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# Medvedev Heads for Tough EU Talks in Brussels

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After a groundbreaking summit in Poland, President Dmitry Medvedev will head to Brussels on Tuesday for much harder talks with European Union leaders.

Medvedev will push long-standing Russian demands at this year's second EU-Russia summit, the Kremlin said Monday, but analysts said it was unlikely that the talks would result in much substantial progress.

Many observers expect the main tangible outcome to be a memorandum sealing approval of Moscow's bid to join the World Trade Organization, while hopes for visa-free travel and common ground on foreign and security policy will be projected into a dim future.

"Russia sees the EU as a real strategic partner, linked by sizable economic interdependence and common approaches to international and regional issues," the Kremlin said in an e-mailed statement Monday.

But one key foreign policy issue identified earlier this year is unlikely to move forward, diplomats said.

In June, Medvedev and German Chancellor Angela Merkel pledged to found a joint Security Committee that would help resolve regional crises and conflicts.

Moscow has since been pushing for the committee, which would basically add Russia to the council of the bloc's 27 foreign ministers, saying the arrangement would give substance to its foreign policy cooperation with Brussels.

But the initiative immediately ran into trouble because both sides disagree on the conditions. Merkel said in June that the first issue to be tackled should be the conflict in Transdnestr, a separatist sliver of eastern Moldova where Russian troops have kept an uneasy peace for almost two decades.

Diplomats said Transdnestr was chosen as a test case for Russia's willingness to solve "frozen conflicts" in its neighborhood.

"It seemed the least insolvable of the insolvable conflicts," a senior EU diplomat told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity.

But the Kremlin refuses the notion of conditionality.

"Transdnestr was never put forward as a precondition but as a pilot project," Moscow's EU ambassador, Vladimir Chizhov, told Interfax in an interview last week.

Chizhov added that the impasse could not be solved without the two conflict parties: Moldova and the separatist leadership in Tiraspol.

A current political impasse in Moldova makes a fast solution to the conflict unlikely, he said.

That argument was supported by a second diplomatic source in the EU, who said the summit was too close to last month's parliamentary elections in Moldova to discuss Transdnestr in detail.

"It is just too early to talk about that," the source said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Analysts have argued that Moscow could do much more to solve the conflict.

"The EU expects Moscow to demonstrate good faith in Transdnestr — and so far there is no sign of that," said Frazer Cameron, director of the EU-Russia Center, a Brussels-based think tank.

But Konstantin Zatulin, a United Russia lawmaker who serves as first deputy chairman of the State Duma's Commonwealth of Independent States Committee, said the EU should not expect any concessions from Moscow over Transdnestr: "We have no obligation to Brussels here — our only obligation is to help our citizens who were left defenseless after the Soviet Union's dissolution," he said by telephone.

The issue also overshadowed last week's summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in the Kazakh capital, Astana, which failed to agree on an action plan to resolve future conflicts.

Another potentially slow-moving topic will be visa-free travel. The Kremlin jumped on an initiative revitalized by Spain earlier this year to abolish visa requirements for both

Europeans and Russians, but other EU members quickly countered that Russia should not get free-travel before a group of post-Soviet states including Belarus and Azerbaijan, which signed the EU's Eastern Partnership program.

On Monday, the Kremlin said the issue remained a test case. "This is an essential indicator of whether the EU is ready to build a bigger Europe — a unified economic and liberal [humanitarian] space," the Kremlin statement said.

Ambassador Fernando Valenzuela, head of the EU delegation to Moscow, said EU leaders would definitely set no deadline for when visas would be scrapped.

"Artificial deadlines do not help," he told Interfax on Monday.

Instead, Valenzuela said, both sides would probably agree to start new negotiations to ease visa regulations next year. They would be parallel to talks already under way on lifting visas altogether, he said.

The summit is the 26th top-level EU-Russia meeting. Both sides meet twice every year, once in Russia and once in an EU member country.

After the Lisbon Treaty reforms abolished the rotating presidency's say over the EU's foreign policy, the European venue is set to be Brussels.

In a peculiar gaffe, the Kremlin's statement Monday failed to mention Herman van Rompuy, the European Union president, saying merely that EU Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso would represent the European side.

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