

***Russian-German Baltic Sea gas pipeline raises environmental concerns - Finnish dep. for. min.***

VIENNA. APRIL 24. INTERFAX CENTRAL EUROPE - Russian and German plans to build a natural-gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea, linking the countries directly and bypassing their neighbors, raise environmental concerns, while posing no threat to Finland's strategic interests, the Scandinavia country's deputy foreign minister, Markus Lyra, told Interfax Central Europe Monday.

"I have no problems with it," Lyra said of the project known as Nord Stream at the sidelines of the Europe-Russia Forum in Vienna. "Except the environment - environmental issues need to be addressed and I am not sure that they have been addressed. I have an environmental problem with it, but no security [problem]."

Sweden also opposes the Nord Stream project on environmental grounds, citing the high quantities of poisonous gases and other chemicals sunk in the Baltic by the Nazis in the dying days of World War II.

Meanwhile, the Central European countries between Russia and Germany perceive the project as a security risk. Since pricing disputes with Belarus and Ukraine have led to several cut-offs, or threatened cut-downs, in deliveries to the region on several occasions in the past four years. Poland and Lithuania fear the pipeline bypassing their territory would allow Russia to blackmail them without alienating its more important customers further west. But these countries also cite environmental concerns.

"New projects such as the Nord Stream project, could have a very negative impact on the Baltic Sea," chairman of the Lithuanian parliament's foreign-affairs committee, Justinas Karosas, said. "It is a significant environmental problem. Lithuania therefore urges the EU to carry out preliminary environmental studies before building the project."

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