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# Russian Influence Returning In Black Sea

By Javno.hr, Croatia  
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Putin said Russia was back as a key player in the Black Sea region.

President Vladimir Putin said on Monday Russia was back as a key player in the Black Sea region and urged its neighbours to turn their loose regional grouping into an effective tool of economic cooperation.

"The Balkans and the Black Sea have always been a sphere of our special interests," he told reporters after a summit of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation (BSEC). "And it is but natural that a resurgent Russia is returning here."

Russia lost much of its clout in the region after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, but is seeing its influence revive on the back of its strong economic growth and booming oil and gas exports.

Many of the 12 BSEC members are ex-Soviet republics or former Cold War allies of Russia.

Putin told the Istanbul summit, called to mark the 15th anniversary of the grouping, that the Black Sea had great potential as a hub for delivering oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caspian region to European markets.

"Energy supplies are becoming an increasingly important factor in progress," Putin told fellow leaders.

"We are ready to solve with our regional partners major tasks that affect not only the economic climate in the region but also the European and world economy," he said in the sumptuous Ciragan Palace beside the Bosphorus straits.

Last month, Putin told a conference in St Petersburg that flexible regional groups could challenge the domination of established Western-led international bodies, which he said had failed to fully take into account emerging nations' interests.

In Istanbul, he said the BSEC could become such a grouping.

"We propose to enhance the stability of local energy markets, among other things through long-term contacts," he said "Diversification of energy delivery routes is also on the agenda."

Apart from its Blue Stream project, which delivers Russian gas to Europe via Turkey, Russian monopoly Gazprom last week signed a deal with Italy's ENI to build a pipeline under the Black Sea to Bulgaria and on to Europe.

## RIVAL ROUTES

Analysts say the pipeline expansion plans are part of Moscow's strategy to head off the creation of rival routes bypassing Russia.

European countries are keen to lessen their heavy dependence on Russia

for their oil and natural gas.

"All projects, small and big, should be economically viable, otherwise they will be just idle talk bringing disappointment," Putin said, in an apparent reference to the rival projects.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters that other projects backed by Russia that the BSEC could undertake included a ring road around the Black Sea coast, a joint energy network and the revival of ferry traffic between major ports.

But Lavrov signalled Russia's reluctance to allow the grouping to tackle the region's political conflicts.

"Any attempts to politicise its work are counterproductive. The conflicts should be solved in formats that have been approved by the United Nations," he said.

In particular, Armenia and Azerbaijan are at loggerheads over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have broken away from central control in Georgia.

The leaders of Serbia and Albania -- both members of the BSEC though they are not on the Black Sea -- sparred at Monday's meeting over Kosovo, the mainly ethnic Albanian province that is seeking independence from Belgrade.

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