
Russia seeks closer energy ties with Balkans

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Russian President Vladimir Putin will attend a summit on energy cooperation between Balkan nations in Zagreb on Sunday in an apparent attempt to strengthen Russia's influence in regional energy sector, a presidential aide said.

The Balkan energy summit in the capital of Croatia will focus on regional energy cooperation and construction of a pan-European oil pipeline, which is expected to connect oil-producing countries in the Caspian region with Europe, bypassing the Bosphorus Straits.

Putin, who is invited to attend the forum as a special guest, will meet with 10 heads of state from the Balkan region - Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Slovenia, and Serbia.

"The participation in a summit on energy cooperation in southeastern Europe is a continuation of our systemic efforts to explain our plans, intentions and to promote our capabilities," Sergei Prikhodko said early Sunday.

"We would like to demonstrate Russia's readiness to be more involved in economic development of Balkan countries," he said.

The importance of the Balkans as an energy transit hub is on the rise, and Russia is seeking to maintain its dominance as a key energy supplier to European customers, offering a number of transit projects in an attempt to prevent the European Union from creating alternative routes.

Russia and Italy signed Saturday a memorandum on the construction of a new natural gas pipeline from Russia to Europe across the Black Sea.

The memorandum was signed in Rome by representatives of Russian energy giant Gazprom and Italy's ENI in the presence of Russian Industry and Energy Minister Viktor Khristenko and Italian Economic Development Minister Pierluigi Bersani.

The pipeline, which will be called South Stream, will stretch for 900 km (560 miles) across the Black Sea from Russia to Bulgaria at a maximum depth of over 2 km (over 1 mile).

Speaking at a press conference in Rome, Alexander Medvedev, Gazprom's deputy CEO, said the new pipeline's estimated annual capacity will be about 30 billion cubic meters.

"This [the memorandum] is another real step in the implementation of Gazprom's strategy to diversify routes of Russian natural gas supplies to European countries and a considerable contribution to the energy security in Europe," Medvedev said.
