

# RUSSIA MONITOR

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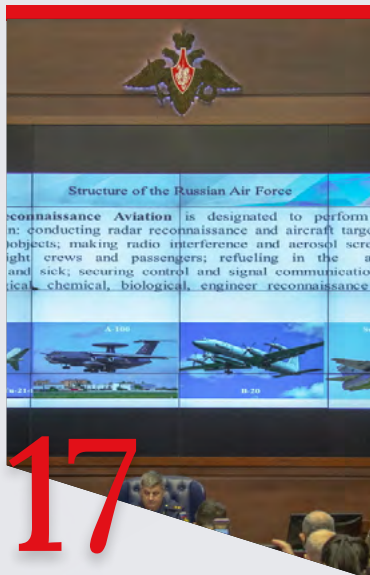
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SOURCE: МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

4 November 2021

## IS RUSSIA MASSING TROOPS AT UKRAINE'S BORDER?

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**It seems Russia is repeating the deceived war-like scenario it first played out earlier this year. In March and April, Moscow sounded so convincing in its threats to attack Ukraine that U.S. President Joe Biden invited Vladimir Putin for talks in Geneva to ease tensions. Now there is much to indicate that Moscow is playing a game to exert pressure on Western states. It is unlikely for any war to start under current weather conditions.**

**I**n late September, Ukrainian officials said that after the conclusion of the Zapad 2021 exercises, Russia left military equipment, as well as control and communications centers, at training sites along the Ukrainian border. At that time, it held little attraction for Western outlets. The situation has yet shifted and an

array of influential Western media outlets like Politico and the Washington Post reported the Pentagon voiced concern amid a buildup of Russian troops at Ukraine's border, confirmed by satellite imagery. But compared to what happened earlier this year, now tensions continue to percolate between Russia and

Ukraine. The whole thing started a few weeks ago when Dmitry Medvedev, a former Russian president and incumbent deputy chair of the country's Security Council, published a Ukraine hit piece of his own. In statements over the course of the year, Putin and the Russian foreign ministry have said the expansion of NATO activities in Ukraine represents a "red line" for Moscow. What must have caused concern in Moscow was the visit the Pentagon chief paid to Kyiv, promising Ukraine fresh weapons supplies. The USS Mount Whitney, the flagship of the U.S. 6th Fleet, has entered the Black Sea. Western media reported that armored units, tanks, and self-propelled artillery along with ground troops were massing near the Russian town of Yelnya close to the border of Belarus. Alarming reports are in line with Moscow's strategy of intimidating Western nations. Kyiv

denied the troop buildup, saying the transfer of more Russian soldiers, weapons and equipment to Ukraine's border "was not recorded" while reports that Russia is once again massing troops and military equipment on the border are part of information and psychological warfare. Oleksiy Danilov, head of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, called media reports of the concentration of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border "deliberate disinformation." What some Western news outlets did seem to be to the Kremlin's liking as Russian officials again launched a war hysteria campaign. Although Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov refuted claims made in the Politico report, his statement was part of an information warfare campaign to press on the West with a war threat in Eastern Europe. ■

5 November 2021

## CIA DIRECTOR VISITS MOSCOW AT PRESIDENT BIDEN'S REQUEST

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**CIA Director William Burns flew to Moscow for two-day talks with top Russian officials. At President Biden's request, Burns was leading a delegation of senior American officials on the trip to Moscow. In the Russian capital, Burns held at least two meetings with the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) chief and the secretary of the Security Council.**

While in Moscow (November 2–3), Burns met Nikolai Patrushev, the powerful secretary of the Kremlin's Security Council and a close associate of Vladimir Putin. The two "discussed Russian-U.S. relations," the Council's press service said in a short statement. No further details were disclosed. It was Patrushev's first meeting with Burns since the

senior U.S. official was appointed the director of the CIA. The two men know each other because Burns was a U.S. ambassador to Moscow in 2005–2008. He was an architect of the Russian reset, an attempt by the Obama administration to improve relations between the United States and Russia. In addition, Burns met with Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) chief Sergei



SOURCE: SCRF.GOV.RU

Naryshkin and the two discussed U.S.-Russia cooperation in fighting international terrorism. The meeting took place at the initiative of the American said, according to the Russians. The U.S. delegation flew to Russia at President Biden's request, marking another high-level

U.S.-Russia meeting. Last month, Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland traveled to Moscow. All these talks confirm that the U.S. administration is looking to cooperate with Moscow. ■

8 November 2021

## THE NEXT STEP IN RUSSIA'S INCORPORATION OF BELARUS

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**On Unity Day, a top Russian public holiday, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko signed an agreement providing for a total of 28 integration road maps. In addition, the two leaders approved a joint military doctrine and a common migration policy.**

**W**hen accepting the latter, the Russian and Belarusian leaders agreed on new tasks for the interior and foreign ministries, state security agencies, and border services.

On the same day, Lukashenko and Putin discussed the crisis at Belarus's border with the European Union and NATO. This again confirms that Moscow is taking part in





SOURCE: PRESIDENT.GOV.BY

a hybrid operation targeting Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. The two leaders agreed upon the programs at the Supreme State Council, party via video conference. Initially, Vladimir Putin was poised to come to Minsk to take part in the Union's Supreme State Council, but the Kremlin said the president would participate via a video link amid the fragile epidemic situation. The integration programs were approved at the September 10 meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Union State in Minsk. The union schemes include plans to integrate the two countries' financial, monetary, and credit policies, create common energy markets and industrial policy, unify market competition, harmonize taxation, create a common payment system, communications markets, tax, and customs regulations, sanitary and veterinary inspections, and protect consumer rights. There was no mention of issues surrounding

political integration - a common parliament or a single currency. Lukashenko is striving to maintain an illusion of Belarus as an independent state as long as possible. The Belarusian strongman also said Belarus and Russia were poised to reinforce the regional grouping of the Union State's forces. With a joint military doctrine with Belarus, Russia has absorbed the neighbor's armed forces. Belarus's military potential was indeed incorporated into the Russian strategy. The Belarusian army is weak and under-equipped while Lukashenko has been pumping money into interior forces and security agencies, believing it is crucial to protect his regime rather than the country's borders. This is a task for Russia. The geographical location of Belarus is of strategic importance for Russian military plans in case of a possible war with the North Atlantic Alliance. ■



SOURCE: MEDIA.GAZPROM-NEFT.COM

9 November 2021

# **OPEC+ MEETING REBUFFED CALLS FOR OIL INCREASE MEAN MORE MONEY FOR RUSSIA**

State authorities in Russia are seeking to break the deadlock in relations with the Taliban and gain some influence in Kabul, hence an idea of an international conference in Moscow, attended by new Afghan authorities. So far, the Taliban have reneged on promises to make their government more inclusive, contrary to what Moscow had expected. Russia and China are urging the Taliban to take Afghanistan on a more moderate political course to facilitate international recognition of the new government of the Central Asian country.



OPEC and its allies agreed at a meeting on November 4 to stick to plans to raise oil output by 400,000 barrels per day (bpd). Top OPEC producer Saudi Arabia rejected U.S. pleas to pump more oil. The United States called on the oil-producing coalition to open the taps wider in December to produce between 600,000 and 800,000 bpd. India and Japan also called for higher output. The group agreed in July to boost output by 400,000 bpd a month, allowing oil-rich countries to do so in August. But the cartel halted this in September and October to moderate the price volatility. The so-called OPEC+ group consists of 13 member nations and 10 of their partners, led by Russia. Shortly before the summit took place, energy analysts believed crude prices could be poised to rally toward \$120 a barrel. Russia was represented there by Deputy Prime

Minister Alexander Novak. The Russian official said OPEC+ members considered “the pluses and minuses,” including the seasonal drop in demand in winter and the impact of the Delta variant of Covid-19 on world economies. “There are some signs of decreased oil demand in the European Union in October. Global oil demand is still under pressure from the Delta Covid-19 variant,” Novak said. An actor that takes most of growing oil prices is Russia’s National Welfare Fund; any extra \$5 per barrel means \$10 billion more for the country per year. Clearly, Russia and Saudi Arabia – top OPEC+ countries – pursue a similar policy in this respect. It is unlikely for the oil cartel to make another decision in a month. What might change this is radical U.S. steps, but it seems rather doubtful. The next OPEC+ meeting is scheduled for December 2. ■

## 9 November 2021

# PUTIN’S PROVOCATION IN CRIMEA

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**Russia is whipping up tensions in relations with Ukraine. Perhaps it is incidental that Vladimir Putin’s visit to Crimea coincided with reports of an alleged Russian military buildup at the border with Ukraine. The fact that the Russian leader went to the annexed peninsula to observe Russia’s most important public holiday was also meaningful.**

Russian President Vladimir Putin marked the national Unity Day holiday of November 4 with a trip to Russian-occupied Crimea (since 2014), declaring the region will always be a part of Russia. While in Sevastopol, the Russian leader part in a flower-laying ceremony at a monument dedicated to the end of the Civil War of 1918-1920. Putin exalted

the annexation, praising Crimea’s “return” to Russia and saying the country “has regained its historical unity.” Putin’s speech followed by the flower-laying ceremony fits into the president’s policy that consists in blending elements back from the time when Russia was “white” and “red.” Unity Day of November 4 marks the expulsion in 1612 of Polish forces





SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

that occupied Moscow. The holiday was started by Vladimir Putin several years ago to replace the Soviet-era commemoration on that date of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Making the date that marks the expulsion of Polish forces from the Kremlin to be the top Russian national holiday fits into the country's anti-Western stance. In addition, by brushing aside the Soviet-era tradition, Moscow can follow its eclectic politics of history that juxtaposes incongruous features of tsarist Russia and Soviet Russia. Putin used the Crimea visit for his country's domestic purposes while adding

a new element to an intense anti-Ukrainian campaign he has been waging for two months. The Ukrainian foreign ministry filed a protest note over Putin's trip to the annexed peninsula. "Ukraine considers this step to be a gross violation of Ukraine's sovereignty," the ministry said in a statement. "Ukraine considers this step to be a blatant disrespect by the Russian side for the legislation of Ukraine, international law, the United Nations Charter, the United Nations General Assembly Resolution, and other treaties to which Russia and Ukraine are sides," the November 4 statement said. ■



SOURCE: TWITTER / STRAZ GRANICZNA

9 November 2021

## **CRISIS ON THE BORDER BETWEEN BELARUS AND THE EU. RUSSIA ENTERS THE GAME**

From the beginning, the Russian Federation has supported, and perhaps even inspired, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's hybrid war against neighbouring EU and NATO countries. It has achieved its first goal, namely the escalation of migrant attacks directed by Belarusian services primarily at the border of Poland. Now Moscow is embarking on the next stage of the operation—it will seek to assume the role of mediator between the Lukashenko regime and the EU. This is supposed to bring it, on the one hand, a strengthening of its control over Belarus and, on the other, a strengthening of its position in Europe. There may be a larger plan, encompassing not only Belarus but also other disputed points on the Russia-Western line, with Ukraine at the forefront.



Moscow remained silent for the first months of the crisis on the Belarusian border with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Although, the Russian services had to be involved in this hybrid war with migrants. Russia waited patiently until the situation is so dramatic that it becomes the focus of attention no longer only for Poland, Lithuania and a few other EU countries, but also for Brussels, the US and NATO. On November 4th, Putin and Lukashenko talked about the situation on the border. Shortly afterwards, Belarusian services moved a large (at least 1,000 people) column of migrants to the Polish border crossing point in Kuźnica. The border was stormed, but repulsed by Polish services and the army. This was accompanied by a media campaign by Belarus and Russia to convince the EU that this could be a repeat of 2015. With the atmosphere of danger growing, the day after the attempted assault, on November 9th, the head of the Russian Foreign

Ministry spoke out. Sergei Lavrov compared the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border with the wave of refugees from Turkish territory. The head of Russian diplomacy says that if the EU helped Turkey financially with refugees then, it could do the same in the case of Belarus. In this way Lavrov shows Brussels a way out of the current situation without losing face. The sanctions will remain, but at the same time cashflow from the European Union to Belarus will allow Lukashenko to survive the sanctions. This seems to be only the first such probe of the EU's attitude on Moscow's part. Given that there was also another phone conversation between Putin and Lukashenko about the border crisis on November 9th, and the Kremlin has admitted that it is in constant contact with Minsk (including in the area of secret services), it can be expected that if there are no positive reactions from the EU to Lavrov's first offer, there will be further attacks on the border. ■

## 15 November 2021

# GAZPROM PLAYS FOR TIME, EU HAS MODEST GAS STOCKS

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**It was only on November 9 that Russian energy giant Gazprom started refilling European gas-storage facilities. Nonetheless, the company so far has pumped very small amounts of gas into its European storage facilities that remain mostly empty. As Russian gas is a major part of the EU's total storage capacity, inventories in Europe are facing a tough situation while entering the winter heating season.**

Gazprom has approved and started the implementation of the gas injection plan in five European underground storage facilities, the company said in a statement. The company has its biggest storage facilities in Germany (4), and one each in Austria, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Serbia. Gazprom

started pumping natural gas into European gas storage facilities once it finished filling its own stocks. Naturally, the Russian gas company could have done both simultaneously amid its high production levels but it put off the start of injecting gas into European facilities by a week or two, which affected the European



SOURCE: GAZPROM.COM

energy market that reached record levels. During a meeting on October 27, Putin told Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller to finish filling underground gas storage facilities in Russia by November 8. Nonetheless, the company made this move a day later. On November 12, Miller said his company “was implementing a plan to inject gas into Russia’s sites in Europe.” Nonetheless, no significant gas flow had been recorded, according to data from European storage operators. Furthermore, Gazprom is pumping gas out of its sites in Austria and the Netherlands. The German Rehden storage facility is now being filled at 5 percent while another site, Katharina, is just 20 percent full. The EU’s gas storage sites were just 75 percent, which is 20 percent less than last year. In this manner, Russia is pursuing its game to force the European Union into concessions as Gazprom

continues to fill its facilities and Moscow is extending the whole process to weeks. The purpose is to force Germany and Brussels to give the green light to Nord Stream 2. Russia is able to start gas deliveries via the link immediately after it gets regulatory approval, Vladimir Putin said on October 21. The first of the project’s two lines has been filled with so-called technical gas and the second is to be ready in December. Meanwhile, Moscow is seeking to exert bigger pressure because this is how the European Union should see Lukashenko’s threat to float the possibility of interrupting the Yamal–Europe pipeline that supplies Poland and Germany with Russian gas. Naturally, the Kremlin pretends to be surprised, but there is no doubt that the Belarusian dictator has agreed that with the Russian leader. ■





SOURCE: PRESIDENT.GOV.BY

16 November 2021

## LUKASHENKO BLUFFING ON EU GAS THREAT

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Floated by the Belarusian dictator, the possibility to halt gas transit into Poland and Germany amid fresh EU sanctions is part of the game Minsk and Moscow are playing against a background of the EU-Belarus border crisis. Contrary to what the Kremlin claims, it is hard to believe that Alexander Lukashenko would threaten to retaliate against any new European Union sanctions by shutting down the transit of natural gas via Belarus without the Kremlin's knowledge. It is all the more so that a new component of Lukashenko's aggressive policy towards the EU may fit into the Russian gas strategy.

On November 11, Alexander Lukashenko raised the prospect of cutting gas supplies to the European Union through the Yamal-Europe gas pipeline if Brussels imposes new sanctions against his regime. "This would

be a violation of our transit contract and I hope it will not come to that," Vladimir Putin said two days later. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists a day earlier that Lukashenko had not shared his plan to cut off gas transit

into Europe with the Kremlin. Peter Stano, the EU's lead spokesman for external affairs, said that Lukashenko's effort to halt gas transit through Europe would harm Russia's interest - something the Belarusian strongman would like to avoid. The EU diplomat considered that accepting Lukashenko's threats literally only contributed to the dissemination of the false narrative of the Belarusian dictator. But many see Lukashenko's threat as a "gas bluff." Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya also dismissed Lukashenko's threat, saying to cut gas supplies would cause more damage to him than to the European

Union. But Russia is the key factor here. The Belarusian section of the Yamal-Europe pipeline is operated by Russia. Moscow is sending gas to Belarus while Lukashenko cannot make any move to cut gas or threaten the European Union without Moscow's knowledge. Why is this gas blackmail working out well for Russia? It fits into the Kremlin's strategy to force the European Union into concessions for Nord Stream 2. The European Union is now facing gas shortages amid Gazprom's deliberate strategy while cutting off gas transit through Ukraine could exacerbate the crisis. Lukashenko's threats are actually those from the Kremlin. ■

17 November 2021

## TELEPHONES AND ROCKETS. A NEW 'NORMANDY FORMAT'?

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**Russian diplomacy has successfully dragged Germany and France into talks on the situation on the Belarusian border. Migratory pressure was more and more doomed to failure with each passing day in the face of effective defence of Poland's borders, so the Kremlin is being helped – not for the first time – by Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron.**

Belarusian Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin, in an interview with Al Jazeera TV, assured that "if necessary" Iskander missile systems would be sent to Belarus from Russia. Lukashenko had said this a little earlier, arguing that Iskanders would strengthen the Western border of the Union State of Belarus and Russia and that he was asking Putin for them. This is the latest installment of Minsk's war rhetoric, which is not backed by facts. However, it must be stressed that this is not, as some believes, Lukashenko acting alone and putting pressure on Russia. It is Moscow's part in the military threats and escalation of tension between Belarus and Minsk. On November 12th, Belarusian and Russian airborne troops took

part in exercises near the border with Poland. Earlier, Russia sent long-range bombers over Belarus, and fighter jets as part of "military exercises". Putin's and Lukashenko's objective is clear to intimidate the European Union (which is what Lukashenko did when he threatened to block the transit of Russian gas). What for? Firstly, so that the West starts talking to him, which means the end of his isolation and the de facto legitimisation of his presidential election victory stolen with falsifications in the summer of 2020. The second step will be, as a result of these talks, if not to reduce the existing sanctions, then not to introduce new ones against Belarus. And, perhaps, financial support for 'refugees' in Lukashenko's country,





SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

which would partly compensate the regime for the losses resulting from the current sanctions.

On Tuesday, 16th November, Putin and Lukashenko spoke by phone, including the Belarusian dictator's earlier conversation with Merkel. The telephone conversation between the acting German chancellor and Lukashenko is effectively a recognition of him as the legitimate leader of Belarus. This is something the West has shied away from since the fraudulent presidential elections in the summer of 2020 and the subsequent wave of brutal repression by the regime. Angela Merkel, who is leaving office, has done a great service to Putin by establishing direct contact with Lukashenko and legitimising the illegitimate regime in Belarus. On November 15th, she had a nearly hour-long telephone conversation with the dictator. The telephone conversation

between the presidents of France and Russia lasted even longer, almost two hours, on the same day. They agreed that the migration crisis on the borders with Belarus should be de-escalated.

The sequence of events is as follows: Putin talking to Lukashenko first, then Putin talking to Merkel, then Merkel talking to Lukashenko and Macron talking to Putin. Next will perhaps be a conversation between Macron and Lukashenko. We are seeing the construction of a kind of new Normandy format, that is, a move towards Paris and Berlin discussing certain Eastern European problems with Moscow over the heads of the people in the region. It is true that Ukraine is participating in the Normandy format, but the other three are Russia, Germany and France. Now we may have to deal with an even more dangerous quartet

Russia, Belarus, Germany and France. They will talk over the heads of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Not only about the situation on the border or the problem of migrants in Belarus, but probably also, for example, about Nord Stream 2. It is worth noting that Moscow, which initially directed everyone to direct talks with

Lukashenka, has now changed its line. — Russia could, as an intermediary in negotiations, help to solve the migration crisis on Belarus' borders with the EU, the Kremlin spokesman said on November 15th. Dmitry Peskov, by the way, assessed that Russia is already partly playing the role of an intermediary. ■

19 November 2021

## MACRON, PUTIN DISCUSS BELARUS BORDER TENSIONS

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Russia and France have increased contacts between their top officials. It is not only about a phone conversation between the presidents, but also a two-plus-two meeting in Paris, where French and Russian defense and foreign ministers met.

SOURCE: MID.RU





French President Emmanuel Macron and Russian President Vladimir Putin on November 15 talked on the phone about the need to deescalate the tensions around the migrant pressure on the European Union's border with Belarus. Macron urged Putin to use his influence on Lukashenko to stop using migrants as a weapon against the European Union. He mentioned the need to cooperate with Moscow in this respect. The French leader also referenced the reports about Russian troops amassing near the Ukrainian border. Paris has seemingly no idea how to break the deadlock on Donbas and the Russia-Ukraine conflict as much. It suggested convening a meeting of the decaying Normandy format, which can hardly be considered a good plan. Three days before the two leaders held talks, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Defense Minister Florence Parly met with their Russian counterparts Sergey Lavrov and Sergei

Shoigu. "We view the U.S. aggressive military activity in the Black Sea region as a threat to regional security and strategic stability," the top Russian diplomat said. Lavrov added relations between Moscow and the European Union had reached a dead end and the Russian delegation proposed to look for a way out. Shoigu stressed the importance of working with France to determine steps to deescalate the situation in Europe and prevent military incidents. France urged Moscow to use its influence on Lukashenko to stop using migrants as a weapon against the European Union. In addition, French officials warned Moscow against a new attack on Ukraine. The meeting was part of the two-plus-two formula France initiated a few years ago. The meeting was the first in this format since last year's poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. France canceled a similar meeting in September last year in the aftermath of the attempted killing. ■

24 November 2021

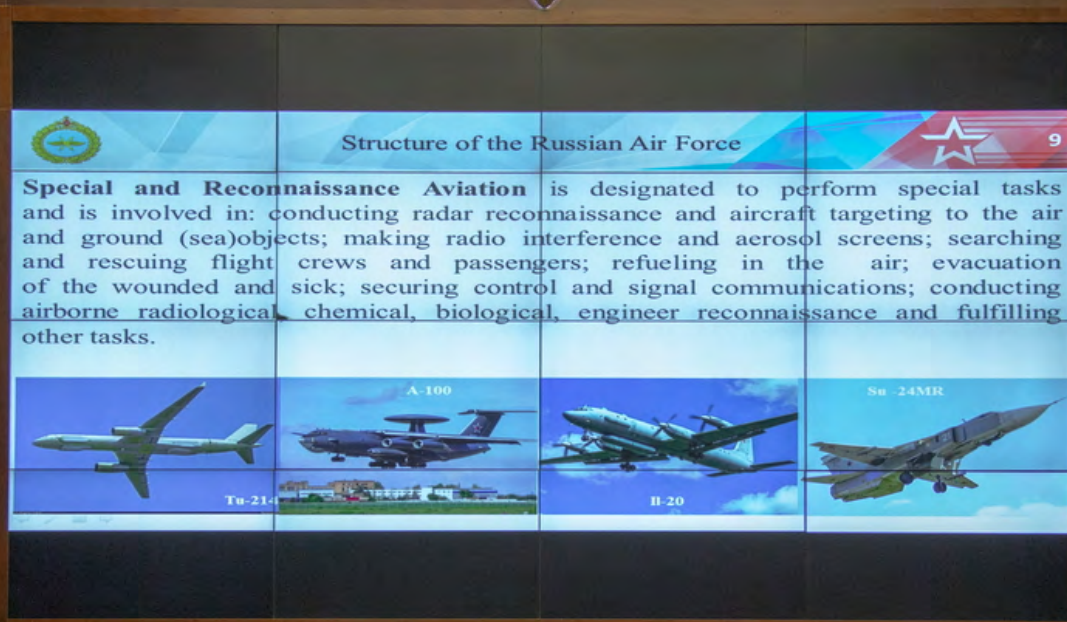
## MOSCOW AND MINSK MILITARIZE MIGRANT CRISIS

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**The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus informed it would revise its 2021–2022 preparedness scheme while Nikolai Patrushev, a top Russian silovik, said Russia and Belarus would jointly respond to all provocations, also military. The reason is the migrant crisis that Moscow and Minsk are blaming the West for, which is yet another sign of ever-growing military ties between the two states.**

The Belarusian Chief of Staff justified updates made to the preparedness strategy of the armed forces with a "complex political and military situation" and the migrant crisis. Chief of the General Staff and

Deputy Defense Minister Viktor Gulevich said drills would include "operational efforts to form troops deployed in multiple directions." Belarus's top military brass accused the country's neighbors, including NATO states



SOURCE: МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

and Ukraine, of aggressive intentions, amid an alleged increase in the number of troops. Gulevich did not refer to the alliance with Russia yet his statement goes in line with an interview of Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, published the same day (November 23). Moscow and Minsk will continue to “respond adequately to all provocations, including military, near the border of the Russia-Belarus Union State, a former FSB chief and Putin’s top aide said in a statement. Using this term was noteworthy, implying Russia and Belarus are one, at least for security issues. This summer, the two countries

established joint training centers while between November 10 and 11, Russia flexed its military muscles in Belarus. First, Russia sent two Tu-22M3 long-range bombers on a patrol while two Tu-160 strategic bombers flew over Belarus and its border, practicing bombing runs at a training ground in Belarus. On November 12, Russian and Belarusian paratroopers took part in joint military exercising near the border with Poland. Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin said in a statement that Belarus would deploy Russian missile systems Iskander “if necessary.” ■





SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

29 November 2021

## **PUTIN RECEIVES ARMENIAN AND AZERI LEADERS FOR TALKS**

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The optimistic moods that the leaders of Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan showed at a meeting in Sochi cannot dispel doubts about future peace in the South Caucasus. Russian President Vladimir Putin recalled Russia's role as a mediator, but he could curb military tensions in the region for some time only. Moscow has no idea how to solve the problem it provoked last year while brokering a peace agreement for Azerbaijan and Armenia. Perhaps that is what it is about - make Moscow mediate in a conflict that will continue to destabilize the region for years to come. This is why Russia is not willing about permanent peacemaking solutions to foster cooperation between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

On November 26, Vladimir Putin brought together Armenia's Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijan's Ilham Aliyev for talks in Sochi, urging both to ease tensions and resolve disputes left over from last year's war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Recent weeks saw a set of incidents that were a threat to the peace deal ending the six-week Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. The war ended with a Russia-brokered peace deal that saw Azerbaijan gain control of a significant part of Nagorno-Karabakh and reclaim all the regions controlled by Armenian forces outside the separatist region. Russia has deployed nearly 2,000 peacekeepers to monitor the peace deal. After the Sochi meeting, Putin said that the three leaders agreed to create mechanisms for delimitation and demarcation of the border between the two countries before the end of the year. Russia is a mediator with the blessing from both sides. A three-way communique said Aliyev and Pashinyan had agreed to "work towards increased stability and security on the border." Putin said the two leaders as well as Russian deputy prime ministers were soon meeting

in Moscow to conclude the Sochi summit and coordinate further action. "I repeatedly said that we in Azerbaijan are ready to turn the page after many years of confrontation with Armenia and start the stage of normal interaction," Aliyev was quoted as saying after the November 26 talks. "It was a very positive meeting," Pashinyan added. However, the Sochi summit is not enough to address most of the Caucasus' major challenges. One thing is to develop a deal formally delimiting and demarcating the borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and another on opening up new transportation routes between the two countries, most notably a route through Armenia connecting Azerbaijan's mainland with its exclave of Nakhchivan. A tense dispute is over the second route, also known as the Zangezur corridor, whose opening would shift the situation in the region, linking Turkey to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Not only Armenia is trying to prevent it, but also Iran. In addition come Moscow's ties with Turkey that have decayed dramatically. ■

29 November 2021

## **RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC GAME TOWARDS THE TALIBAN IS FALLING APART**

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**Moscow is making it clear it was not satisfied with the latest decision by the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Russia is seeking to exert further pressure on the authorities in Kabul to milder its stance. The Taliban's overly radical approach is barring Moscow and Beijing from making the new Afghani government an internationally recognized actor.**





SOURCE: TWITTER / SMQURESHIPTI

On November 15, Russian Special Presidential Representative Zamir Kabulov met with U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West in Moscow. The meeting was West's first trip to the region since taking over from Zalmay Khalilzad in October, for whom he was deputy. After the meeting, Kabulov said they discussed "all the issues in Afghanistan." The Russian diplomat added the Taliban are trying to deliver on their promises, but too slowly. Four days before, Pakistan hosted China, Russia, and the United States for talks on Afghanistan. at the same time as a Taliban delegation led by Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. Pakistan's foreign minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, promised to involve the Taliban officially in future regional meetings. "God willing, we will invite them in the next meeting in Beijing so that their concerns should be shared with the world, and they should know what the world community expects from them in return," Qureshi told journalists. In a joint statement after the meeting, the four countries of the Troika Plus format pressed the Taliban to provide access to education for women and girls of all ages. Since their takeover on

August 15, the Taliban have effectively banned girls from secondary education in Afghanistan. In its statement, the countries of the Troika Plus urged the Taliban to ensure unhindered humanitarian access to the nation. The UN said in a report that more than 22 million people in Afghanistan will face acute food insecurity this winter. The U.S. has frozen nearly \$10 billion in assets belonging to the Afghan central bank and stopped shipments of cash to the nation until the Taliban fulfill their commitments to the international community. The Troika Plus is a Moscow-made platform that includes Russia, the USA, China, Pakistan, and Iran. However, Iran has been reluctant to attend meetings that put its officials face to face with U.S. officials. The November 11 summit in Islamabad was the fourth meeting since the Taliban seized power in the country. The previous ones took place in Moscow, Tehran, and New Delhi. Absent at the meeting were diplomats from China and Pakistan. Their absence amid poor bilateral ties and Iran's reluctance to attend the Islamabad meeting is a signal that it is unrealistic to work out a common stance on Afghanistan. ■





SOURCE: GAZPROM.RU

29 November 2021

## A NEW “GREEN” SOLUTION FOR NORD STREAM 2

**As Germany suspended the certification procedure for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline while the country’s new government is taking shape with the Green Party, Russia proposes hydrogen production to convince Berlin to give its green light to the contentious gas link. What might confirm that is the latest statement from the chief of the Russian trade bureau in Germany.**

**A**ndrei Sobolev, a Russian embassy officer in Berlin, said Gazprom and the German state Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, headed by a pro-Russian SPD prime minister, are pondering constructing a hydrogen production plant near Lubmin. The facility would convert gas flowing through Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 into hydrogen. The head of the economic bureau of the Russian embassy

in Berlin said another Russian energy giant, Novatek, had signed a hydrogen deal with Germany’s Uniper SE. Under the document, the two firms agreed to jointly develop the production, transport, and supply of hydrogen. Alexander Ishkov, head of Gazprom’s energy efficiency and environmental department, said the company sought to develop hydrogen options through a specialized subsidiary,



Gazprom Hydrogen. The company is planning to construct a large methane pyrolysis plant where its Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 make landfall in Germany. Through such pursuits, Russia is seeking to convince German officials that Nord Stream 2 could serve its purpose for the EU's green energy policy. Critics of Nord Stream 2 say the link will increase gas

flows into Europe, in contrast to the bloc's decarbonization efforts. Russia is now lobbying for its gas pipeline, saying its hydrogen potential could help implement the EU's green agenda. In addition, using Nord Stream 2 to promote hydrogen energy is in line with the Russian hydrogen strategy that envisages the export of Russia-produced resources. ■

29 November 2021

## **RUSSIA WINS NEW ALLY, PROMISING CHEAP GAS**

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**Russia uses gas supplies as a tool for pursuing its international policy. By offering cheaper energy, Moscow is expecting its customers to remain political friends, as was the case of Hungary, and now Serbia. The Kremlin is trying to lure other countries, including Moldova and Bulgaria.**

SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU



Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said on November 25 after a meeting with Vladimir Putin they had agreed on the price of gas for Serbia. The country will continue to pay \$270 per 1,000 cubic meters of natural gas for the next six months. The Russia-Serbia gas deal is set to expire later this year. Vucic explained that Belgrade could not hold the first price proposal, which stood at \$780–790 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas. It was just an introduction to further negotiations. Belgrade will buy cheaper gas for some political concessions. What does Moscow expect from Serbia? A hint might be that while in Sochi, the leaders of Russia and Serbia discussed military cooperation. “We regularly hold joint drills, develop interaction along the lines of power structures, defense ministries, general staff,” the Russian head of state said. The representatives of Serbia’s

military are being trained at Russian universities. Russia signed some deals to deliver pieces of military equipment to Serbia. In exchange for friendly gas prices, the Kremlin might have asked Serbia to tighten military cooperation. Thus, Serbia will continue to sail away from its prospective NATO membership. Even if a pro-Western party won democratic elections in Serbia, it would find it difficult to get out of a network of Serbia-Russia interdependency. Vucic is seeking to conclude the 10-year deal with Russia’s Gazprom as soon as possible. The six-month scheme indicates that Moscow is keen on a more comprehensible set of concessions from Belgrade. They could both refer to security and the country’s pursuits to become closer to the European Union before officially joining it. ■

## 30 November 2021

# RUSSIAN OIL OUTPUT IS GROWING

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**Russia raised its oil output by 0.3 percent in November, marking another growth this year. Since early January, Russia saw its total output of some 8.3 percent. Russian oil and gas condensate output rose to 1.485 million barrels per day (bpd) in November 2021. The country is expected to see growth in the months that come amid unlocked output curbs as stipulated in a deal Russia committed itself to within the oil-producing cartel and its allies (OPEC+).**

In recent years Moscow has introduced regulations aimed at deepening curbs in domestic oil production amid the OPEC+ agreement. However, starting from January this year, it was given the right to boost output within a gradual easing of restrictions. For example, the agreements enabled Russia to increase crude production by 125,000 bpd

in January, and by another 130,000 bpd in February, and 38,000 bpd in May and July. In August and November, Russia raised its output by 100,000 bpd each month, sticking to the same levels in December 2021. Since January, Russia has increased oil production by some 8.3 percent, when its average output was 1.371 million tons each year. Under the OPEC+





SOURCE: MEDIA.GAZPROM.RU

deal, Russia would produce no more than 9.8 million bpd of oil in October and fewer than 9.913 million bpd in November, excluding gas condensate.

Russia's oil and gas condensate production stood at 10.89 million bpd in November while it averaged 10.05 million bpd in December 2020. The country produces 800,000–850,000 bpd of gas condensate each month. How does oil output growth affect export figures? In November, Transneft, a Russian pipeline

transport company, curbed oil shipments through ports by 10 percent, to 10 million tons, compared to October, while handling more petroleum products, showing a 21 percent growth, to 1.8 million tons. In November, the port of Novorossiysk handled 1.38 million tons of oil, the port of Primorsk – 3.6 million, while those in Ust-Luga and Kozmino – 1.99 million and 3.04 million tons, respectively. In November, the facility in Novorossiysk shipped 348,000 tons of crude products while that in Primorsk – 1.425 million. ■



SOURCE: FSIN.GOV.RU

30 November 2021

## **PUTIN FIRES RUSSIAN PRISONS CHIEF AFTER TORTURE SCANDAL**

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President Vladimir Putin has fired the head of Russia's prison system, Alexander Kalashnikov, replacing him with Deputy Interior Minister Arkady Gostev (since 2012) as head of Russia's Federal Prison Service (FSIN). The high-profile sacking of Kalashnikov followed the firing of prison officers involved in the case. The latest personnel reshuffle came in the aftermath of leaked videos showing rape and torture in Russian prisons.



The Russian leader appointed a new chief of the prison system on November 25. Kalashnikov was in charge of the Federal Penitentiary Service since October 2019. He used to work as a senior FSB officer in the Komi Republic and then in Krasnoyarsk Krai. Kalashnikov has also been subjected to Western sanctions over the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. The reason for Kalashnikov's dismissal was not specified, but it came after dozens of videos of torture from inside prisons, notably in the city of Saratov, were published recently by Russian human rights group Gulagu.net. Its members announced they had received disturbing footage and pictures showing rape and torture inside a prison hospital, perpetrated on the order of FSB and FSIN officers. The videos were smuggled out of the prison by a former inmate, Belarusian IT engineer, who has fled Russia and asked for asylum in France. Several investigations were opened while the head of the Saratov branch of

FSIN, Alexei Fedotov, was being removed from his position. Earlier this month, FSIN said it had dismissed 18 officials in the Saratov region. Russian prisons and penal colonies are a vital part of a regime created by Vladimir Putin and former KGB officers. Abuses and restrained information access in the prison system are purported to make Russians obedient to law enforcement agencies. Russia's huge prison network has long been known as a place of torture and sexual violence inflicted on inmates, according to human rights groups. Nonetheless, complaints are rare to be examined while criminal proceedings are rarely initiated. The situation is so dramatic that Russian prisons have seen massive revolts involving hundreds of inmates, the first such since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The protests in Angarsk (April 2020), Khabarovsk Krai (September 2021), and Vladikavkaz (October 2021) prompted state authorities to send spetsnaz to suppress riots. Some inmates were killed or wounded. ■

## 30 November 2021

# MOLDOVA SETTLES DEBT FOR GAS TO RUSSIA

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**Moldovagaz, a Moldovan utility company, has paid for Russian natural gas it received in the last month and a half. The move came shortly before the deadline from Russia and just after Moldovan lawmakers voted amendments to settle the debt for recent deliveries.**

On November 22, Moldovagaz received a notification from Gazprom threatening to cut off gas supplies to the country within 48 hours unless the country settles its debt. Moldovagaz, a Russian-controlled gas firm, informed it was waiting for \$74 million from the government while the latter said it would

be unable to provide money as it was within the parliament's competence to issue a decision. Gazprom spokesman Sergei Kupriyanov said on November 24 in a statement that the company has shown "good will and understanding of the situation," adding it would not halt gas flows for Moldova. The country promised to settle



SOURCE: MOLDOVAGAZ.MD

its old debt by the end of the week. Moldova's parliament on November 25 approved budget amendments that will allow the national energy company to pay energy dues to the Russian energy giant. Some 1.4 billion Moldovan lei (\$79 million) was allocated to Moldovagazto pay the Gazprom debt. On November 26, Gazprom confirmed it had received the money from Moldova for gas the country had been delivered in October and the first half of November. Moldova will receive around 3 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas per year under a new gas deal it signed with Russia in late October. In November, the price of Russian gas is \$450 per

1,000 cubic meters. In line with the previous contract Moldova paid around \$250 per 1,000 cubic meters. The two sides concluded the agreement after the gas crisis swept Moldova. As the previous gas contract expired at the end of September, Moldova declared a state of emergency amid gas shortages. Gazprom agreed to extend the deal for a month, until October, while raising prices. A new contract was inked but the pro-Western government in Moldova agreed to pay less in exchange for some solutions hampering the country's energy integration with the European Union. ■





SOURCE: GAZPROM.RU

30 November 2021

## GAZPROM REPORTS RECORD RESULTS ON SURGING GAS PRICES

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Eye-watering gas prices are equivalent to a massive increase in profits for gas companies, including Gazprom, which accounts for a third of all gas imports into Europe. The tense situation in the energy market is profitable for the company and the Russian state authorities in general. In fact, Gazprom's bigger profits mean more money to the Russian federal budget.

Russia's Gazprom on November 29 reported a record quarterly net profit of 582 billion roubles (\$7.8 billion) for the third quarter reflecting high natural gas prices. European

nations receive a third of their gas commodities from Russia. In addition, they saw record surges in energy prices following the economic recovery from pandemic-related lockdowns.

Gazprom Deputy Chief Executive Famil Sadygov said in a statement that the company's record-high profits were tied to a gas crisis in Europe, hoping for higher results in the fourth quarter of 2021. "Obviously, the price of our supplies to Europe will be significantly higher in the fourth quarter, which will have a positive impact on the full-year results," Gazprom said in a statement. The giant is cashing record-high revenues despite the curb in gas supplies into Europe, which has contributed to a surge

in prices. Russia is deliberately restricting gas supplies and is in no rush to fill its European storage facilities to speed up the launch of Nord Stream 2. That is not the only purpose of the Russian strategy. Moscow is seeking to force the European Union into some special conditions for Gazprom's supplies to Europe by curbing the effect of the third energy package on Russian energy projects. This means long-term contracts with Gazprom. ■

30 November 2021

## **RUSSIAN ANTI-SATELLITE MISSILE TEST CAUSES U.S. CONCERN**

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**Russia is developing air defense systems in space, which does not violate its arms control treaties with the United States. The country is enhancing its strategy for taking down U.S. satellites in the event of a conflict, believing this would curb America's military advantage in this respect.**

Russia conducted a direct-ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) test on November 15 to destroy its Soviet-era defunct satellite, Cosmos 1408, that has been in orbit since the 1980s. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on November 16 said the weapons test had targeted an old satellite with "razor-sharp precision." "The debris it produced did not create any threat and does not pose any obstacles or difficulties to the functioning of orbital stations and spacecraft, or to other space activities," Shoigu said, adding 1,500 traceable pieces of debris would not endanger space operations of the International Space

Station. The U.S. administration has condemned the Russian anti-satellite test. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he condemned "Russia's reckless test of a direct-ascent anti-satellite missile against its satellite, and the interests of all nations." It was for more than ten years that Russia has sought to develop a space defense system capable of intercepting space missiles. The country's weapon, formerly known as Nudol, has undergone tests recently. Russia sees its direct-ascent anti-satellite missiles as a vital element of its military rivalry with Washington. By deploying a large number of dual-use ground-based interceptors for





SOURCE: STRUCTURE.MIL.RU

anti-missile and anti-satellite defense systems, Moscow could argue it was not dispatching any weapons into space while still being able to take down major U.S. satellites. By doing so, Russia could cripple or damage U.S. real-time intelligence gathering capacity, GPS navigation,

communications, or network, by destroying guided weapons, cruise missiles, or unmanned aerial vehicles. This move could help Russia bridge the tech gap with the United States and dramatically shift the balance of power between the two sides. ■



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