

Russian Oil Giants Get Record Prices, But Not Profits to Match



The price of crude in rubles has surged to an all-time high, but Russian oil producers will miss out on record first-quarter profit because of a rising tax burden.

Investors in Lukoil PJSC or Rosneft PJSC – which is due to publish earnings on May 14 – will probably have to wait until later in the year to see the full benefit of the surge in crude. So far, Russia’s government has done a better job of translating record prices into revenues, said Denis Borisov, a director at the Ernst & Young Oil and Gas Center in Moscow.

“The golden rain will likely fall on the companies in the second quarter if key conditions – the oil price and ruble exchange rate – remain in place,” Borisov said on Thursday.

The price of international benchmark Brent crude averaged 3,823 rubles a barrel (\$67.23) in the first quarter, just a hair away from the previous quarterly record in 2014. It's risen further to as high as 4,881 rubles this month. Yet the price of Urals crude in Russia's currency, net of taxes, was 3 percent lower from January to March compared with the fourth quarter due to higher oil-extraction levies, according to Deutsche Bank AG.

Tighter Burden

Tax costs of Russia's producers have been rising since last year

The industry also faced a jump in petroleum-product excise tax – an additional support to the state budget to fund road construction that may reach 40 billion rubles this year, according to Finance Ministry's estimates made last year. However, Russia's domestic gasoline price increases lagged crude in the first quarter, possibly showing that companies were holding back from shifting part of this burden onto consumers ahead of presidential elections in March, said Ildar Davletshin, an energy analyst at Wood & Co.

The revenue of state-run Rosneft, which pumps more than 40 percent of Russia's oil, could have hit a record of 1.73 trillion rubles in the first quarter, according to Renaissance Capital. However, it expects net income to drop 19 percent from the fourth quarter to 81 billion rubles.

Rosneft plans to start its first-ever share buyback program this quarter, spending \$2 billion over three years. That means investors will also be closely watching cash flow. Renaissance Capital expects the company to generate 75 billion rubles in the first quarter, almost 16 percent lower than a year ago, Bloomberg calculations show.

Several of Rosneft's peers are planning or implementing

buybacks as a way to share the rewards from rising crude prices with investors. Lukoil announced a five-year repurchase scheme worth as much as \$3 billion back in January – four months before Rosneft. The move boosted the stock's appeal to investors and helped close the gap in the market value of the rivals.

For 2018 as a whole, Lukoil and Gazprom Neft PJSC are expected to post big gains in net income, according to analysts surveyed by Bloomberg. Rosneft's cash flow should more than double to some 550 billion rubles, which is enough to cover interest payments, dividends and as much as half of the planned share purchases, Davletshin said. Another Rosneft plan – to cut its debt by 500 billion rubles this year – may need proceeds from selling non-core assets, he said, a move the company is already considering.

Still, the size of the tax burden remains a risk, particularly as Russia forms a new government. President Vladimir Putin's administration will soon lay out targets for the economy and budget for his fourth term. While the state has promised to avoid significant changes in oil taxes this year, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said this week that Russia will need at least 8 trillion rubles in additional spending to fulfill its plans

Europe Awakens for LNG to Rival China as Own Gas Runs

Out



Europe is starting to steal some of the limelight from China's booming liquefied natural gas demand as imports pick up after several lackluster years.

Europe and China will be comparable in significance as importing regions in the coming years, Cheniere Energy Inc. said, citing data from Wood Mackenzie Ltd. That follows "absolutely phenomenal" growth in China last year, Andrew Walker, vice president for strategy at the company that pioneered the transformation of the U.S. shale boom into global exports, said in Amsterdam.

China's LNG consumption leapt 42 percent last year to almost match European imports, which climbed 20 percent. Whereas the Asian nation needs the fuel mostly to replace dirtier coal, Europe needs it to offset rapidly declining domestic production.

The re-emergence of Europe as an LNG market has caught the eye of the coming wave of U.S. fuel producers. Venture Global LNG, Inc., which is developing export terminals in Louisiana, sees

Europe as “one of the biggest surprises,” it said at the Flame conference in Amsterdam.

Europe’s location may give it an edge over generally higher-priced markets in Asia when it comes to attracting the increasing volumes produced in the Atlantic. North America and Russia were seen providing most of the new supply from 2025 to 2030, according to a poll at Flame.

Demand growth in China and South Korea, the second and third biggest LNG importers, will cool during the rest of this year after continued expansion through April, according to Cedigaz, a Paris-based industry research group. With less appetite also from Japan, the biggest buyer, northern Europe will step in to balance the markets, Cedigaz’s secretary general Geoffroy Hureau said at Flame.

U.K. supply this summer may be low but the Netherlands will see a pick up as it rushes to offset lower own production and higher demand for storage, Nick Boyes, a senior gas and LNG analyst at Axpo Trading AG, said by email. France will also need more for storage, he said.

The Netherlands is taking the lead also because of lack of storage demand in Britain after the closure of the Rough facility. The Dutch market is so hot that the country’s Title Transfer Facility hub will be the main reference for LNG trading in the next three to four months, Ruben Tomas, lead LNG trader at Germany’s Uniper SE’s commodity unit, said on a panel.

“We see a well-supplied Atlantic Basin this summer” as Russia’s Yamal LNG and U.S. projects fill the market with cargoes, Axpo’s Boyes said. Trinidad & Tobago and Angola are also boosting supply, while demand in southern Europe and Egypt is declining, he said.

While the usage rate of LNG terminals in Europe was just 23 percent last year, things are looking up, according to Arturo Gallego Diaz, head of LNG trading and operations at Centrica Plc.

“There are more and more people looking at northwest Europe as an opportunity to deliver volumes that are produced in the Atlantic basin,” he said.

Declining production in the North Sea and the Dutch Groningen field as well as the closing of coal plants in Europe have a “big impact on LNG production” and are “a very big demand surprise,” Venture Global LNG Chief Commercial Officer Tom Earl said at Flame. The company recently signed a supply contract with Portugal’s Galp Energia SGPS SA.

‘Fairly Stable’

Creditworthy counterparts, liquid hubs and physical demand help make Europe attractive for LNG, according to Gallego Diaz.

Uniper expects “fairly stable” demand for gas in Europe, while seeing growth in gas-to-power and potentially transport, said Gregor Pett, executive vice president for market analytics.

Russia, Europe’s biggest gas supplier, sees higher demand for its pipeline gas, undermining the region’s efforts at diversification, according to Sergei Komlev, head of the contract structuring and price formation directorate at Gazprom PJSC’s export unit.

While Russia will continue to pipe natural gas to Europe in competition with LNG, both can co-exist, the Centrica and Uniper executives said.

“I don’t think they exclude each other,” Uniper’s Pett said. “Everyone has a place.”

Higher oil prices offer 'temporary relief' to Mena exporters: IIF

Higher oil prices offer "temporary" relief to the oil exporters of the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) whose economic prospects are improving, according to the Institute of International Finance (IIF), the Washington-based economic think tank.

Oil prices rose rapidly in the past six months on unanticipated sharp output fall in Venezuela, the extension of the producers' pact on production cuts to the 2018- end, the escalation of tensions in the Mena, which enhanced risks of oil supply disruption; and higher global oil demand. We have revised upward our average Brent oil price assumption to \$72 per barrel for 2018 (33% increase from 2017)," IIF said.

With the projected \$18 increase in average oil prices in 2018 against last year, it expects the cumulative current account surplus for the nine Mena oil exporters (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq and Iran) to increase from \$56bn in 2017 to \$233bn (9.5% of gross domestic product) in 2018. "The fiscal situation for Mena oil exporters (except Bahrain and Oman) is now on firmer footing. The respective authorities in the region have implemented serious fiscal adjustment in recent years," it said.

Higher oil prices, combined with additional non-hydrocarbon revenue, should more than offset the 7% average increase in public spending, leading to narrower deficits (excluding investment income), according to the IIF. "We expect the consolidated fiscal deficit for the nine Mena oil exporters to decrease from 7.5% of GDP in 2017 to 3% in 2018," it said, adding when included investment incomes, which are very large

in Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar, the cumulative deficit will be much smaller.

Highlighting that gross public foreign assets will resume its rise to \$2.9trn by end-2018; it said about 70% of these assets are in the form of sovereign wealth funds. With relatively little public external debt, the region's net public external assets position of \$2.6bn (108% of GDP) is substantial, the report added. Expecting non hydrocarbon growth to accelerate from 2.3% in 2017 to 2.8% in 2018 (still well below the average growth of 6.2% in 2001-2014); IIF said the growth pickup will be supported by the shift to fiscal expansion following three years of consolidation. A tighter monetary stance in the six GCC countries and Iraq, whose currencies are pegged to the US dollar, could offset some of the gains from expansionary fiscal stances. "We expect a cumulative increase of 100 bps in key policy rates, in line with the four Fed hikes of 25 bps each," it said.

UK could face court action over air pollution after EU warning: 'We can delay no more'



Proposals made on Tuesday are 'not substantial enough to change the big picture'

Nine European countries including the UK could face legal action if they fail to make progress on reducing air pollution, the EU's top environment official has warned.

The intervention came as legal air pollution limits for the whole year were reached within a month in London.

Brixton Road, Lambeth, has seen levels of pollutant nitrogen dioxide exceed average hourly limits 18 times so far this year, the maximum allowed under European Union air quality rules.

Inaction by national governments over the issue prompted the European Commission's environment commissioner, Karmenu Vella, to warn of legal action after talks with ministers from nine EU countries including Britain, France, Germany, Spain

and Italy – all of which regularly flout the bloc's air quality standards.

“Every year, an astonishing number of citizens' lives are cut short because of air pollution,” Mr Vella said.

“We have known this for decades, and the air quality limit values have been in place for almost as long.

“And yet, still today, in 2018, 400 000 people are still dying prematurely every year because of a massive, widespread failure to address the problem.”

He continued: “The deadlines for meeting the legal obligations have long elapsed... we can delay no more.”

Poor air quality caused by vehicle emissions, industry, power plants and agriculture is known to cause or exacerbate asthma and other respiratory problems.

Air pollution also has significant economic impacts, increasing healthcare costs, reducing employees' productivity and damaging crops, soil, forests and rivers, according to the European Environment Agency's latest annual report.

It has taken the London longer to reach the air pollution limit this year than last year when legal levels were breached less than a week into the new year.

But while campaigners welcomed action by London Mayor Sadiq Khan to tackle pollution, they warned the relative delay in reaching the limit this year could be down to weather conditions dispersing the dirty air.

Environmental groups called for the Government to take urgent steps, including creating and funding clean air zones in pollution hotspots across the UK where 85% of areas still break air quality rules which should have been achieved in 2010.

Government estimates suggest compliance for levels of nitrogen dioxide, much of which comes from road transport, particularly diesel, will not be met until 2026.

The most recent data shows that around 7 per cent of the urban population within the EU was exposed to fine particulate levels higher than the EU-stipulated limit in 2015.

If the stricter World Health Organisation limits are applied, that rises sharply to 82 per cent.

The countries represented at Tuesday's summit have been given ten days to submit new proposals for meeting EU air quality standards regarding particle levels.

In Mr Vella's opinion, the proposals offered by the nine offending countries were "not substantial enough to change the big picture".

He insisted that the only way to avoid court action was to take "all possible measures without delay".

Reacting to the outcome of the summit, ClientEarth lawyer Ugo Taddei said: "Commissioner Vella was evidently unimpressed.

"The European Commission should now follow this blatant inaction through to its legal consequences and trigger court actions without further delay.

"The people of Europe have waited long enough to breathe clean air."

EU Commission warns members it will get tough on pollution



BRUSSELS (Reuters) – The European Commission said on Tuesday it would get tough on air quality and penalize members that breached EU rules on pollutants such as nitrogen oxide and particulate matter.

The Commission estimates that 400,000 people die every year as the result of airborne pollution, and targets introduced for 2005 and 2010 are still being exceeded in 23 of 28 EU countries.

After a meeting with the environment ministers of nine countries which face legal action because of air quality problems, including the bloc's largest economies Germany and France, EU Environment Commissioner Karmenu Vella said his

patience was running thin.

“The deadlines for meeting the legal obligations have long elapsed, and some say we have waited already too long, but we can delay no more, and I have made this very clear to ministers this morning,” Vella told a news conference.

He added that while countries had made some suggestions during the meeting, air quality standards would still be breached well beyond 2020 unless new measures were taken.

“In our exchange, there were some positive suggestions, but I have to say that at first sight, these were not substantial enough to change the bigger picture,” Vella said, adding members had until next week to improve on their proposals.

The EU Commission can take countries to Europe’s top court if they breach EU law. Poland as well as Bulgaria have already faced legal action over air quality issues.

A Trump Darling, Gas Exports, Set to Gain as Iran Deal Dies



Another darling of the Trump administration is poised to gain from the Iran deal breakup as oil surges: Natural gas exports.

With the move to curb Iran's oil output encouraging more shale drilling, prices for natural gas produced alongside crude in West Texas could crater, falling to zero some days, according to Tudor Pickering Holt & Co. Already, the gas sold at West Texas' Waha hub is down 51 percent for the year.

That's bad for producers selling the fuel in the U.S., but good for companies that export it in tankers. As the market for liquefied natural gas grows in Asia, being able to source gas at its cheapest should give U.S. exports a leg up.

From Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross to the President himself, the White House has long sung the praises of increasing American LNG exports to help trim the trade deficit with Asian countries. Meanwhile, the Permian boom has filled pipelines to capacity, trapping gas in the region and making prices there the cheapest of any major U.S. shale play.

Qatar welcomes Maronite Patriarch with open arms





Maronite Patriarch Bechara Rahi has wrapped up a visit to Qatar aimed at serving the spiritual needs of Christian expatriates working in the country, addressing temporal issues relating to the Lebanese community there, and increasing the number of Qatari visitors to Lebanon.



One of the highlights came when Rahi laid the foundation stone for what will be Mar Charbel Church, the first Maronite church in a Gulf Cooperation Council country. The new facility will be built within the Religious Complex in Doha's Abu Hamour district, which houses places of worship for several Christian denominations, including Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Greek Orthodox.



Rahi, who serves as a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church

and whose official title is Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, led a delegation that included Archbishop Francisco Montecillo Padilla, Apostolic Nuncio to Qatar and four other Gulf countries; Bishop Camillo Ballin, Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia; and Archbishop Samir Mazloum, and Archbishops Mazloum and Sayyah, Emeritus Curial Bishop of Antioch and Fr. Charbel Mhanna, Patriarchal Envoy for the Maronites in Qatar.



The patriarch was warmly received by numerous senior officials, chief among them the Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani; the Prime Minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa al-Thani; the Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdel-Rahman al-Thani; and the Minister of Environment and Municipalities, Mohammed bin Abdullah al-Rumaihi. The delegation was accompanied to these meetings by businessman Roudi Baroudi, a prominent member of the Lebanese business community in Doha.



At each stop, Qatari leaders expressed their gratitude and their respect for Lebanese expatriates, who have been instrumental in diluting the impact of efforts by Saudi Arabia and certain other countries to strangle Qatar's economy since mid-2017. Many Lebanese of all faiths have even put off plans to return to their homeland, standing shoulder to shoulder with their hosts to help Qatar maintain strong growth despite the resulting pressures.



Rahi, who was making his third visit to Doha since becoming Patriarch in 2011, also addressed practical considerations in order to strengthen the Qatari-Lebanese relationship, including a streamlining of the processes by which Lebanese

expatriates obtain residency and other status documents in Qatar. He also called for a lifting of the travel advisory that Doha has had in place for Lebanon since November 2017, when Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned under highly suspicious circumstances while visiting Saudi Arabia in November 2017.

بارودي: التوصل الى اتفاق تفاوضي بشأن البلوك 9 قد يعني نصرا اكبر بكثير للبنان



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شدد الخبير النفطي الدولي رودي بارودي على "أن التوصل الى اتفاق تفاوضي جيد من خلال وساطة أو تحكيم طرف ثالث، قد يعني نصرا اكبر بكثير للبنان بدل إسرائيل في النزاع الحاصل حول النفط والغاز في البحر".

واكد بارودي الذي شارك في مؤتمرات دولية عدة آخرها في قبرص "أن هناك عوامل أخرى تبشر بالخير بالنسبة إلى الآفاق القانونية اللبنانية القصيرة والطويلة المدى، بما في ذلك حقيقة أن الجزء من البلوك 9 الذي تهتم به توتال وآني ونوفاتيك، يكمن بوضوح في المياه اللبنانية، وهذا يترك مجالا واسعا لحل وسط وقصير الاجل، على الأقل يسمح بالاستكشاف في المناطق غير الخاضعة للنزاع مع ترك أسئلة

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الخبير النفطي بارودي: التوصل الى اتفاق تفاوضي بشأن البلوك 9 من خلال وساطة أو تحكيم طرف ثالث قد يعني نصرا اكبر بكثير للبنان



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وأضاف بارودي "ان الجانب اللبناني استخدم الرسوم البيانية للهندسة البحرية البريطانية الأصلية كنقطة انطلاق للحدود الجنوبية لمنطقتها الاقتصادية الخالصة، ما يضفي صدقيةً أكبر على معارضتها".

واوضح الخبير النفطي "أن لبنان وقع وصادق على الاتفاقية الدولية الاساسية في شأن ترسيم الحدود البحرية عام 82، إلا أن إسرائيل لم تفعل ذلك، وبناء على ذلك فإنه لا توجد آلية ملزمة يمكن بموجبها لأي من لبنان وإسرائيل ان تحيل الحدود البحرية إليها من أجل حلها، من دون موافقة صريحة من الجانب الآخر".

ولفت بارودي إلى انه "بما ان اسرائيل وقعت اتفاقية منطقة اقتصادية حصرية مع قبرص فإن لدى لبنان خيارات على هذا المستوى".

وتحدث بارودي عن "الجهود الدبلوماسية المعقدة بسبب العديد من العوامل التي تعيق طرق حل النزاع، خصوصاً أن لا علاقات دبلوماسية بين لبنان وإسرائيل".

وشرح الخبير النفطي الدولي تحفظات لبنان في ما يتعلق بتعيين محكمة العدل الدولية أو اي طرف ثالث لحل النزاع الحدودي البحري ذات شقين:

أولاً: المخاوف من أن تسعى إسرائيل لتشريع اي اتفاق لإحالة النزاع البحري الى محكمة العدل الدولية او اي محكمة اخرى بعد موافقة لبنان على إخضاع كل القضايا الحدودية لحل هذه الهيئة.

ثانياً: القلق من أن اي اتفاق مباشر مع إسرائيل على طلب مشاركة

طرف ثالث على النزاع، يمكن اعتباره اعترافا بحكم الواقع وبحكم القانون لإسرائيل.

وأضاف بارودي: "إن هناك عناصر معينة تجعل النزاع اللبناني الإسرائيلي مزيدا من بعض النواحي، لكن الظروف العامة في هذه الحالة ليست عادية"، شارحا أن "كل ولاية ساحلية على كوكب الأرض لديها منطقة بحرية واحدة على الأقل تتداخل مع منطقة أخرى، ولا يزال العديد من هذه النزاعات من دون حل".

وأشار إلى أن "العديد من المعاهدات البحرية الثنائية التي تم التوصل إليها، تعارضها البلدان المجاورة ذات المناطق المتداخلة، كما هو الحال مع معارضة لبنان للاتفاق الإسرائيلي-القبرصي".

رودي بارودي: اتفاق تفاوضي جيد من خلال وساطة أو تحكيم طرف ثالث قد يعني نصرا أكبر بكثير للبنان



شدد الخبير النفطي الدولي رودي بارودي على أن التوصل الى اتفاق تفاوضي جيد من خلال وساطة أو تحكيم طرف ثالث ، قد يعني نصراً اكبر بكثير للبنان بدل إسرائيل في النزاع الحاصل حول النفط والغاز في البحر.

واكد بارودي الذي شارك في مؤتمرات دولية عدة آخرها في قبرص ، أن هناك عوامل أخرى تبشر بالخير بالنسبة إلى الآفاق القانونية اللبنانية القصيرة والطويلة المدى، بما في ذلك حقيقة أن الجزء من البلوك 9 الذي تهتم به توتال وآني ونوفاتيك ، يكمن بوضوح في المياه اللبنانية ، وهذا يترك مجالاً واسعاً لحل وسط وقصير الاجل، على الأقل يسمح بالاستكشاف في المناطق غير الخاضعة للنزاع مع ترك أسئلة اكثر صعوبة في وقت لاحق.

ولفت بارودي الى أن نوعية المعلومات التي قدّمها لبنان إلى الأمم المتحدة والأطراف الأخرى المهمة تعطي أهمية كبيرة لموقفها وبأكثر من طريقة وأضاف بارودي إن الجانب اللبناني استخدم الرسوم البيانية للهندسة البحرية البريطانية الأصلية كنقطة انطلاق للحدود الجنوبية لمنطقتها الاقتصادية الخالصة، ما يضيف صدقيّةً أكبر على معارضتها .

واوضح الخبير النفطي أن لبنان وقع وصادق على الاتفاقية الدولية الاساسية في شأن ترسيم الحدود البحرية عام 82 ، إلا أن إسرائيل لم تفعل ذلك ، وبناء على ذلك فإنه لا توجد آلية ملزمة يمكن بموجبها لأي من لبنان وإسرائيل ان تحيل الحدود البحرية إليها من أجل حلّها ، من دون موافقة صريحة من الجانب الآخر.

ولفت بارودي إلى انه بما ان اسرائيل وقعت اتفاقية منطقة اقتصادية حصرية مع قبرص فإن لدى لبنان خيارات على هذا المستوى. وتحدث بارودي عن الجهود الدبلوماسية المعقدة بسبب العديد من العوامل التي تعيق طرق حل النزاع، خصوصاً أن لا علاقات دبلوماسية بين لبنان وإسرائيل.

وشرح الخبير النفطي الدولي أن تحفظات لبنان في ما يتعلق بتعيين محكمة العدل الدولية أو اي طرف ثالث لحل النزاع الحدودي البحري ذات شقين:

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لبنان على إخضاع كل القضايا الحدودية لحل هذه الهيئة. ثانياً: القلق من أن أي اتفاق مباشر مع إسرائيل على طلب مشاركة طرف ثالث على النزاع ، يمكن اعتباره اعترافاً بحكم الواقع وبحكم القانون لإسرائيل.

وأضاف بارودي: إن هناك عناصر معينة تجعل النزاع اللبناني الإسرائيلي مزيداً من بعض النواحي ، لكن الظروف العامة في هذه الحالة ليست عادية ، وشرح أن كل ولاية ساحلية على كوكب الأرض لديها منطقة بحرية واحدة على الأقل تتداخل مع منطقة أخرى ، ولا يزال العديد من هذه النزاعات من دون حل.

وأشار إلى أن العديد من المعاهدات البحرية الثنائية التي تم التوصل إليها ، تعارضها البلدان المجاورة ذات المناطق المتداخلة، كما هو الحال مع معارضة لبنان للاتفاق الاسرائيلي-القبرصي.