

# Russia Sends Medvedev to Munich Seeking Sanctions Relief

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Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in Sept. 2014. He is heading the Russian delegation set to attend the upcoming Munich Security Conference.

At last year's Munich Security Conference, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov took to the stage to defend Russia's actions in Ukraine. Scheduled between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the U.S. vice president, Lavrov faced a tough sell.

He did his best to toe the government line, declaring Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 more legitimate than the reunification of Germany in 1990. It was all too much for the audience of heads of state, foreign and defense ministers, and experts. He was laughed at.

"Lavrov accuses the EU of 'supporting coup d'etat' in Kiev. I hope he feels somewhat ashamed of having to market such rubbish," former Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, a staunch critic of Russia's actions in Ukraine, wrote at the time.

Lavrov was, of course, pandering to a domestic audience. His points were not meant to sway international opinion of Moscow's foreign policy, but to reinforce Russian state media narratives of the crisis in Ukraine, regardless of how it looked abroad.

This year, it appears Russia is changing tack. While Lavrov will attend the Munich conference, Russia's official delegation will be led by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev — the message seems to be that Russia is ready to talk about sanctions relief.

"Medvedev is a positive sign that means Moscow is taking the event more seriously now," said Yury Barmin, a political analyst. "All in all, I think the Russian delegation will try to smooth out the disagreements with the West, and Medvedev's presence might help."

Medvedev provides a soft face with which to wrap Russia's intransigence on issues like Crimea, the conflict in eastern Ukraine, and Moscow's support for Syrian President Bashar Assad. Whether true or not, Medvedev is viewed in Moscow as the West's Russian sweetheart.

According to Dr. Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russian security affairs, Medvedev will be looking for clarity on sanctions relief, "or, at least, some hope of widening divisions over the issue." Medvedev will relay the usual Russian talking points, but "sanctions are the absolute central issue."

## **Under Pressure**

Official Russian foreign policy positions in Ukraine and Syria have not changed since Lavrov was laughed off stage last year. But Moscow has been forced to show flexibility in finding a solution to its standoff with the West.

The reason for the softening of Russia's position is simple: the nation is experiencing its worst economic crisis since 1998, and Western sanctions are part of the problem. Consumers and companies are in desperate need of relief from the recession.

Economists from Russian banks said that were sanctions lifted tomorrow, Russia's economy would receive considerable stimulus, as companies could begin refinancing their debts in foreign currencies — which would provide the ruble with a measurable boost. However, some economists doubted that the relief would be significant enough to entice the Russian government into capitulating to Western demands in Ukraine.

There is, however, something to be said for the government's fear of economically-motivated public unrest. Negotiating an end to sanctions, even if the relief is more symbolic than substantive, would send a positive message to concerned Russians.

The Kremlin faces a daunting balancing act: It cannot be seen to abandon the separatist forces it supported in eastern Ukraine — especially if Kiev pulls back from implementing the political side of the Minsk agreements. Equally, it cannot afford to continue its fight with the West.

"Russia wants a repeat of the 2008 Georgian War scenario — getting back to business as usual with the West without having to cede any ground," said Vladimir Frolov, a Russian expert on international relations.

As such, Medvedev will look to explore Russia's maneuvering room. Meanwhile, the Europeans will themselves look to discuss sanctions, according to U.S. Senator John McCain, who is scheduled to participate in the conference.

## **Twin Track**

Medvedev's peacemaking effort is part of a broader attempt to reopen diplomatic tracks with the United States. The extent of this apparent detente was underlined last month by a mysterious and surprising meeting in Kaliningrad between Kremlin advisor Vladislav Surkov and Washington's Victoria Nuland.

Following the meeting, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry mentioned for the first time that sanctions could be lifted. But agreeing on an acceptable schedule of sanctions relief won't be easy, as the crisis in Ukraine is not over.

The key to sanctions relief is implementing the Minsk-2 ceasefire agreement. But Kiev, under considerable domestic pressure, may decide it's in their best interests to spoil Minsk. Likewise, separatists in eastern Ukraine may find reasons of their own to reject Minsk, under plausibly deniable instruction from Moscow, or otherwise.

Russia is trying to paint Ukraine as the problem. Moscow has argued that Kiev is dragging its feet on implementing its side of the Minsk bargain, namely enacting constitutional reform allowing for greater autonomy for the rebel regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. But the Russian-backed rebels have also been sluggish in implementing Minsk. OSCE monitors have noted serious ceasefire and weaponry infringements on both sides.

## **The Syrian Connection**

Looking beyond Ukraine, Russia's efforts to break sanctions will be further complicated by its actions in Syria. Though the West has "compartmentalized" the two, checking Moscow's attempt to trade its favor with Assad for a compromise in Ukraine, there is an unspoken link between them.

Russia's actions in Syria have been resoundingly derided in the West, and peace talks collapsed last week as Russian warplanes flew cover for a Syrian army advance on rebel positions in the northern region of Aleppo.

This infuriated German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was reported to be "horrified" by the suffering caused under Russian bombing. Merkel's reaction may foreshadow a broad challenge to Medvedev's efforts in Munich. But, as Galeotti noted, "were the Russians expecting a diplomatic triumph, Putin likely would have gone."

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