

Oil Drop Below \$80 Vindicates Cautious Investors Trimming Bets



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- Hedge funds cut Brent wagers by most since June 2017
- Saudi Arabia signals OPEC and allies may boost production

Money managers' reluctance to get behind the oil rally is finally paying off.

Hedge funds trimmed their net-long position – the difference between bets on a price increase and wagers on a drop – in

Brent crude by the most in almost a year. The cuts came as the global benchmark capped its first weekly drop since early April, sliding below \$80 a barrel after Saudi Arabia and Russia said OPEC and its allies may boost oil output in the second half of the year.

“Traders thought that the market was in the process of topping out,” John Kilduff, a partner at Again Capital LLC, a New York-based hedge fund, said by telephone Friday. Oil prices had a “swift reaction today to the musings by OPEC to potentially add more supply to the market. We will be very headline-driven over the next few weeks.”



Oil retreated from the highest prices in almost four years as Russian and Saudi energy ministers signaled that the coalition led by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries may gradually raise oil production to assuage consumer anxiety about higher prices. Their comments mark a major shift in strategy for the historic alliance forged in 2016 to erase a global crude glut.

“I think in the near future there will be time to release supply” smoothly to avoid shocking the market, Saudi Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih said at the St. Petersburg

International Economic Forum in Russia. When OPEC, Russia and other major producers meet in June “we will do what is necessary” to reassure buyers, the minister said.

He spoke after talks with his Russian counterpart Alexander Novak, who said the output boost would start in the third quarter, if it’s approved by other members of the group. Both men said the size of the increase was still subject to negotiation.

Hedge funds lowered their Brent net-long position by 8.6 percent in the week ended May 22 to 501,634 contracts, according to ICE Futures Europe data on futures and options released Friday. That was the biggest decline since June 2017.

Money managers’ net-long position in West Texas Intermediate crude fell by 2 percent to 377,520 futures and options, the lowest since November, according to U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission released Friday. Longs slipped less than 0.1 percent, while shorts climbed 23 percent, the biggest jump since April.

“You want to get out of the long positions if you are expecting that OPEC is going to increase production,” James Williams, president of London, Arkansas-based energy researcher WTRG Economics, said by phone. “It makes perfect sense for the folks that are long to say, ‘How much longer can this thing continue to grow?’”

Disruption Threat

Crude had rallied earlier this month on the dual threat of supply disruptions from Iran and Venezuela, which together account for about 14 percent of OPEC’s production. Still, the coalition is weighing the possibility of easing output limits at a time when drillers are pumping record amounts of crude from American shale basins.

“The market kind of overextended itself, ” Gene McGillian,

manager of market research for Tradition Energy in Stamford, Connecticut, said by phone. "With the Saudis now saying they're limiting their production cuts and geopolitical risk already priced in, there is going to be some uncertainty."

A dearth of pipelines in West Texas' Permian Basin, the most prolific U.S. oil play, is leaving supplies trapped in the region. That's expanding the nation's surplus of the fuel as American production tops 10 million barrels a day.

U.S. inventories climbed by 5.78 million barrels to about 438 million barrels in the week ended May 18, data from the Energy Information Administration showed. That was a surprise increase compared with the 2 million-barrel decline predicted in a Bloomberg survey.

But analysts and traders predict that stockpiles may decline in the coming weeks, bolstering prices. Data provider Genscape Inc. was said to report that inventories fell by about 475,000 barrels between May 18 and May 22 at the key pipeline hub in Cushing, Oklahoma.

Oil prices have "been extremely extended for a long period of time," Kyle Cooper, a consultant at brokerage Ion Energy Group LLC, said by phone Friday. The "EIA report was bearish with a nearly 6 million-barrel build in total petroleum. The more important thing is how that was followed up today with OPEC and Russia regarding the possibility of removing some of those supply constraints."

Saudi Arabia and Russia

Discuss Scaling Back Global Oil Cuts



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- Easing output curbs “on the table”; no decision yet: Al-Falih
- OPEC, allies to discuss loosening supply caps in June: Novak

Saudi Arabia and Russia, the oil producers who led the effort to shrink a global glut, said they are discussing easing output curbs for the first time.³⁰

While scaling back the supply caps is “on the table,” no decision has been made, Saudi Arabian Energy Minister Khalid

Al-Falih said in an interview early Friday morning in St. Petersburg. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its partners will in June discuss loosening the curbs that began in 2017, Russian counterpart Alexander Novak said at the same interview after a meeting between the two officials.

Speculation is swirling over when and by how much the producers will scale back cuts after they eliminated an inventory surplus that had sparked a price crash about four years ago. Market uncertainty has risen following renewed U.S. sanctions on Iran that may curb the Islamic Republic's exports, and as economic turmoil in Venezuela drives a collapse of the OPEC member's oil industry. Crude's rebound is also spurring concern that demand may falter.

Russia and Saudi Arabia share a common view on "consuming countries' anxiety and concerns over potential supply shortages," Al-Falih said. "We will ensure that the market remains in its trajectory towards rebalancing, but at the same time we will not overcorrect." The two nations will meet at least two more times before OPEC and its partners gather in Vienna next month, he said.

While Saudi Arabia has shown a desire for higher prices to bankroll domestic economic reforms and underpin the valuation of its state oil company in a planned initial public offering, the top OPEC member and its allies are facing pressure from consuming nations as well as crude producing companies.



High Enough

Indian Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said earlier this month that he expressed concern about rising crude and its impact on consumers to Al-Falih. He added that the Saudi energy minister had assured him that the Middle East nation and other producers would ensure that adequate supplies are available and that prices remain reasonable. In developing countries from Brazil to the Philippines, drivers are complaining about high fuel costs.

In Russia, some of the largest oil producers called for more flexibility after almost 17 months of output curbs. The cuts have achieved their goal and crude prices near \$80 a barrel are high enough, according to the bosses of Lukoil PJSC and Gazprom Neft PJSC. Novak said that he will hold talks with the nation's crude producers next week or the week after to discuss the deal with OPEC.

"Earlier we said that we will monitor the market situation, now we can say that we are looking into the issue" of a smooth recovery in output to meet growing demand, Novak said in the interview on Friday. He added that he and Al-Falih discussed prices and the market situation, including Venezuelan

production and risks related to Iran.

The Saudi minister said he'll meet Novak again in Moscow on June 14, adding that another meeting between the two is possible before that.

U.S. Supply

In Washington, Democrats are using high gasoline prices, approaching \$3 a gallon for the first time since 2014, as a political tool, accusing the White House of not doing enough to shield consumers.

Recent price gains have been driven by American actions such as President Donald Trump's withdrawal from a 2015 deal between Iran and world powers that had eased sanctions on the Persian Gulf state in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. Earlier this month, Al-Falih and United Arab Emirates Energy Minister Suhail Al Mazrouei said recent moves in oil prices have been driven by geopolitics and that global supply remains ample.

Additionally, record production in the U.S., which is not part of the deal among global producers to cut output, is a key issue that's complicating strategy for OPEC and its allies.

Brent crude, the benchmark for more than half the world's oil, was down 0.4 percent at \$78.49 a barrel at 7:31 a.m. in London. Earlier this month, prices had traded above \$80 a barrel for the first time since November 2014. U.S. West Texas Intermediate futures were at \$70.49 a barrel in New York.

"We will be coordinating closely, monitoring the market almost on a daily basis," Al-Falih said on Friday. "We'll consult with other countries. Each of them has a voice and their voices matter to us."

Sanctions aren't stopping Russia's LNG ambitions



Despite the imposition of US and EU sanctions in the energy sector, new projects continue to flourish in Russia. Already the world's largest exporter of traditional natural gas, the country is gaining a foothold in the liquefied natural gas market. For the last 3 years, Russia's LNG capacity has been growing substantially.

Competition from Qatar, Australia, and the US, the world leaders in LNG exports, coupled with the impact of political tensions after the Ukraine crisis, have made Russia reconsider its traditional pipeline exports. After Lithuania and Poland built their own LNG terminals with gas from Norway, Qatar and most recently the US, Gazprom's conventional gas intake was

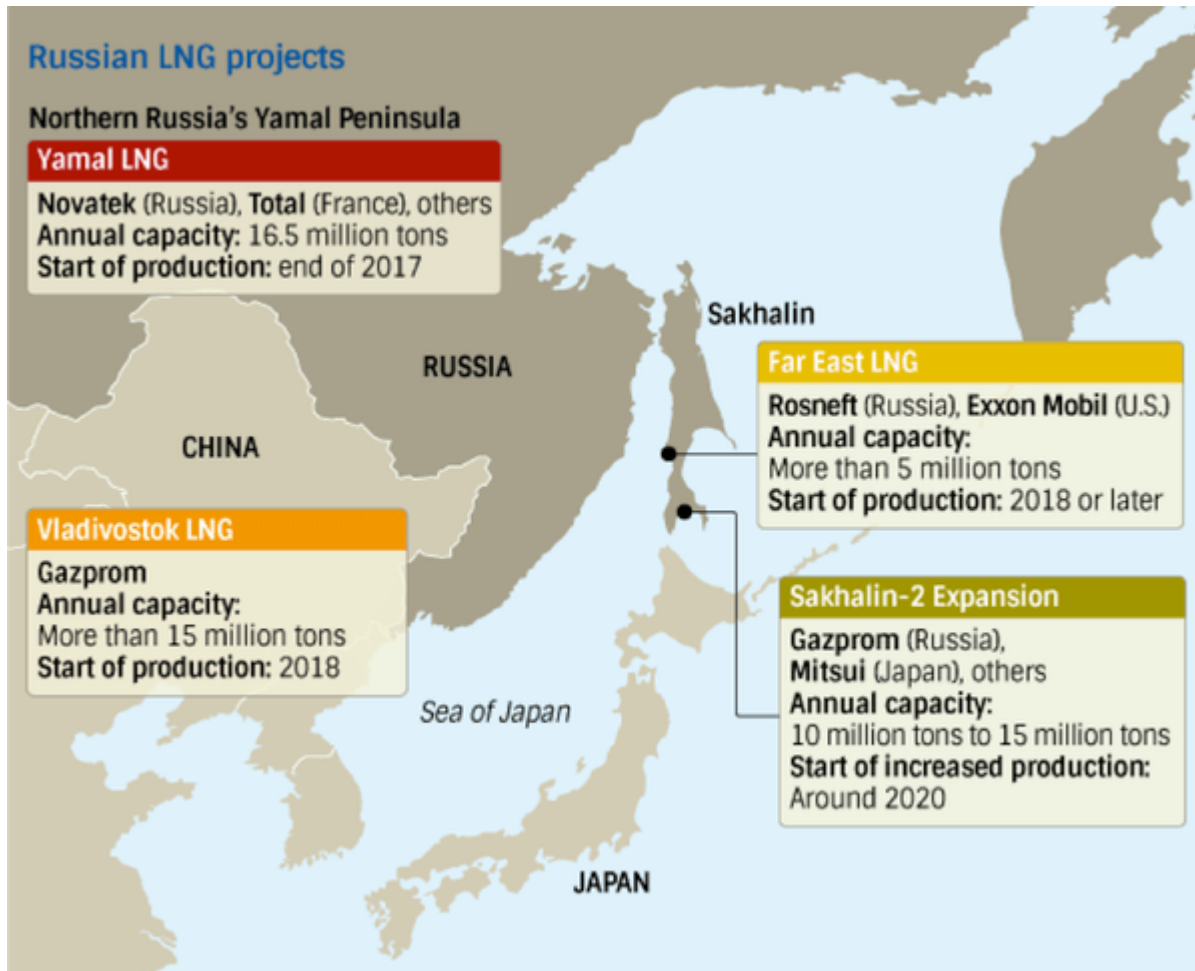
significantly diminished in both countries. Despite Gazprom's cheaper price, Lithuania and Poland preferred to pay a premium for their LNG to reduce the dependency on Russia's energy resources.

Gaining a foothold

Novatek, Rosneft and Gazprom each set out to develop their own unconventional gas resources. Novatek's Yamal LNG is Russia's most ambitious project. Based on the Kara Sea in the Arctic Circle, gas extraction is conducted under the permafrost, which makes it incredibly challenging. Funded by Russia's Novatek, France's Total, China National Petroleum Corporation, and China's Silk Road Fund, Yamal LNG is a \$27 billion facility that will start full operation in 2018. It will produce 16.5 million tonnes of LNG per year. Yamal LNG's gas plant will be finished in November. As a symbolic gesture, Russia will send the first shipments to China, which supported the project. Another four shipments will follow in December.

Rosneft is developing its Far East LNG project in Sakhalin, which aims to produce 5 million tonnes of LNG gas. Its goal is to deliver supplies to the Asia-Pacific region, in particular to Japan and South Korea.

Gazprom is pushing LNG as in-house transport fuels. Russia's gas giant signed agreements with Avtodor, the Russian highways state company, and Gazprom Gazomotornoye Toplivo, a Gazprom subsidiary, to grow a network of LNG and compressed natural gas filling stations for locomotives and trucks. Expanding its reach, Gazprom also launched small-scale LNG projects abroad in places like Vietnam, Belarus, Ghana and Bolivia.



Bypassing Western sanctions

The impact of Western sanctions on Russia's LNG development proved to be rather limited. Despite the restrictions on financial borrowing and export of Western technologies (e.g. drilling and hydraulic fracturing), Russia managed to keep its LNG projects afloat. Loopholes in the sanctions regime and new partners allowed Russia to bypass legal implications and to find new funding.

While both oil and gas exploration projects were prohibited under US sanctions, the EU sanctions exempted gas projects. This allowed European investors to further participate in the development of Russia's LNG gas plants. Both French Total and Dutch Shell preserved their 20% and 27% shares in the Yamal and Sakhalin projects, respectively.

Despite Western restrictions on capital, Russian energy companies still manage to attract European investments.

Italy's Saipem is set to be a subcontractor for Arctic LNG 2, Novatek's second gas plant on the Kara Sea. In 2015, Shell agreed to invest in the expansion of Gazprom's Sakhalin II, while in 2017, a Dutch company set up a joint venture with Gazprom to design and construct the Baltic LNG project in the Leningrad Region. However, Rosneft's Far East and Gazprom's Vladivostok LNG projects were delayed until 2020 due to a lack of funds and low fuel prices. Partnered with ExxonMobil in 2014, the Far East project was stalled due to looming Western sanctions over the Ukraine crisis. Recently, Rosneft announced that it may build the LNG plant using its own resources exclusively.

Russia's pivot to Asia and the Middle East lessened the country's dependence on Western lending. In March 2017, having difficulties raising funds from Western banks, Novatek sold a 9.9% stake to China's Silk Road Fund. Similarly, Rosneft turned to Chinese investors after Glencore and the Qatar Investment Authority cut their stakes. A 14% stake of Rosneft was bought by CEFC, China's Energy conglomerate, for \$9 billion. Recently, investors from Japan and the Middle East showed interest in Gazprom's Baltic and Novatek's Arctic 2 LNG projects.

Making strides in the LNG market

With the latest reports predicting 13% growth in the LNG market by 2025 and an overall 53% share in long-distance gas trade by 2040, Russia is under further pressure to develop its LNG projects on time. Currently, Russia exports 10.8 million tonnes and has a 4.2% market share.

Following the completion of the Arctic 2 LNG project, the country might challenge the dominance of Qatar, which currently occupies 30% of the market. By building the second gas plant on the Gydan peninsula, Russia could produce up to 70 million tonnes of LNG annually, just below Qatar's 77 million. The construction of Arctic 2 is slated to commence in 2019, with the first shipments due on the market in 2023.

Challenging Qatar's dominance in the LNG market would make Russia not only the world's largest exporter of conventional natural gas, but also of liquefied gas. The conditions for that are favourable. With funding from China and Saudi Arabia, Russia can bypass Western restrictions on capital. Russia's LNG exploration sites are strategically close to the Asian market. Located in the Far East, LNG would be easy to transport via sea to Japan and South Korea, the world's largest LNG importers.

Gazprom escapes EU fine in competition probe



The Russian gas giant has to revamp the way it sells gas to EU

countries.

European Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager on Thursday stuck with her controversial decision not to fine Gazprom on charges that it abused its dominance to rip off consumers in Central and Eastern Europe.

Instead, the settlement announced Thursday will seek to change Gazprom's behavior through a set of legally-binding commitments.

"Our decision provides a tailor-made rulebook for Gazprom's future conduct," Vestager said. "It gives Gazprom customers in Central and Eastern Europe an effective tool to make sure the price they pay is competitive."

Under the deal, the Kremlin-backed firm agreed to make deep changes to the way it has historically done business in Central and Eastern Europe.

"I know some would have liked to see us fine Gazprom no matter the solution on the table," Vestager said, adding that the settlement achieves goals that the Commission "could not have gotten otherwise."

Gazprom agreed to change how it negotiates gas prices with countries in Central and Eastern Europe, in an effort to create a more competitive market. Customers will now have the right to ask for a price review if they believe they are paying Gazprom higher prices than on Western European gas hubs. If a deal isn't struck within 120 days, an arbitrator overseen by the EU "will then impose a competitive gas price."

Gazprom also agreed to drop clauses restricting customers' ability to sell gas across borders and create opportunities for more gas to flow to the Baltic states and Bulgaria.

The commitments are valid for eight years.

"Gazprom has accepted that it has to play by our common rules

– at least if it wants to sell its gas in Europe,” Vestager said.

Gazprom’s Deputy CEO Alexander Medvedev said that the company was “satisfied with the commitments decision.”

“We believe that today’s decision is the most reasonable outcome for the well-functioning of the entire European gas market,” he said.

The Commission can impose a fine of up to 10 percent of the company’s annual turnover in case Gazprom breaks its commitments “without having to prove an infringement of EU antitrust rules.” In Gazprom’s case this could be as much as €6.8 billion, according to its 2015 results. It will also set up a monitoring system to ensure Gazprom sticks to the deal.

Opponents of the settlement argued that Gazprom should have been fined. They fear any commitments will be too weak to change Gazprom’s behavior.

“We are disappointed that the years-long proceedings have ended with no fine for Gazprom, no compensation for affected companies, and with hardly any meaningful concessions on Gazprom’s side,” said a Polish diplomat. “This is particularly worrying in the context of the aggressive Russian policy against the EU and its member states. Today’s decision sends a clear signal that the EU is coming to terms with years of Russian tactics of using Gazprom as an external policy tool against the [Central and Eastern European] region.”

A leaked copy of the Commission’s 2015 charges against Gazprom shows Brussels planned to hit the Russian company with significant fines for “intentionally” abusing a dominant position to harm governments and customers in Europe in what was an “obvious infringement” of EU rules.

But the Commission retreated from that hard stance.

Thursday's final announcement comes more than a year after Vestager first announced in March 2017 that she was considering settling the inquiry without a fine in return for Gazprom's commitment to improve how it does business in Central and Eastern Europe.

Lithuania, whose complaints kicked off the case in the first place, was generally pleased with the outcome, but the country's energy minister, Žygimantas Vaičiūnas pointed out that the settlement doesn't correct past wrongs.

"We cannot write off estimated losses of about €1.5 billion to our gas consumers, created by Gazprom abusing its dominant position on the market," he said in a statement. "We will continue to look for ways to make Gazprom to indemnify those losses."

The decision doesn't mean Gazprom won't face lawsuits. "It is for people who feel that they have suffered from Gazprom behavior to go to national courts and to seek compensation as it has just been confirmed by the EU court," Vestager said.

Commission investigators raided Gazprom's offices in 2011, although held off on formally charging the company amid a dramatic deterioration in relations between the EU and Russia over the latter's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

The Commission has not always followed up on threats to fine companies in the past, dropping cases against banks and cement-makers in recent years after they dispelled concerns set out in formal charges. When asked in 2017 to explain why she preferred settling, Vestager said: "We found it was most helpful for citizens to have Gazprom's future behavior changed."

EU settles seven-year Gazprom dispute without imposing fine



The EU has settled a seven-year dispute with Gazprom after the Russian state-controlled energy giant agreed to change its operations in central and eastern Europe.

The deal, announced on Thursday by the EU's competition commissioner, Margrethe Vestager, comes at a time of tensions between Russia and Europe over Ukraine, Syria and the poisoning of the Skripals in Salisbury, which has taken British-Russian relations to a new low. Meanwhile there is division within the EU over the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany.

Vestager sought to isolate the case from the political turmoil. "This case is not about Russia, this case is about European consumers and European businesses and making the market serve them," she said. "This is about what rules to play by, no matter your flag, no matter your ownership."

Under the terms of the deal, Gazprom will be banned from imposing restrictions on how its customers in central and eastern Europe use gas. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia will no longer be banned from exporting gas to another country.

The deal aims to answer concerns that customers in five countries were being over-charged for their gas. From now on, customers in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have the right to demand a price in line with those in Germany and the Netherlands.

If Gazprom fails to respond, these customers can take their complaint to an arbitration body in the EU, which is empowered to impose a lower price.

Some governments are unhappy about the commission's decision not to fine Gazprom for its past behaviour. Lithuania's prime minister, Saulius Skvernelis, described the proposed settlement as "strange", Reuters reported.

Acknowledging that some would have liked to have seen Gazprom fined, Vestager said that option was not in the best interests of European consumers.

"With today's decision, Gazprom has accepted that it has to play by our common European rules, at least if it wants to sell its gas in Europe. It has accepted to play by a rulebook that is tailor-made to ensure that European customers can benefit from the free flow of gas this very day."

She said failure to comply could lead to a fine of up to 10% of global turnover, a step that can be taken without another lengthy legal investigation.

"This is not empty theory," she said. "In 2013 we fined Microsoft over half a billion euros when the company broke its obligation. In other words, the case doesn't stop with today's decision. Rather, it is the enforcement of the Gazprom

obligations that starts today.”

Gazprom’s deputy chief executive, Alexander Medvedev, said he was satisfied with the settlement, describing it as “the most reasonable outcome for the well-functioning of the entire European gas market”.