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## **ENERGY TO DOMINATE BULGARIA'S PM TALKS WITH PUTIN**

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After President Rumen Radev paved the way towards improved Bulgarian-Russian relations last week, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov will follow up by visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin on May 30.

Both the meeting and the date were announced by the Russian side last week, with the Bulgarian authorities maintaining a low profile. BIRN asked the Council of Ministers for more details last week, but received no response.

The only official information in Sofia has come from Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva, who told National Television on Friday that the visit had been planned for months and was not urgent.

She added that economics, tourism and energy were the topics on the agenda.

The announcement of the visit came during a statement made by Putin after his meeting with Radev last Tuesday.

"I would now not comment on any particular economic questions ... We will have the pleasure to discuss these with the Prime Minister of Bulgaria in a few days' time, the Russian President said.

Over the following days, the diplomat and presidential aide Yuri Ushakov informed Russian media of the particular day the meeting will take place – May 30, quoted by Russia's TASS agency.

Although the Russian President did not mention what topics he had in mind, his invitation to Borissov comes just a week after the Bulgarian government announced its plans to "unfreeze" the Belene Nuclear Power Plant project.

On Monday last week, Radev also proposed the restart of the "South Stream" gas pipeline under the name "Bulgarian Stream", after talking to Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev.

According to Russia specialist Dimitar Bechev, from the University of North Carolina, energy projects are the main driver of the rapprochement between Bulgaria and Russia, although not much in terms of concrete results can be expected at this stage.

I don't see what concrete result Bulgaria might get from Russia about Belene, he told BIRN. As for Turkish Stream 2, or however this new gas pipeline is called, it cannot happen without a green light from the European Commission, Bechev added.

According to him, even if the project is launched, Russia might still prefer to connect a new

pipeline to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline, TAP, which is already under construction, instead of the Gas Hub Balkan proposed by Borissov.

The invitation underlines Moscows understanding that the Bulgarian President does not carry enough weight and prerogatives to decide concrete questions and the news about the upcoming visit of the PM was, in practice, the only real news from the Presidents visit to Russia, Vessela Tcherneva, director of the Sofia office of the European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR, told BIRN.

She added that it is clear that energy projects will head the discussion, yet it is far from clear what can Borissov offer Putin at this point.

To her, the fact that the visit was announced by Russia first also sent the wrong message to the Bulgarian audience.

Apart from energy diplomacy, the visit might also have larger geopolitical connotations.

Tcherneva noted that the Prime Minister is visiting not only in his capacity as Bulgarian head of government, but also as the representative of the rotating Presidency of the EU.

At this moment, the EU is trying to attract Russian support to protect the interests of companies in Iran from so-called 'secondary US sanctions,'" she said, referring to the US President's decision to scrap the Iran nuclear deal and to subsequently impose sanctions on any companies doing business in Iran.

She added that this was why French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Putin last week.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bulgaria-s-borissov-to-meet-with-vladimir-putin-discuss-energy-projects-05-28-2018>

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