

# RUSSIA MONITOR

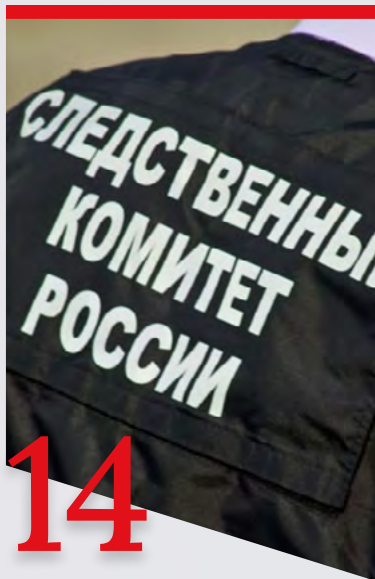
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April 2022



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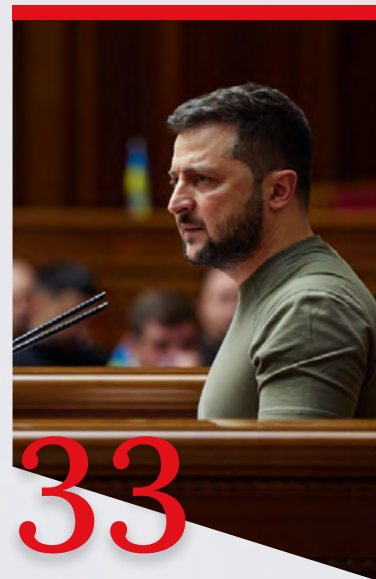
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SOURCE:KREMLIN.RU

7 April 2022

## “BLACK TUESDAY” FOR RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE AS EUROPEAN COUNTRIES EXPEL MORE RUSSIAN “DIPLOMATS”

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It was just on April 5 that Western countries ejected a total of 150 Russian diplomatic staff members. Recent days saw the mass expulsion of Russian “diplomats”—most of whom are intelligence officers—from Western states after Russian war crimes had been revealed in Bucha, Ukraine. Other European nations began to expel Russian operatives just after the war broke out. Since February 24, around 400 Russian diplomats have been asked to leave their postings. And more expulsions will follow.

**O**n April 6, Greece also announced that 12 members of the Russian diplomatic and consular missions were now personae non gratae for their actions incompatible with

diplomatic status. Three Russian diplomats accused of conducting the like activities have been expelled by Norway on the same day. The day before, Romania later said it would expel

10 Russian diplomats, also citing actions that “contravene the diplomatic status.” Estonia announced that it would shut two Russian consular outposts in the cities of Narva and Tartu and would expel 14 staff members, among them seven diplomats. Latvian authorities made a decision to kick out 13 Russian diplomats and to shut down Russian consulates general in Daugavpils and Liepaja. On April 5, Sweden said it would eject three Russian diplomats for spying. Earlier Sweden’s intelligence service SAPO said that one-third of Russian diplomats were in fact spies. Italy declared 30 Russian officials *personae non gratae*, while Spain said it planned to expel 25. Still that same day, Joseph Borrell, the EU’s chief diplomat, announced in a news release that 19 members of Russia’s Permanent Mission to the EU were asked to leave in connection with activities that are contrary to their diplomatic status. Portugal required Russia to reduce its embassy staff in Lisbon by 10 amid their “engaging in espionage activities that are adverse to national security.” On Tuesday, April 5, Slovenia kicked out 33 of them. Denmark raised the tally by another

fifteen. On Monday, April 4, Lithuania said that it downgraded the country’s diplomatic relations with Russia and ordered Russia’s ambassador to leave Vilnius. The Baltic nation also closed the Russian consulate in Klaipeda. France ejected 35 staff members, while Germany and Ireland—40 and four, respectively. Since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, Western countries expelled a total of more than 400 Russian diplomats and staff members. Poland expelled 45 Russians with diplomatic status accused of spying, which was the most of all Western states. Several consulates were closed while SVR, GU, and FSB residencies are now short of personnel. Such moves deliver a blow to Russian officers in European countries. This is now particularly important as amid escalating tensions with the West and the war in Ukraine, Russian “diplomats” were involved in both gathering intelligence and recruiting new sources while seeking to create groups tasked with staging provocation and acts of terror. They pose a direct threat to Ukrainian refugees in European countries and carry out disinformation campaigns. ■

8 April 2022

## PUTIN’S APPETITE FOR RAPID SUCCESS: IF NOT DONBAS, THEN MARIUPOL

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**Russian forces are slowly regrouping to double down on their attacks in Ukraine’s Donbas despite heavy losses they had sustained in the country’s north and some personnel shortages. But these issues are unlikely to make Moscow scrap its plan to attack southeastern Ukraine. Faced with a total failure, Russia can only make an effort to seize a portion of Ukrainian territory and then give its go-ahead for ceasefire and talks before the conflict is frozen.**



SOURCE:МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ/MULTIMEDIA/PHOTO/GALLERY

The Kremlin's failed plan to disband the Ukrainian military, remove Ukrainian authorities from power and impose its conditions made Russian officials rethink their initial strategy. Withdrawing troops from Ukraine's north and northeast (Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy) means that Russia's top military brass is unable to mass enough forces to start an offensive to break the Ukrainian military group in southeastern Ukraine--the strongest in the whole war theater. It is clear where Russia is going to strike next. Russian forces are likely to advance nearby the town of Iziium southwest, towards Sloviansk, and from the south through Volnovakha towards Sloviansk. The third means Russian forces advancing northwards in the Luhansk region. Once successful, Russian forces could seize whole Donbas region of Ukraine and a chunk of the Kharkiv region while cutting off the major Ukrainian troops. But this is unlikely to happen as Russia would not surprise anyone with such a move. Much has been said about that while Russian forces took more time to regroup than initially expected. Ukrainians could therefore brace themselves for a possible

assault. It is doubtful whether Russia is capable of concentrating enough troops for that. One obstacle is heroic resistance in Mariupol. But Russia will continue to seize the southern city for many days to come. This is damaging to morale and prevents forces from launching an attack northwards. Perhaps Moscow will deploy chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons to break resistance in Mariupol. Civilians, who are still trapped in the city, now remain hostages. The Kremlin's minimum goal is to capture Mariupol--the goal that must be accomplished before May 9. In general, Russians are seeking to tighten their grip on a strip of land stretching between Kherson and the mouth of the Dnipro river in the southwest and whole Donbas and southern lands of the Kharkiv region, through the southern chunk of the Zaporizhia region that borders the Sea of Azov. As Russian forces struggle to occupy Donbas, they are also unlikely to seize Kharkiv. Having achieved its goals, Moscow will possibly agree to sign a ceasefire deal to consolidate control of some Ukrainian regions and mass new forces to resume military operations. ■



SOURCE:KREMLIN.RU

11 April 2022

## **”BESIEGED FORTRESS:” POLLS SHOW RUSSIANS SUPPORT PUTIN AND WAR IN UKRAINE**

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Western sanctions that followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine did not compromise Vladimir Putin’s popularity rating. Although the Russian population is not in the same euphoric mood as after Crimea was annexed in 2014, these two events share some features. Polling agency results have pointed to a surge of support for Putin, including what he referred to as a “special military operation” in Ukraine. But among some Western experts, the poll shows a Russian fear of speaking frankly and honestly to pollsters, even those run independently. Russian researchers—also those very critical of Putin’s actions—say that the uptick in the president’s popularity is what could be labeled a defense strategy to an alleged attack from the outside, which is the Kremlin’s official narrative.

**A** Levada Center survey showed in late March that Putin's popularity ratings were soaring. Eighty-three percent of Russians said they approved of Putin's actions, up from 71 percent in February. The results showed that when Russians were directly asked the question "Do you support the war?" 68 percent said they did. Importantly, the poll overlaps with those from state-controlled polling agencies. And Levada is not a state-run pollster. In 2016, the leading Russian independent polling agency was labeled a "foreign agent." The dynamics of people's moods is gauged by a number of factors. Most Russians appear to be getting an incomplete picture of the war in Ukraine. Russian media outlets conceal the full truth while depicting the Russian withdrawal from Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy as a goodwill gesture and Moscow's being ready for ceasefire talks.

An average Russian will never know how many Russian soldiers have been killed and how many pieces of military equipment have been destroyed. Russia's most recent official tally is ten times lower than the actual one. Some Western academics and political scientists wonder how authentic the Levada poll was. In a nutshell, Russian respondents tend to be hiding their true feelings on political questions--in particular if those are not in line with the regime's narrative. According to Levada Center, about half of Russians support Putin more or less unconditionally, and about one-third have some doubts. Sometimes respondents say that they do not like what is happening, but they should be patriotic in such situations--also when Russia is under an alleged armed or economic attack. ■

12 April 2022

## **RUSSIA IS SEEKING TO ENCIRCLE UKRAINE'S DONBAS**

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**Ukraine, the United States, and NATO say that Russia is nearing a significant new offensive in the eastern Donbas region. Russia regrouped troops that failed to seize Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Sumy, or Kyiv--the country's capital. Now it shifts its offensive east to cut off Ukrainian forces in Donbas. In addition to capturing the whole regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, Russians are seeking to break Ukrainian morale. Ukrainian forces stationed in the Donbas are the best trained and equipped units.**

**R**ussia is planning to dispatch to Donbas twice as many troops as Ukraine. Between 70,000 and 90,000 Russian soldiers will advance towards 40,000-50,000 Ukrainians. But the aggressor may not unlock its full battle potential. About 20,000 Russian soldiers are expected to advance Ukrainian positions. Russian troops will hold an advantage in

the air while most fighting will take place in rural areas, far from urban centers. One exception is fortified cities in the Luhansk region (Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, Popasna, and Rubizhne) and the two more cities in the Donetsk region--Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. If Russians are planning to encircle Ukrainian forces--as the latter fight in the Kyiv-controlled



SOURCE:МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

northern part of the Luhansk region--it will be crucial for them to advance from the northern town Iziium southwards to capture Sloviansk and Kramatorsk. The two cities are key for Ukrainian defense forces in Kyiv-held Donbas. But what could make the whole operation successful is military reinforcements from the south--the city of Popasna and the Azov Sea port of Mariupol. But Russian troops are not yet ready to advance there as Ukrainian forces in Mariupol have blocked at least 10,000 Russian personnel--albeit for a short time. Mariupol

is important to Russian forces--for a couple of reasons. In 2014, the city withstood brief occupation by pro-Russian forces. In addition, Moscow needs a stable and safe land corridor from Crimea to the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don. Furthermore, Russia is seeking to effectively seize the Sea of Azov. Last but not least, after a failed capture of Mariupol, Russia could not take control of the whole Donbas and advance towards Zaporizhia and the Dnieper--if not now, possibly in the summer. ■





SOURCE:KREMLIN.RU

19 April 2022

## UKRAINE'S SBU DETAINS PUTIN ALLY VIKTOR MEDVEDCHUK

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Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk has for years been the number one figure in the pro-Russian political wing in Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities had already charged Medvedchuk with treason last year and placed him under house arrest. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the mogul escaped but was detained by Ukrainian counterintelligence officers. He must know a lot about Russian plans of a military invasion of Ukraine. But will he be willing to cooperate? One is certain: by capturing Medvedchuk, Ukrainian operatives dealt a blow to Russia, Putin, and the FSB.

In May 2021 he was charged with “high treason” over accusations of attempting to steal assets from Russia-annexed Crimea. He was later again charged with treason and illegal coal supplies from separatists republics in Donbas. Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, the mogul escaped from his house arrest. Ukraine’s security services on April said they had arrested the fugitive oligarch. Wearing camouflage fatigues with a Ukrainian flag patch, the pro-Russian tycoon was trying to cross the border with Moldova’s breakaway region of Transnistria. Medvedchuk was captured by Ukraine’s security services while trying to flee the country after escaping house arrest. His safe house was reportedly near the capital city of Kyiv. He was accompanied by what appeared to be real Ukrainian law enforcement officers. Ukrainian authorities said the court had seized 154 assets belonging to Medvedchuk and his wife, Oksana Marchenko. They include houses, apartments, plots of land, and a yacht. Authorities said they also identified and seized shares of capital in 25 companies owned by either Medvedchuk or his wife, Oksana Marchenko. Medvedchuk was a leader of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform – For Life party, which was banned following the invasion. The Ukrainian politician is a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has been the godfather of Medvedchuk’s youngest daughter since 2004. The godmother is Dmitry Medvedev’s wife. In addition to being Putin’s close ally, Medvedchuk owns millions of dollars worth of assets. He was a media and energy

tycoon. In a presidential order announced in February 2021, Volodymyr Zelensky imposed sanctions on channels 112, NewsOne, and ZIK. Medvedchuk is a long-serving politician with some murky Soviet past. Medvedchuk also had notoriety in Ukraine for his role as the Soviet state-appointed defense attorney for the Ukrainian dissident poet Vasyl Stus, who died in a Soviet labor camp five years later. From 2002 until 2005, Medvedchuk served as head of President Leonid Kuchma’s presidential administration. He was considered a “grey eminence” at that time. After the Orange Revolution, Medvedchuk continued to operate from the shadows during the turbulence rocking his homeland. Eventually, he bounced back to the center of the political stage in 2014 after Petro Poroshenko came to power. Back then, his companies won a 40 percent share in the Ukrainian LPG market and control of the major pipeline carrying diesel flows from Russia to Ukraine. Former president Petro Poroshenko made Medvedchuk chief negotiator with representatives of Russia-controlled members of militarized groups in the Donbas during a round of peace talks in Minsk. He was relieved from this post by Volodymyr Zelensky. Medvedchuk’s Opposition Platform – For Life score well in the latest general election and became the second-biggest party in the Ukrainian parliament. His party won most of the voters and politicians from the former Party of Regions. In 2021, Medvedchuk’s party challenged Zelensky’s Servant of the People party in polls. ■



SOURCE:МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

19 April 2022

## **RUSSIA'S OFFENSIVE ON DONBAS HAS BEGUN**

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**The Russian military command launched an operation in Ukraine's Donbas while not waiting for the fall of Mariupol. The aggressor's top mission is to smash the best-equipped Ukrainian units and seize at least the whole Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which would be what the Kremlin meant while recognizing the so-called "people's republics" in Donbas.**

Russian forces have started the battle for Donbas, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in a video address late on April 18. The Ukrainian president said the aggressor was mounting a more rational assault than before. Russian forces are looking for the weakest

spots of the Ukrainian military to hit them fully. Since the morning of April 18, Russian troops have started "an attempt" to break through Ukrainian positions around Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv. Russia is mounting the biggest attack from the town of Iziurm towards

Sloviansk. “The second phase of the war has begun,” the Ukrainian president’s chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, wrote earlier. What might hint at the beginning of the Russian offensive is more air raids in many spots around Ukraine. Fighting has intensified in Kyiv and Chernihiv. Russian rockets smashed into the western Ukrainian city of Lviv and the Zaporizhia and Dnipro regions. Russian forces have intensified air strikes by 50 percent in recent days. Several Ukrainian units are still fighting the Russians in Mariupol, including the Marine Brigade and the Azov Regiment. Their holdout is at the city’s

Azovstal steel plant. Ukraine’s fierce resistance in the biggest Kyiv-controlled city in Donbas past 2014 stalls several thousand Russian soldiers that cannot join the main offensive in the north of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Although the Ukrainian president and the military say Russia has started an offensive in Donbas, it now seems far from the main strike. Russia has not massed its second-round troops from Crimea and the Rostov region that borders Donbas. They will not be ready until next week, according to Ukrainian’s general staff. ■

20 April 2022

## UKRAINE–RUSSIA WAR: UKRAINE IS KILLING MORE RUSSIAN GENERALS

**The Russian military is reluctant to start an offensive in Donbas because its senior officers are aware of the heavy losses they might suffer, according to the head of the Ukrainian military intelligence agency. Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is featured with an unexpected death tally of senior Russian military personnel, including dozens of colonels, hundreds of junior officers, and eight generals--of whom three commanders.**

A funeral for Major General Vladimir Frolov, deputy commander of the 8th Army, was held on April 16 in St. Petersburg. This makes him the eighth Russian general killed in Moscow’s invasion on February 24. The seven Russian generals believed to have been killed include Maj. Gen. Andrey Sukhovetsky, deputy army commander of the 41st Combined Arms Army, Maj. Gen. Vitaly Gerasimov, chief of staff of the 41st Combined Arms Army, Andrey Kolesnikov, of the 29th Combined Arms Army,

Andrey Mordvichev, leading the 8th Army, Maj. Gen. Magomed Tushayev, commander of the 141st Motorized Regiment of the Chechen Rosguard, Maj. Gen. Oleg Mityaev, commander of the 150th Motorized Rifle Division, and Yakov Rezantsev, general of Russia’s 49th Combined Arms Army. Russia has only confirmed the death of Major General Andrei Sukhovetsky and Major General Vladimir Frolov. But the official Russian tally shows many dead generals in Ukraine. Every fifth of the confirmed Russian



SOURCE:KREMLIN.RU

soldiers killed in the war in Ukraine was an officer, according to BBC Russian Service. The BBC came to this conclusion after analyzing official data on Russia's losses as of April 6 and messages with specific information about the deceased and their places of burial. 217 of the 1,083 identified dead are officers. Now on the lists of losses are 10 colonels, 20 lieutenant colonels, and 31 majors. A comparable proportion this month (19.6 percent) mirrored that of last month (20 percent). Despite a shift in the Russian strategy--which is to withdraw from Ukraine's north and northeast where Russian forces suffered the heaviest losses--there are still more high-ranking officers that are killed in battle. Why do so many generals die in Ukraine? One reason could be the poor morale among Russian forces that push

commanders closer to the front line. Another one could be a poor level of command among low and middle-ranking officers. In the Russian army junior officers refrain from taking any major decision without prior consent from higher-ranking personnel and thus are unable to decide freely on the battlefield when every second matters. The third issue might be that Russian forces are unable to shield their senior personnel near the front while Ukrainian snipers and saboteurs infiltrate the rear. The Russian campaign--mostly in the north and northeast of Ukraine--outstretched its convoy and supply lines. There was no coherent line between the two armies. Ukrainian forces let Russian armored forces and infantry into the territory to attack supply lines and damage command posts behind. ■



SOURCE:SLEDCOM.RU

24 April 2022

## WAVE OF MYSTERY SUICIDES OF RUSSIAN GAZPROM EXECUTIVES

**Four recent suicides of high-profile Russian gas industry executives seem somewhat suspicious. One case is believed to have been what is known as an extended suicide. Gazprom's security agency is investigating into all deaths. At least two of the executives knew a lot about the company's financial flow.**

**O**n April 18, the lifeless bodies of Vladimir Avayev, 51, his wife, and younger daughter, 13, were found in their Moscow apartment. According to the investigators, Avayev first killed his wife and daughter, and then himself.

Avayev reportedly became jealous that his wife became pregnant by his driver. Some people who contacted the former executive shortly before his death said he had been in a good mood and nothing looked like he would

shoot his family. The door of the apartment was locked from the inside, no traces of other persons being there during the shooting were found, according to the 22-year-old daughter of Avayev who found her family dead. Avayev was a former vice-president of Gazprombank. He ran a business, including in Kaliningrad, and cooperated with Russia's megacorp Rostech. It is a high-profile case for the Russian authorities. A group of investigators, including the head of Moscow's Investigative Committee, Andrey Strizhov, arrived at the crime scene. Earlier, the bodies of two other senior officials at Gazprom were found in a luxurious real estate compound of Leninskoye near St. Petersburg. At the end of January of this year, the head of the Gazprom Invest transport service, Leonid Shulman, was found dead in the bathroom

of his house. Next to Shulman was a note in which he complained of pain in his broken leg. He was found with wound stabs on his wrists. Last autumn, Gazprom's security units probed into Shulman's alleged fraud while upgrading the company's vehicle fleet. On February 25, 61-year-old Gazprom former deputy Alexander Tyulyakov was found hanged in a garage near St. Petersburg. As soon as the police arrived at the crime scene, Gazprom's security units showed up. In all cases, there are widespread suspicions that the deaths may have been staged as suicides, But who did this and why? Possibly some senior Kremlin-linked people are now covering up the traces of fraud in state-run companies. If Gazprom sees major personnel reshuffles among its senior managers, this hypothesis could be true. ■

25 April 2022

## WILL RUSSIA CREATE NEW “PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC” IN KHERSON?

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**According to the Ukrainian intelligence agency, Russia is planning to proclaim what is known as a “people’s republic” in the Moscow-occupied southern Ukrainian region of Kherson. No details are known about how far it will stretch. It will probably cover the whole area of the Russian-occupied Kherson region and the southern bit of the Zaporizhia region. The name of the “republic” is not incidental—Kherson is the region’s major city to fall to Russian forces after their February 24 invasion of Ukraine.**

**S**hould Japan ever exit the Sakhalin energy projects in Russia and their stakes were acquired by Russia or a third country, this would weaken the effectiveness of Western sanctions and benefit Russia, Japanese Industry Minister Koichi Hagiuda said in a statement. Energy giant Shell is in talks with some Chinese companies to sell its stake in the Sakhalin-2 project amid sanctions imposed on Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine, according to The Telegraph. The company is in joint talks with Chinese state-run oil companies CNOOC Ltd, China National



SOURCE:МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

Petroleum Corp (CNPC), and Sinopec over its 27.5 percent holding in the venture. Japanese companies have shares in both Sakhalin-2 and Sakhalin-1 projects. Sakhalin-2 is controlled and operated by Russian gas giant Gazprom. Other stakeholders in the project include Japan's Mitsui & Co (12 percent) and Mitsubishi Corp (10 percent). Gazprom is a 50-percent-plus-one-share shareholder in Sakhalin Energy. The company produces crude oil from the oil field in the north of Sakhalin, with a production capacity of 150,000 barrels per day. It also liquefies natural gas produced from the gas

fields in the north of Sakhalin, and has an annual LNG production capacity of 9.6 million tons. The project began year-round crude oil production in 2008 and LNG production in 2009. Some 60 percent of LNG produced by the Sakhalin 2 project is bound for Japan. As Sakhalin is located in the Russian Far East close to Japan, this project significantly contributes to Japan's energy security. This must be why Japan is unwilling to exit the project. In addition, Japanese trading houses could fear growing Chinese influence in the energy sector. ■





SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA

25 April 2022

## JAPANESE FIRMS ARE UNLIKELY TO EXIT SAKHALIN-2 PROJECT

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Energy giant Shell says it will exit all Russian operations, including the Sakhalin-2 LNG project in the Russian Far East. According to some reports, Shell is in talks with some Chinese companies to sell its stake in the Sakhalin-2 liquefied natural gas project in Russia. Two Japanese firms that hold shares in the project say they will not exit the venture despite Tokyo's harsh crackdown on Moscow following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

All Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea and Azov Sea remain temporarily closed to ships seeking to enter or exit, Ukraine's infrastructure ministry said on March 21. Russian forces occasionally shell Odesa, a port

city on the Black Sea coast. The city of Mariupol also came under artillery fire. After three weeks of the war, Russian forces now have full control of the coast of the Sea of Azov--except for the city of Mariupol--and part of the coast that is

west of Ukraine, to Mykolaiv. So the Russians failed to seize a strip of land running from Donbas to Odesa and push Ukrainian soldiers of the sea. Russian forces are blocking access to Ukrainian-controlled sea ports. The near future looks grim for the countries in Africa that depend on the Ukrainian wheat imports. The Panama Maritime Authority reported that the Russian Navy was preventing the departure of some 300 Panama-flagged vessels in the Black Sea. Panama claims to have the largest number of ships registered under its flag. Five

ships loaded with grain have vanished from a port in Ukraine, and reports indicate that the vessels and their haul were stolen by Russians. Bulgaria and Romania have warned that military activities in the northwestern Black Sea may pose a threat to other sea routes than those to Odesa. It is possible that the mines that Ukrainian naval forces had deployed in the Black Sea could drift as far as the territorial waters of Romania. The war is a peril to Black Sea security and trade. ■

26 April 2022

## RUSSIA'S LUKOIL CHIEF ALEKPEROV RESIGNS

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**Russian billionaire Vagit Alekperov has resigned as CEO of Lukoil. The oil tycoon joined a handful of Russian business leaders that have departed their firms following the invasion of Ukraine and possible personnel reshuffles in Putin's Russia. Those who retire are long-serving senior officials, giving way to young technocrats who owe their careers to Vladimir Putin.**

Veteran oil executive Vagit Alekperov resigned as the head of Russia's largest privately owned oil company Lukoil after thirty years. He also quit the company's management board, Lukoil said in a statement on April 21. The board of directors appointed Vadim Vorobyev, who has been the first executive vice president for twenty years, as its acting president. In June, a traditional shareholders' meeting will take place to formally appoint Vorobyev as a new CEO. The company did not disclose the reason for Alekperov's resignation. But the announcement comes just days after he was

sanctioned. The resignation of the CEO who ran Lukoil since the company was founded may harm the firm. Lukoil fell as much as 6.7 percent as of April 21 in Moscow. Azeri-born Alekperov began his career in the oil business in the 1970s in Azerbaijan-based oil firms. In 1990, at 39, he moved up the ranks, eventually becoming the Soviet youngest-ever deputy minister for oil and gas industry. In 1991, three oil production companies, Langepasneftegaz, Uraineftegaz, and Kogalymneftegaz, were merged into a new company. Alekperov reformed a Soviet state oil corporation into privately run Lukoil



SOURCE:KREMLIN.RU

in 1993. Back in the mid-1990s, a U.S.-based company bought a stake in the company. In 2000, Lukoil was added to the list of Fortune Global 500 companies. It has left its footprint in Russia, Europe, and Africa. In 2004 American oil company ConocoPhillips acquired a 20 percent share in Lukoil to eventually become its strategic partner. In 2012 Alekperov said 50 percent of the share was in foreign hands. On April 13, 2022, the UK sanctioned Alekperov, instructing banks to freeze his assets. The UK authorities also banned him from entering the country. As of March 31, Alekperov owned 3.12

percent voting shares and was the beneficiary of 5.43 percent of shares without voting rights. Alekperov occupies the tenth spot on the Forbes list of Russia's eighty-eight richest people. In 2022 his net worth reaches \$10.5 billion. Vorobyev served as vice president and then president of Norski-Oil, the oil company that merged with Lukoil back in 2001. Since 2005, he has been vice president in charge of petroleum products in Russia. In 2016 he was appointed vice president for oil refining and gas processing. In 2018 he was promoted as Lukoil's first executive vice president. ■



SOURCE:ARMENIA.GAZPROM.RU

26 April 2022

## THE FIASCO OF “ROUBLE BLACKMAIL” DESPITE ARMENIAN EXAMPLE

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A Russian plan to set up a special payment facility to pay for gas in roubles was a game that the Kremlin played with Western countries that seek to reduce their gas imports from Russia. EU nations did not bow to Russian pressure though Moscow has forced Armenia, its ally, into paying for gas in roubles to show that the new payment system is in force. Although Russia said it would start forcing “unfriendly countries” to pay for their natural gas supplies in roubles, Armenia is certainly not one.

Armenia has agreed to switch to payments in roubles, according to the country’s economy minister Wahan Kerobjan. He added the gas price is fixed in dollars but Armenia will pay in roubles. Russia currently sells

gas to Armenia for \$165 per thousand cubic meters. Armenia relies on Russia for its gas supplies. Gazprom Armenia, a subsidiary of the Russian Gazprom, holds a monopoly on supplies. Like in Moldova, Russia sells gas to

a Moscow-controlled distributing utility. In late March, amid Western sanctions imposed because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin signed a decree demanding foreign buyers of Russian gas from what Russia deems “unfriendly” countries to pay in roubles. Like the majority of European gas consumers, Russia on March 30 partially abandoned its demands. EU states rejected Vladimir Putin’s demand as an unacceptable breach of contract. Moscow said the new payment scheme could

be extended over time. This could be just a blackmail technique before a new package of EU sanctions. In 2021 71 percent of piped Russian gas was delivered to European. The EU imported from Russia some 40 percent of its total gas consumption. In a nutshell, Russia relies more on gas exports to Europe than EU states are dependent on Russian-sourced flows. This is unlikely to change soon as the Russia-to-China pipeline infrastructure needs at least a few years to be completed. ■

27 April 2022

## TENSIONS SURGE IN MOLDOVA’S BREAKAWAY REGION OF TRANSNISTRIA

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**The Novatek-controlled flagship LNG project, or Arctic LNG-2, is again in trouble. Japan and France have stopped making new investments in a major liquefied natural gas development project in the Russian Arctic, Nikkei reported on March 25.**

Separately, Transnistria’s Security Council on April 26 reported a “terrorist attack” on a military unit near the city of Tiraspol. A military unit reportedly had been hit in the village of Parkany. Vadim Krasnoselsky, the self-styled president of Transnistria, called for a meeting of the State Security Council in response to “terrorist attacks on state institutions and infrastructure facilities in the republic.” The region of Transnistria raised its “terrorist threat level” to red, its leader announced. Explosions also damaged two old Soviet-era radio antennae in the village of Maiac. Both came after a series of blasts tore through the State Security Ministry in Tiraspol. The Ukrainian military intelligence agency responded to the attack, saying it was one of a number of provocative measures organized

by Russian services. Moldovan President Maia Sandu called for a meeting of the country’s Supreme Security after the reports. “These escalation attempts stem from factions from within the region who are pro-war forces and interested in destabilizing the situation in the region,” the president told a news conference. Moscow’s willingness to destabilize the region and draw it and Moldova into war could result from its push to capture Odesa. Russia has been massing troops to seize Odesa and Mykolaiv to cut Ukrainian forces off the Black Sea. It sounds probable as Russian troops launched a missile strike on the Odesa region, damaging a bridge across the Dniester estuary. It is the only bridge that links up the historical land of Budjak and the rest of the country. Now the only road to the isolated part of Ukraine runs



SOURCE:МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

through Moldova. By cutting off Budjak, staging provocation in Transnistria, and intensifying shelling in the Kherson region, Russia may signal an upcoming offensive. Russia still has around 1,500 troops stationed in Transnistria, with no military hardware. Along with a few thousand “soldiers” of the breakaway republic, they are not enough to serve a vital role in the war. More incidents are expected to occur to

distract Ukrainian forces from Odesa. Perhaps Russia is seeking to stage provocations throughout the region to involve Moldova in hostilities. The authorities in Chisinau avoided it as much as they could. Albeit pro-Western in nature, they declare neutrality and no interest in joining NATO. But Russia’s aggressive policy may make Moldova change its mind as Sweden and Finland already did. ■



SOURCE:МУЛЬТИМЕДИА.МИНОБОРОНЫ.РФ

27 April 2022

## **RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE: FEARS OF ATTACK ON ODESSA**

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**As Russia stepped up its artillery and rocket attacks on cities in southern Ukraine and massed its forces, many reports are that Russian forces are seeking to take Odesa. At the same time, Moscow could order an offensive along the right flank by striking an area stretching from Zaporizhia to Kryvyi Rih.**

**T**he front line in southern Ukraine stabilized some two or three weeks ago. Russian forces have seized almost the whole region of Kherson although Ukrainian troops recaptured an area in the north, on the western bank of

the Dnipro river. Indeed, the city of Kherson fell into the hands of Russian troops who can stage an attack northwest, to fire Mykolaiv, from its suburbs. Russia seized two-thirds of the Zaporizhia region and it now occupies the

southern city of Melitopol. From there, Russian forces can advance on to the north, towards the city of Zaporizhia. Russia could be preparing a mass-scale offensive in this part of Ukraine to seize Ukraine's entire south coast. That means taking not just coastal cities Mykolaiv and Odesa but cutting Ukraine off sea access. To capture Odesa, Russian forces need to seize Mykolaiv or at least encircle it to disable any threat to the rear troops seeking to besiege Odesa. The mayor of Mykolaiv has declared the city authorities are preparing for a Russian attack as Russia had amassed troops in the Kherson region. A large convoy of Russian military hardware is moving from Crimea's Simferopol towards the Kherson region, according to the Ukrainian authorities. In Kherson, Russians are

removing any traces of the Ukrainian regional administration. The authorities in Kyiv warn Russia could pose a serious maritime threat. Some twenty vessels and submarines carrying cruise missiles were dispatched west of Crimea. Russia could fire cruise missiles to target Odesa at a "safe" distance while the Black Sea Fleet could avoid more losses--as when its flagship vessel Moskva was struck with a Neptun cruise missile in mid-April. There is widespread fear of a Russian attack in Kryvyi Rih, a city north of Kherson and Mykolaiv. Russian forces have massed much equipment and many troops along the front line in an attempt to march towards Zaporizhia. The city recently came under heavy fire. ■

29 April 2022

## EU PREPARES TO HIT RUSSIAN OIL EXPORTS

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**Russia's oil production is on track to drop by 17 percent this year as Western sanctions and departing foreign oil companies complicate extraction, the Russian finance ministry said in a statement. The first quarter of this year was beneficial to Russian oil firms, though.**

“Russia's oil production this year could decline by as much as 17 percent because of Western sanctions,” Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov told journalists. The European Union is working on a new package of sanctions that is set to include some form of ban on Russian oil imports. “If Western countries reject Russian oil completely, we will look for new clients,” Siluanov added. “Now the quantity of oil is dropping while its price is going up.

On the whole, our companies more or less have a balance,” the official was quoted as saying. “How sales will be conducted further is difficult to assess now,” he added. “We are working on a sixth sanctions package and one of the issues we are considering is some form of an oil embargo,” The Times reported, citing the European Commission's executive vice president, Valdis Dombrovskis. He said that the restrictions could include a gradual





SOURCE:SOVCOMFLOT.RU

phasing-out of Russian oil or imposing tariffs on exports beyond a certain price cap. The EU is considering three scenarios: embargo, imposing tariffs beyond a certain price cap, or payment mechanisms to withhold parts of Moscow's revenue, according to Bloomberg. However, Russia is enjoying an injection of petrodollars. Moscow may boost its export figures considerably as the April figures rose year-on-year. In March, oil output in Russia rose by 10.2 percent month-on-month and by

7 percent year-on-year--to 46.4 million tons. The first quarter of this year saw an 8 percent increase year-on-year, reaching 135 million tons, according to Rosstat. In March, Russia has increased the exports of oil to non-CIS states by 5 percent-- to 4.75 million barrels per day. This is largely due to such clients as India that started buying even more cheap oil from Russia at a discount of around \$30 per barrel. Russia is sending more oil flows to China and Indonesia.. ■



SOURCE:ONGCINDIA.COM

29 April 2022

# IS INDIA PLANNING TO INVEST IN RUSSIAN ENERGY DESPITE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL RISK?

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**As the West shuns Moscow, India has taken up a Russian offer to buy crude oil at a discount. However, it is struggling to find shipping options. This may be a crucial factor for Indian companies that consider purchasing more stakes in Russian energy firms and their oil and gas ventures.**

**T**he Indian government has asked the state-run energy companies to evaluate the possibility of buying European oil major BP's stake in sanctions-hit Russian firm Rosneft. BP

said it would withdraw from the Russian project in late February. The Economic Times reported. The Indian oil ministry last week conveyed its intent to ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), Indian

Oil Corporation, Bharat Petro Resources Limited (BPRL), Hindustan Petroleum's subsidiary Prize Petroleum Limited, Oil India Limited, and GAIL (India) Limited. The call on petroleum companies to explore buying the stake in Rosneft came after BP CEO Bernard Looney met Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri in March. India, the world's third-biggest oil importer and consumer, imports about 85 percent of its five million barrels per day (bpd) of oil needs. India has already bought 15 million barrels of crude from Russia since it invaded Ukraine, which is almost the same as it purchased in 2021 (16 million). For India, it is a mere drop in the ocean, but Russia is seeking to develop deliveries eastwards—even at a discount price. Other countries in southern Asia—including Indonesia—also evince interest in Russian oil flows. ONGC Videsh is considering buying extra stakes in the Sakhalin-1 project in Russia's Far East. The company already holds a 20 percent stake in the project. It could consider buying a 30 percent stake held by Exxon Mobile Corp that decided to discontinue all its Russia operations. The remaining shareholders are Japan's Sakhalin Oil&Gas Development Co. Ltd (30 percent)

and two subsidiaries of Rosneft that have a 20 percent stake in total. Exxon Mobil, which quit the project, was its operator until now. Indian companies hope to get stakes in Russian assets at discounted rates but are afraid of risks. Restrictions on Russia are already affecting oil and gas supplies to India. India's Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) is struggling to find a vessel to ship 700,000 barrels of crude from Russia's Far East. The company requires vessels that can break through the ice. In addition, due to the sanctions imposed on Russia, getting insurance and reinsurance cover for voyages by Russian ships is becoming tough. As a result, ONGC is unable to bring the oil from Sakhalin. India's ever-growing business involvement in the Russian energy sector would disappoint the United States. U.S. President Joe Biden has asked Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi not to accelerate purchases of Russian oil. During a video call on April 11, Biden also told Modi that the U.S. could help India diversify its sources of energy. Also on April 11, the U.S. and Indian defense and foreign ministers met in person, which shows to what extent India would be in trouble if it developed energy ties with Russia. ■



30 April 2022

## GERMANY READY TO CONFISCATE ROSNEFT OIL ASSETS

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**The biggest Russian oil company is unable to award a tender to sell oil while Germany has signaled a change of control at the country's Schwedt oil refinery that is run by Rosneft. In a major shift in its stance, Germany says it is prepared to ditch Russian oil supplies. Its cooperation with Poland could be vital in this context.**

**R**ussia's biggest state oil producer Rosneft PJSC failed to award a tender to sell 5 million tons of crude, according to Bloomberg.

No bids were placed from European companies, the traders said. Some Asian refiners submitted bids, but Rosneft deemed them too low. No



SOURCE:PCK.DE

Russian oil company has sold even a batch on the spot market since February 24. Once new sanctions are efficient in mid-May, any licensable activities are necessary for ensuring critical energy supply within the European Union. It was not clear, but the EU's sixth package of sanctions contains an oil embargo—with some exemptions, though—no one in Europe is ready to make business with Sechin who is a close associate of Vladimir Putin. The German government approved amendments to the 1975 energy security law, allowing the expropriation of assets critical to the energy supply of the economy. Germany is preparing for a change of control at the PCK refinery in Schwedt operated by Russian state-owned Rosneft that supplies 90 percent of the gasoline consumed in Berlin and Brandenburg.

The Rosneft refinery is the last in Germany to buy Russian oil, whose market share has fallen from 35 percent to 12 percent. Germany, which previously blocked the oil embargo against Russia, changed its position. Berlin will not veto such a decision within the EU, according to Robert Habeck, the German vice-chancellor and economy minister. “We have made a lot of progress on oil and we can join the embargo if it happens. Germany will not stand in the way of this,” Habeck added. What adds up to the German stance is cooperation between Germany and Poland. The authorities in Warsaw have signaled it will agree to having its infrastructure used to supply Schwedt if the German government confiscates the Rosneft-owned refinery. ■



SOURCE:PGNIG.PL

30 April 2022

## **RUSSIA CUTS OFF GAS TO POLAND, BULGARIA**

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Russia's Gazprom cut Poland and Bulgaria off from its gas for refusing to pay in roubles, which was a purely political move. Moscow somehow had to respond to the fact that European clients had rejected Vladimir Putin's demand that foreign purchasers of Russian gas pay in the Russian currency. It was the Kremlin's tit-for-tat move after the West imposed a batch of sanctions that crippled the Russian currency. It was a brazen demand as Putin's demand to pay in roubles was a breach of contract. Once it is met, EU recipients would violate the sanctions against Russia. Putin thus incites some discrepancies within the EU while seeking to display the bloc's weakness at the time of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Initially, all EU customers ignored Putin's demand. After a few weeks, Russia decided to play hardball. By cutting off natural gas flows to Poland and Bulgaria, the Kremlin showed it was not joking. Of course, Russia will not cut off gas supplies to Germany or Italy amid these two's reluctance to pay in roubles. Such actions will strengthen the arguments of some Western politicians and businessmen who are ready to accept Putin's demand to keep gas flows unchanged. This group that involves Germany's Uniper and Italy's Eni must have been encouraged by the Hungarian foreign minister who said his country would meet Putin's demand that Russian gas be paid in roubles. Their argument is reliance on Russian hydrocarbons. Those in Germany, Austria, and some other countries could play the same argument. Not only is the EU unable to tighten energy sanctions against Russia, but it also cannot enforce the restrictions already in force. The European Commission has said countries should not pay in roubles, and that complying with Russia's request could breach EU sanctions.

Hungary has broken ranks with the European Union, saying it will accept Moscow's demand that gas supplies be paid for in rubles. For many countries—including Germany—it is vital for Russia not to cut off gas supplies. Their governments and businesses are looking for some legal ways to circumvent EU sanctions and be allowed to pay for gas in roubles. It is doubtful that Poland makes efficient efforts to impose new sanctions on Russia—including an embargo on energy commodities—amid the Kremlin's decision to cut off gas flows. Importantly, the gas crisis displayed solidarity between some countries of Europe. Regardless of vast gas reserves, increased LNG imports, and plans to launch the Baltic Pipe pipeline in October, Lithuania offered some help to Poland, with a new gas link between the two countries to be opened on May 1. Lithuania boasts a flowing LNG terminal in Klaipeda. Norway said it would increase output to satisfy the needs of Poland. Bulgaria could count on Greece—the country's prime minister Kiril Petkov discussed the issue with his Greek counterpart. ■

30 April 2022

## NO ARMORED BATTLE IN UKRAINE'S DONBAS AND ON SOUTHERN FRONT

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**The much-debated battle of Donbas unfolds differently than some expected. Vladimir Putin cannot announce the Russian seizure of the whole regions of Donetsk and Luhansk on May 9. Perhaps Russian forces will not be able to seize the very last Ukrainian stronghold in Mariupol, either. They are seeking to attain some goals in the regions of Kherson and Zaporizhia. A Russian invasion of Odesa or Kryvyi Rih is unlikely to succeed.**



SOURCE:FLICKR

The Russian offensive to seize the whole region of Donbas takes much more than Moscow initially expected. Yet Russian troops underestimated Ukrainian defense capabilities. Much was said about a possible armored attack on the steppes of Donetsk, but there is nothing like that eventually. Ukrainian forces sat in well-fortified cities and towns throughout the region-- from Rubizhne to Popasna through Severodonetsk. They are also skilfully shutting off the Russian maneuver from Iziium to Sloviansk that the Russian military deemed strategic to cut off Ukrainian forces. Ukraine was perfectly prepared for the Russian attack. For weeks now, they have fiercely defended the northern part of Donbas--they are now retreating but the Russians suffered heavy losses. And yet they are surrounded on three sides. The war campaign in the region seems to last for a couple of weeks to come. Meanwhile, Russia is seeking to grab more

lands in Ukraine's south. Recent days have seen renewed attacks on the right bank of the Dnipro river to seize the whole region of Kherson. Reports are also that Russian forces could attack northwards to claim the city of Kryvyi Rih. But this would not reinforce their strategic position. Instead, they would push Ukrainian forces to the west, towards the city of Mykolaiv. Much is now taking place on the central front between Kherson and Donbas. Russian troops are advancing towards Zaporizhia. They control some two-thirds of the region while capturing its capital would be a massive propaganda success. Interestingly, Russia deployed more forces there than near Kherson. Now the Kremlin's goal is to claim full control of Donbas, Zaporizhia, and Kherson and then occupy them permanently. It is a short-term goal, naturally. Once accomplished, Russia could take further action to undermine Ukraine's territorial integrity. ■





SOURCE: PRESIDENT.GOV.UA

30 April 2022

## PROSPECTS FOR UKRAINE JOINING NATO ARE DIM

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**Kyiv is insisting on the set of peace proposals it submitted in late March in Turkey. The proposals mean that Ukraine would not host any military bases in exchange for security guarantees from most countries, including Russia. But recent occurrences may make Kyiv change its position.**

Staging a sham referendum in the so-called people's republics in Donetsk and Luhansk would toughen the Ukraine-Russia talks, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on April 28. Undoubtedly, Kyiv is now under big pressure and seeks talks with Moscow. Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Zelensky

and member of the Ukrainian delegation, said the talks were ongoing via video links and in working groups. David Arakhamia, chairman of Ukraine's ruling Servant of the People party and the chief negotiator, said Kyiv would not revise its stance and voiced the proposals Ukraine had made at the Istanbul meeting. In late March,

Ukraine proposed adopting neutral status in exchange for security guarantees at talks with Russia in Turkey, meaning it would not join military alliances. Arakhamia's words came in response to what Lavrov and Putin said about alleged Ukrainian efforts to ditch the Turkey proposals while submitting new ones. Podolyak added that Ukraine would like to see a large group of states become its security guarantors while Russia remains reluctant. The authorities in Kyiv seem to have accepted that Ukraine would not become a fully-fledged member of the Western world. "Unfortunately, Ukraine will not become a NATO member," Volodymyr Zelensky was quoted as saying. The Ukrainian leader specified for the first time that Ukraine's desired "security guarantees" after he met with the presidents of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba echoed his words, saying Ukraine has given up nuclear weapons but did not join

NATO anyway. The Russian aggression stems from a security vacuum. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, about a third of the Soviet nuclear arsenal was in Ukraine. In 1994, Ukraine agreed to destroy the weapons, and to join the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Kyiv destroyed or turned over atomic weapons in exchange for security guarantees. In December 1994, the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, Britain, and the United States signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances to provide Ukraine with security assurances. Russia breached these provisions in 2014 when it unlawfully annexed Crimea. Now Kyiv says much about security guarantees but what is the only genuine guarantee for Ukraine is a military alliance with Western nations. The proposals envisage security guarantees along the lines of the NATO military alliance or bilaterally--with Poland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, or the United States. ■



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