

Putin Welcomes EU Leaders in St. Pete

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ST. PETERSBURG — European Union leaders sit down for the first time with President Vladimir Putin since his return to the Kremlin this Monday for a summit that is expected to send out many signals but little substance.

The two-day talks, which kicked off with a dinner Sunday night, are being held in Constantine Palace, an 18th-century baroque beauty overlooking the Gulf of Finland outside Putin's hometown, St. Petersburg.

But despite the grandeur, the summit won't see any joint statements or signatures. Rather, diplomats said, EU co-leaders Herman van Rompuy and Manuel Barroso and foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton will focus on getting reacquainted with Putin, who had not been their official interlocutor during the last four years, when he served as prime minister.

"It's all about atmosphere," said a senior EU official, requesting anonymity in order to speak candidly. He added that what the Europeans will look out for most is whether Putin will move away from the Kremlin's previous stance versus Brussels. "There is an expectation that he

will make some new marks," the official said.

During his election campaign, Putin sent strong signals that he is less inclined to cooperate with the West, accusing the United States of financially supporting the opposition, which led unprecedented mass protests against him and election fraud.

Putin did pay short visits to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and newly elected French President Francois Hollande last Friday, but only after a longer stop in Belarus, where he held talks with his counterpart Alexander Lukashenko, whom the EU has hit with sanctions for his crackdown on the opposition.

Talks with Merkel and Hollande were dominated by differences over the crisis in Syria, in which Moscow accuses the West of giving one-sided support to the opposition, and both the EU and the Kremlin have announced that they will discuss the issue.

The biannual summits between Russia and the 27-member union usually focus on trade, energy and travel, progress over each having been excruciatingly slow over the past years.

Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, or WTO, signed last December, removed a big barrier for talks over a new wide-ranging bilateral agreement, but EU officials say they will wait until it goes into effect later this year.

Trade relations are dominated by the country's energy exports to the EU, which reached 158 billion euros (about \$200 billion) last year, dwarfing the EU's exports to Russia at 108 billion euros and resulting in an overall trade deficit of 91 billion euros, according to official EU statistics.

Moscow complains that EU energy market policies are disadvantageous to its oil and gas companies, to which Brussels officials retort that European energy companies face more restrictions in Russia.

Long-standing talks about visa-free travel reached a turning point in December, when both sides agreed on a list of common steps that are to be fulfilled in order to start actual negotiations. But those steps amount to a 40-point to-do list, work on which is mainly Moscow's job, prompting extreme caution from Brussels when Kremlin officials say this will be done by January 2013.

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