven Russian regions where people could cast their ballot online and the only one where the results were not released on Sunday evening, but not until the next day. Opposition politicians say the

authorities rigged the results by adding tens of thousands of votes, mostly in those districts where opposition candidates were leading slightly with 99 percent of vote counted. With traditional ballot papers, opposition politicians would have won in eight out of fifteen electoral districts in the Russian capital. But after adding the result of e-voting, United Russia candidates took it all. Russia's Communist Party said it would not recognize electronic voting results in Moscow. Fraudulent practices of the government, notably in e-voting, have proved the regime's effectiveness in neutralizing what



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

is known as “smart voting,” a tactical voting strategy put forward by Alexey Navalny to cast a ballot for an opposition candidate most likely to defeat a candidate of the ruling party in the same constituency. Navalny said both in many Moscow and St. Petersburg districts, candidates were selected as part of the “smart voting” formula and it is only by rigging electronic voting that United Russia people could officially win. In Moscow, those candidates that were robbed of their winning votes were Communist Party politicians that won support from liberal

voters, as indicated by Navalny. This year’s State Duma “vote” shows that the regime is likely to embark on a similar strategy--after banning most opposition candidates from running in the election or forcing Apple or Google to opposition-created smartphone apps that tells voters which candidates are likely to defeat those backed by Russian authorities--in the 2024 presidential vote where electronic voting will be used on a far bigger scale. It makes it far easier and quicker to falsify votes. ■



SOURCE: FUNCTION.MIL.RU

24 September 2021

RUSSIAN NAVY DRILLS SHOOTING TARGETS IN OCCUPIED CRIMEA

Russia's navy practiced firing at sea-based targets using its Bastion coastal missile defense system. The drills coincide with the exercises in Ukraine involving the use of vessels in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. With time, place, and the type of weapons used, it is possible to state that the Russian war games are a response to the Joint Efforts 2021 exercises as Moscow is flexing its military muscles.

Crews fired from concealed positions and used drones in the Opuk testing ground in Crimea. Russia's fleet practiced detecting and destroying sea targets with its Bastion system, an advanced mobile anti-ship and surface-to-surface defense system capable of destroying assault ships, aircraft carriers,

and other surface targets in heavy firing and radio-electronic warfare operations. It can carry up to 36 missiles. This Bastion System, which the Russian army has had since 2010, can hit sea targets at a distance of more than 300 kilometers. It was dispatched to Crimea right after it had been annexed by Russia. With

their nature and range, they build up Russia's military position in the northern part of the Black Sea. In the event of a conflict, all sea routes to Ukrainian ports will be within the scope of their destruction. The drills in Russian-occupied Crimea came on the heels of a set of wide-ranging exercises, dubbed Joint Efforts 2021, held in Ukraine. These are also attended by military personnel from fifteen countries: eleven NATO states and four of their partners. The drills involve 12,500 people and 600 pieces of weaponry and military equipment. Ukraine's defense ministry said that in addition to boosting the country's defense possibilities, the

drills sought to enhance its cooperation with the armies of NATO states. The exercises are set up to run until September 30. They take place close to Crimea in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Russia's Bastion firing adds to simmering tensions in the region. Once the Zapad 2021 exercises are over, Kyiv fears that Russia could use its personnel to launch a possible military operation against Ukraine. Because of Russia's build-up of its military capabilities, the threat of military operations in southern Ukraine remains, Commander of the Joint Forces of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Serhiy Nayev said on September 20. ■

27 September 2021

LUKOIL VOICES CONCERN OVER GHANA OIL ASSETS

Russian energy giant Lukoil said Ghana's plans to acquire a bigger stake in one of its key oil projects could pose a risk to its execution. The Russian giant is concerned over deteriorating project conditions as a Ghana state corporation acquired stakes from a private Norway-based energy firm.

State-controlled Ghana National Petroleum Corporation last month got parliamentary approval to negotiate increasing its share of the Deepwater Tano/Cape Three Points (DWT/CTP) block and the South Deepwater Tano field. But Russia's Lukoil, which owns 38 percent of the DWT/CTP asset, fears a change of ownership may affect project financing and schedules. Ghana National Petroleum Corporation is currently holding 10 percent of

DWT/CTP and about a third of South Deepwater Tano. Yet the government-run agency seeks to boost the country's revenues after a shortfall in oil receipts amid the pandemic deepened last year's budget deficit. Ghana's hydrocarbon resources will also increasingly have to compete for investment as the use of cleaner energy grows. The government estimates it will need more than \$1 billion to acquire a 50 percent stake in the DWT/CTP asset, operated



SOURCE: LUKOIL.COM

by Norway's Aker Energy AS, and a 70 percent share of the South Deepwater Tano field run by AGM Petroleum Ghana Ltd. Since 2015, Lukoil has been an investor in Deepwater Tano/Cape Three Points through its subsidiary Lukoil Overseas Ghana Tano Ltd. The deposit is offshore of Ghana, stretching for just more than 2,000 square kilometers. It is located in Ghana's

western waters in the Gulf of Guinea, some 80 kilometers off Cameroon. Five oil fields and two gas fields were discovered there. The Ghana project is just one of many Lukoil's investments in Africa. Russia's biggest private oil company is active also in Nigeria, the Republic of Congo, and Egypt. ■



SOURCE: TWITTER / AMBMANSOORKHAN

27 September 2021

KABUL MEETING: A COMMON FRONT OF RUSSIA, CHINA, PAKISTAN?

Moscow and Beijing are pushing for an inclusive government in Afghanistan. At the same time, they are seeking friendly ties with the new government in Kabul as soon as possible. These efforts were channeled into a visit of Russian and Chinese special envoys for Afghanistan. Not only did they join forces, but there were also accompanied by a representative of Pakistan, a country that has the biggest influence on the Taliban and their policy.

The acting head of Afghanistan's Taliban-led government, Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund, met on September 21 in Kabul with representatives from Russia, China, and Pakistan. It was a top high-level meeting for all these three countries. They were represented by the Russian envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, Pakistan's Special

Representative for Afghanistan Mohammad Sadiq Khan, and China's special envoy to Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong. In addition to the acting prime minister, the Taliban was represented by acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Acting Minister of Finance Hedayatullah Badri. No details of the meeting were immediately available. But these three are still putting pressure on the Taliban to add other political groups to the newly formed government. After talks a few days before on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, foreign ministers of Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran emphasized the "need to conclude national reconciliation in Afghanistan, resulting in an inclusive government that takes into account the interests of all ethno-political forces of the country." During their Kabul visit, the three foreign envoys also held talks with former President Hamid Karzai and the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah. Russia

has long suggested including them or their people in the new cabinet, which would make the new Afghan authorities be recognized quicker. The current all-male government is Taliban-dominated, with a handful of ethnic minorities other than the Pashtuns. No woman has been named, either. Taliban government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said it was temporary and the change could be possible. However, other Taliban leaders have indicated Taliban reluctance for the idea. Some are more radical like Mohammad Mobeen who told an Afghan TV broadcaster that adding that asking for inclusivity was tantamount to asking the Taliban to include spies of neighboring countries in their government. Moscow and Beijing have long shown a common front on Afghanistan. In the latest such contact, Russian President Vladimir Putin held a telephone call with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, on August 25. Chinese media said after the call that Putin told Xi he shares China's positions and interests in Afghanistan. ■

27 September 2021

RUSSIA PUMPS MORE CRUDE OIL

Russia's crude oil output jumped in September thanks to some decisions made by OPEC+. However, it is vital for Gazprom to rebuild export capacities after a fire at a facility in Siberia.

The production of crude oil and condensate in Russia increased in the first weeks of September as some of the nation's key producers ramped up in line with the OPEC+ deal and Gazprom recovered from the blaze at its facility in West Siberia. In early August, Gazprom's processing facility near Novy Urengoy was damaged by a fire, forcing the producer to cap its regional output of natural

gas and condensate. It was only in September that the company's gas deliveries to Europe via the Yamal pipeline increased to the highest level since the end of July, indicating that the producer has been gradually bringing back production after the blast. The nation pumped an average of 1,456.9 thousand tons of oil, or 10.679 million barrels, per day in the first half of September, according to data



SOURCE: RUSSNEFT.RU

from the Energy Ministry. This is 2.4 percent above August's level. If that rate of production was maintained for the whole of September, it would be the biggest monthly increase in Russian production in just over a year. The gain was mainly driven by a 13.9 percent hike in production at Bashneft unit and an 11.9 percent increase in the output of smaller oil producers, which include Gazprom. OPEC states and its allies agreed to boost their production from August 2021 in response to growing global energy demand. While the alliance seeks to

add 400,000 barrels a day to the market each month, concerns have mounted recently about whether some members of the group can meet their targets. Russia's share of the increases is some 100,000 barrels a day. At the same time, the International Energy Agency said the extra supply from OPEC and its allies in August and September will be offset entirely by output disruptions like those in Libya (internal struggles) and the Gulf of Mexico (hurricanes). Global production should start growing again in October, it added. ■



SOURCE: TWITTER / HARDEEPSURI

27 September 2021

SECHIN INVITES INDIA TO THE ARCTIC

The huge Vostok Oil project was a key issue of discussion when India's oil and gas minister sat down for talks with Rosneft's Igor Sechin. Shri Hardeep S Puri arrived in Vladivostok to take part in the Eastern Economic Forum. He made a stop-over in Moscow to meet Sechin before heading to the Russian Far East.

Sechin and his Indian guest discussed mainly Rosneft's flagship project in the Arctic, Vostok Oil. "We held very productive discussions on further strengthening our strategic partnership with Russia in the energy sector," Minister Puri said in a comment after the meeting. It is known that Igor Sechin

had prepared a major presentation of his company's new top priority project, the Vostok Oil. According to the oil company leader, Vostok Oil is one of the most prospective oil production projects in the world. It includes 52 license areas with a resource base of more than 6 billion tons of oil. "By 2033, extraction

is projected to reach a level of 115 million tons,” Sechin said, adding that Vostok Oil can simultaneously supply resources from the fields in two directions, both to the European and Asian markets. Rosneft counts on India’s involvement in the project. In early 2020, it was made clear by the former Indian energy minister. Vostok Oil was on the agenda also during the meeting between Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019. Rosneft’s project is being developed in the country’s far northern Taymyr Peninsula as the Yenisey River flows into the Kara Sea. According to the company, the project will include the building of 15 new industry towns, three

airports, about 800 kilometers of new pipelines, and 3,500 kilometers of new electricity lines. In May this year, the first ships loaded with construction materials sailed into the Yenisey Bay. Vostok is what the Kremlin—and thus the government—sees as its priority. It is not only about Sechin’s cordial ties with Putin, which gave Rosneft some outstanding tax reliefs. Vostok Oil is set to become a key element for industrial facilities in the Northern Sea Route as the link is one of the priorities of Vladimir Putin. Sechin convinced Putin that without Vostok Oil’s massive production, there would not be enough crude for sea exports from the Russian Arctic to develop the Northern Sea Route. ■

30 September 2021

RUSSIA ENDURES FOURTH WAVE OF CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Russia is seeing a devastating health situation as one in two regions is grappling with a spike in new coronavirus cases. In the last days of September, Russia reported its highest coronavirus death toll. Undoubtedly, Russia is battered with a long-awaited fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

The situation resembles the highest death tally the country saw back in August 2021. Russia’s thirty-six regions, or almost half of all entities, reported an increase of 6–7 percent of new cases. In late September, Russia entered the fourth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. On September 27, the government coronavirus task force said the number of infected was more than 22,000 for the third day in a row. Russia reported 867 deaths from Covid-19 on September 30, another new record amid a spike

in infections. The total number of confirmed cases of the disease in the country was around 7.5 million. The new figure brings the country’s total deaths from the coronavirus to more than 207,000 people. According to Russian state authorities, infections spike is driven by the contagious Delta variant and slow vaccination rates. Almost 40 million people in Russia have been administered two doses against Covid-19. Just under 29 percent of the population had been fully vaccinated, which is below the



SOURCE: DUMA.GOV.RU

worldwide average figure. The Russian health ministry gave its green light to start clinical trials for a new vaccine called Betuvax-CoV-2. Sputnik Vi is now most often used to inoculate people while there are two other domestic

vaccines. Russia does not use Western-made vaccines to inoculate its population. Unofficially, the Russian government is considering allowing foreign vaccines to enter the domestic market. ■

30 September 2021

RUSSIA LUNGES INTO MALI, SENDS WAGNER GROUP MERCENARIES AND WEAPONS

All signs are that the military junta in Bamako will get its way, allowing at least several hundred Russian mercenaries to start operating in Mali. The government in Mali makes little of the warnings from France and the whole European Union (the bloc deployed to the country a military training mission to help combat jihadi insurgents).



SOURCE: TWITTER / MALIMAECI

A cargo plane delivered four helicopters, weapons, and ammunition from Russia to Mali late on September 30 amid a military deal the two countries had concluded in December 2020, according to the Malian defense minister. Colonel Sadio Camara said these would be used in the fight against insurgents linked to the Islamic State group and al Qaeda. This is another sign of the tightening security cooperation between Bamako and Moscow. The Russians are filling the power vacuum left by the retreating French forces. France's poor ties with Bamako stem largely from the country's dissatisfaction with the current political situation in Mali. President Emmanuel Macron questioned the legitimacy of the Malian authorities after two coups took place in the country: in August 2020 and May 2021. President of France Emmanuel Macron announced a gradual withdrawal of French troops from Mali in June after the country's

second coup in a year. The authorities in Paris are planning to reduce the 5,000-strong French contingent by half. Furthermore, France is seeking to start closing some military facilities in the country while keeping a watchful eye on the border with Burkina Faso and Niger. The government in Bamako thus asked Russia for help. Addressing the last UN General Assembly, Mali Prime Minister Choguel Maiga accused France of abandoning the conflict-torn country adding his government was seeking military aid. Mali has asked private Russian companies to boost security, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said. At the same time, it was reported that the Wagner Group was close to recruiting new people to possibly work in Mali. The Wagner Group is a private military company (PMC) with ties to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman closely linked to the Kremlin. They push for the goals of Russia's foreign policy while securing Prigozhin's interests in

those countries they are dispatched to. They have already left their footprints in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. In addition, they were or still are active in Sudan, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic. If Russian military contractors arrive in Mali, they will be probably sent to northern regions from where France is retreating its troops, at least according to the junta. Unofficially, the contract between Mali and Russia's Wagner Group stipulates that 1,000 Russian mercenaries will be deployed. How much would it be for the Malian junta? The Wagner Group would be paid more than

€9 million for its services; the mercenaries would train the Malian military and provide protection for senior junta officials. Senior Malian military officials were trained in Russia in the past. Mali Defense Minister Colonel Sadio Camara has lately visited Moscow. Plans to seal a deal with the Wagner Group sparked a strong reaction from French state officials. In mid-September, French Defense Minister Florence Parly and Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said French troops would quit the country if the government in Bamako invited Russian mercenaries. ■

30 September 2021

TATARSTAN'S TOP OIL ASSET TO PAY DIVIDENDS

Tatneft is paying out a dividend of 16.52 roubles per share for the results in the six first months of 2021, according to the company's shareholders. On September 30, an extraordinary meeting of the company's shareholders took place in Kazan, alongside a meeting of the board of directors chaired by the president of Tatarstan.

Tatneft is paying out a dividend of 16.52 roubles per share for the results in the six first months of 2021, according to the company's shareholders. As reported in August, this amount was recommended by the board of directors of Tatneft. On September 30, a regular meeting of the board of directors of Tatneft was held in Kazan, chaired by Rustam Minnikhanov, the president of Tatarstan. The results of the company's budget in the eight months of 2021 were considered at the meeting and the budget for October and the fourth quarter of the current year was approved. The meeting participants got acquainted with the progress of executing the projects of the oil

and gas and petrochemical complex at Tatneft. Currently, the development strategy for this business area is at the stage of updating, and it integrates a new project of the company for the production of butadiene rubbers in Kazakhstan and the recently acquired EcoPet asset. Tatneft pays great attention to "green" projects while updating its business strategy. The board of directors considered issues of developing the production of composite materials and agreed on the further development strategy for this business line, which provides for an increase in production and sales of products, performance improvement, and the introduction of new products onto the market. One of the main



SOURCE: RU.WIKIPEDIA.ORG

drivers for the development of this business area today is the trends associated with the need of reducing the carbon footprint. The use of fiberglass pipes and pultruded profiles made of composite materials allows for reducing the company's greenhouse gas emissions. The information was presented at the meeting on the transparency level of the corporate management system at Tatneft and the consideration of ESG factors for the sustainable development of the company. Tatneft is one of Russia's biggest public companies, active

mainly in Tatarstan. The company is in charge of one of Russia's biggest refineries, Taneco. The government of Tatarstan, which has a "golden share," controls Tatneft through and has a 29 percent share in the firm through Svyazinvestneftekhim. Another important shareholder is Citibank that has a 26 percent share. Tatneft has some 140,000 shareholders in total. In 2020, the firm ranked seventh in the top Russian private business companies in the Forbes list whose authors considered any entity private when its majority was privately held. ■

30 September 2021

RUSSIA VS UKRAINE: WHERE DO "RED LINES" RUN?

The idea of NATO membership for Ukraine is the worst-case scenario for Russia that staunchly opposes also the potential broadening of NATO infrastructure on Ukrainian territory. This time the Kremlin is using Alexander Lukashenko to attain its goals. The intention is to send a strong signal to the West that Russia and Belarus would recognize NATO military bases in Ukraine as a casus belli.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

The United States is actually creating NATO bases in Ukraine “under the guise of training centers”, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on September 27. The Kremlin spokesman commented on the matter on the same day. Dmitry Peskov said that the broadening of NATO infrastructure on the territory of Ukraine “would cross red lines,” prompting Russia and Belarus to “ensure the security of the two of our states.” Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba sharply rejected the notion of a Russian “red line” outside of its own borders. “Putin’s ‘red lines’ are limited to Russia’s borders,” he tweeted. “On our side of the Ukrainian-Russian border, we can figure out ourselves what to do in the interests of the Ukrainian people, as well as Ukraine’s and Europe’s security.” If anyone is moving these “red lines” in the region, it must be Russia. “We are concerned about the risks of the possible deployment of uranium enrichment

facilities, the production of dual-use materials, and the use of nuclear-related technologies,” Ukraine said at a UN meeting. Back in August, Kuleba said Russian intentions to deploy nuclear weapons in Crimea posed a threat to the world. In late September, the mandate of international observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) expired, making them unable to monitor two border crossing points on Ukraine’s border with Russia inside the separatist-controlled regions. This is where rain links between Russia and the “people’s republics” run. Now it will be more difficult to monitor whether Russia is sending military hardware to separatists. Commander of the Joint Forces of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Lieutenant General Serhiy Nayev said that as no observers would be at the border, there could be more weapons supplies to rebel fighters. Possibly Moscow will seek to curb the powers of the OSCE mission in Donbas. ■



SOURCE: FLICKR

30 September 2021

TAJKISTAN COULD THWART RUSSIA'S PUSH TOWARDS TALIBAN

It is in Moscow's interest to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan and the entire region. Moscow seeks official ties with the Taliban to build its political and economic influence in Afghanistan. Any tensions do not serve this purpose, as a Russian ally is growing as the top opponent for the Taliban, where thousands of Russian troops are stationed.

Russia urged Tajikistan and Afghanistan to resolve any dispute in a mutually acceptable manner. "We observe with concern the growing tensions in Tajik-Afghan relations

amid mutually strong statements by the leadership of the two countries," Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexei Zaitsev said on September 30. Tajikistan has recently

held military parades in two provinces bordering Afghanistan. On September 27, it hosted a military parade in the Darvoz province while on September 30, President Emomali Rakhmon observed another one in the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region. Meanwhile, according to some unofficial reports, the Taliban allegedly sent thousands of fighters to the Takhar province in northern Afghanistan – which borders Tajikistan. This is another chapter of the Tajik-Taliban conflict. Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon has refused to recognize the Taliban-appointed cabinet in Kabul. He also lashed out at what he describes as violations of human rights in the Taliban's siege of the Panjshir province where opposition forces held rallies. Tajikistan's top Muslim cleric has issued

a fatwa, or religious edict, against the Taliban and their practices being inconsistent with Islam. Tensions have been mounting between Dushanbe and the Taliban since August. Back then, the insurgent group sent Tajik fighters belonging to a group that Dushanbe considers terrorists to the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border. In recent days, the Taliban warned the Tajik government against interfering in its internal affairs. But what infuriates most the Taliban is that Dushanbe is welcoming fleeing Afghans, offering them asylum and help. On the same day that the Russian foreign ministry urged Dushanbe and Kabul to ease tension, the Russian Central Military District said soldiers from the 201st military base would hold drills in the mountainous region of Tajikistan to stop the invasion of an “illegal armed group.” ■

30 September 2021

SOCHI MEETING: RUSSIA AND TURKEY STILL DIVIDED OVER SYRIA

The long-awaited meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan that took place on September 29 in Sochi did not make any breakthrough in the Russia-Turkey ties. They look good despite tensions in Syria. It seems that Erdogan sought to use the meeting with Putin as a bargaining chip in his relations with Washington.

It is little surprising that the Syrian war was high on the agenda as Putin and Erdogan met in Sochi. After all, a few days earlier, a dozen or so pro-Turkish militants were killed in Russian raids. Both leaders held neither a joint press conference nor did they deliver speeches, the fact that shows that their talks were uneasy and failed to produce a permanent agreement on the Syria issue. This could hardly come

as a surprise as both states have conflicting interests in Syria where Moscow backs al-Assad and his regime while Ankara throws support to his opponents. Yet a few years ago other matters pushed the Russians and the Turks towards a compromise (Astana format) while in Idlib, or the last rebel-held province in the country, a fragile truce deal is persisting under some arrangements Putin had made with



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

Erdogan. Had it not been for Ankara's stance, the Russian-backed regime of al-Assad would have long ago smashed the rebel-controlled foothold. The Kremlin is preventing the government in Damascus from launching an offensive as it seeks friendly ties with Turkey. Selling Russian-made S-400 missile defense batteries to Ankara is for Moscow an efficient tool for breaking the Turkish alliance with Western nations. Turkey is also a key market for Russia's Gazprom. Erdogan is playing the game, seeking to weaver between Russia and the United States. Once his talks with Biden proved little efficient, Erdogan immediately told U.S. media outlets that he was going to buy more Russian S-400 missile defense batteries. Erdogan added that as the United States was reluctant to rebuild its ties with Turkey, his country would see better relations with Russia. He said this just before flying to Sochi, possibly trying to push on Washington. Turkey is considering more joint steps with

Russia in the defense industry, including for fighter jets and submarines, the Turkish leader told journalists on his return to Turkey. Yet it is unimaginable for a NATO member, and Turkey is one. But Moscow also prepared for that meeting. Russian army intensified its activities in Syria after Putin had met with Bashar al-Assad on September 13 in Moscow. A few days before Putin met Erdogan in Sochi, Russian air forces had carried out airstrikes in the Turkish and Syrian-controlled areas, which was an unprecedented incident. The northern enclave of Afrin, which was the target of Russian attacks, has been controlled by Turkish forces and their loyal Syrian rebel troops since 2018. Possibly Putin and Erdogan at least clarified some issues on Syria while in Sochi. Erdogan again managed to avoided al-Assad's offensive in Idlib, but Turkish forces will make some tactical shifts in the region, for instance by handing the important M4 highway to the Syrian government forces. ■



SOURCE: GAZPROM.RU

30 September 2021

RUSSIA-HUNGARY NEW GAS DEAL: GAZPROM HALTS TRANSIT THROUGH UKRAINE

The Ukrainian Gas Transmission System operator said Russia's Gazprom had suspended its gas transit through Ukraine from October 1, on the same day that a new gas deal between Hungary and Russia took effect. The agreement outraged Kyiv and triggered a diplomatic row between Ukraine and Hungary. This shows how Russia is seeking to make political use of gas pipelines that bypass Ukraine and Poland. Moscow is sparking conflict between the countries in the region while compromising Ukraine's security and also that of other European states.

Russia's Gazprom had suspended its gas transit through Ukraine for supplies to Hungary from October 1, according to the state-run company Gas Transmission System Operator of Ukraine. Gas supply was halted even though Ukraine's capacity on gas transit to Hungary had been contracted until late September 2022 in the amount of 24.6 million cubic meters per day. Undoubtedly, Gazprom's move coincided with its new gas contract with Hungary to ship 4.5 billion cubic meters each year than took effect on October 1, 2021. Suspending Russian gas transit through Ukraine means reduced gas importing capabilities of the country. Kyiv has long not imported gas directly from Russia. The country receives reverse flows from states that get Russian gas through Ukraine. On September 27, Hungary signed a new 15-year natural gas supply deal with Russia's Gazprom. Under the deal, the Russian state-run gas giant will ship 4.5 billion cubic meters of gas to Hungary annually through lines that bypass Ukraine, via two routes: 3.5 billion cubic meters via Serbia (TurkStream) and 1 billion cubic meters via Austria (through Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2). Ukrainian state authorities have slammed the new gas deal between Hungary and Russia. Ukraine's foreign ministry issued a statement calling

the move "a purely political, economically unreasonable decision taken in favor of the Kremlin while to the detriment of Ukraine's national interests and Ukraine-Hungarian ties." This was in response to the fact that the Hungarian foreign ministry summoned the Ukrainian ambassador. In a tit-for-tat move, the Hungarian ambassador to Ukraine was called by the Ukrainian foreign ministry. Hungary accused Ukraine of making efforts to meddle in its affairs. "Third countries have nothing to do with what we agree on and with whom," the country's chief diplomat Peter Szijjarto said. "I do not remember ever reproaching Ukraine for signing any deal with anyone." While in Brussels on September 29, Ukraine's Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko discussed with European Commission officials whether the gas agreement between Hungary and Gazprom violated European competition rule. Russian authorities also spoke on the issue, seemingly satisfied with the whole matter. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said no gas transmission route was secret, adding "there should be no place for such hysterical reactions." Gazprom's decision to suspend gas supplies to Hungary through Ukraine shows that Kyiv is right to consider the contract a weapon against Ukraine. ■

30 September 2021

LUKOIL PUSHES FOR HYDROCARBON EXPANSION IN KAZAKH CASPIAN SEA BLOCK

Russia's oil giant Lukoil would help Kazakhstan develop oil fields located in its portion of the Caspian Sea, according to Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The statement was made during the 17th Interregional Cooperation Forum of Kazakhstan and Russia held online on September 30.



SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

“We start developing the large Kalamkas-Sea and Khazar fields. The strategic partner from the Russian side has been identified – this is Lukoil. The total project cost will be about \$5 billion,” the president of Kazakhstan informed. Kashagan is Kazakhstan’s largest offshore hydrocarbon field with extraction of more than 400,000 barrels per day. Since its uncovering eighteen years ago, it is the biggest oil field to be discovered in the world. Oil reserves here are estimated at 4.8 billion tons. The Kazakh project is another foreign one for Lukoil that is looking for other areas than state-run Rosneft. Although private, Lukoil enjoys the Kremlin’s support and its Kazakh cooperation is a sign of that. The Russian edition of Forbes magazine has just

published the ranking of Russia’s 200 largest private companies. The magazine added to its list only those companies whose 50 percent remains in private hands. Lukoil was the undoubted leader of this ranking; in 2020, its income was roughly 5.64 trillion roubles, down by 28 percent in 2019 due to the coronavirus pandemic. The top ten included two other oil companies. Surgutneftegaz came fifth (1.07 trillion roubles, down by 31.6 percent) while Tatneft was ranked seventh (720.7 billion roubles, down by 22.7 percent). There is a gap between Lukoil and other private companies in Russia. The Russian oil giant earned more and less as much as the next four businesses combined. ■



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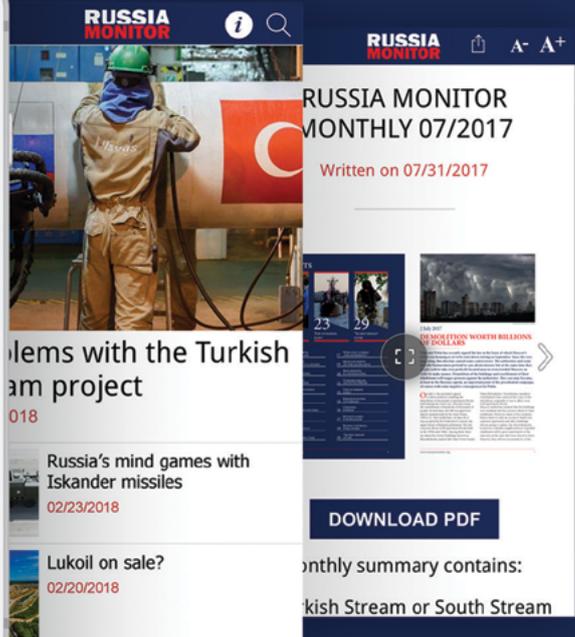
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