

First Set of APEC Meetings Over

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The first major round of meetings under the Kremlin's stewardship of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum finished Sunday, as Russia races to pack in a full schedule before an earlier than usual heads of state summit in September.

The final annual gathering of APEC traditionally takes place in November but was pushed forward to September this year so delegates could avoid the rigors of host city Vladivostok's winter climate.

Twenty days of meetings that began on Jan. 30 culminated last week as deputy finance ministers and deputy central bankers held two days of talks in Yaroslavl. The first APEC senior officials' meeting closed in Moscow on Sunday.

The Yaroslavl discussions focused on the global economic situation, budget consolidation, the different treasury systems employed by member states and how finance ministries can respond to natural disasters, Deputy Finance Minister Sergei Storchak said in an interview published on Russia's APEC website Friday.

Of the 21 members of the Pacific Rim trade organization founded in 1989, only the United States and Japan are grappling with "big questions" of budget expenditure and state debt, Storchak said. But he added that all countries "understand the threats and risks associated with the possibility of a worsening of the situation in Europe."

In 2011, APEC was hosted by the United States and the final summit was held in President Barack Obama's home city of Honolulu, Hawaii. Indonesia will host in 2013.

Washington's selection of Hawaii last year showed how the United States was "pivoting" toward the Far East, Ambassador Hans Klemm, the U.S. senior coordinator for APEC, told The Moscow Times on Saturday. Vladivostok is also a Pacific city and was picked for the same reasons, he added.

"The Russians are using their APEC year to re-emphasize their role in the Far East," Klemm said. "The whole character of the choice would have been different if they had chosen St. Petersburg."

In the run-up to the summit in Vladivostok, regular meetings will seek consensus on issues from counterterrorism to intellectual property rights. Last week's meeting in Yaroslavl was preparation for an August finance ministers' meeting in Moscow. Other gatherings will be held in Kazan, St. Petersburg and Khabarovsk.

For its APEC year, Russia has chosen to focus discussion on innovation, supply chain management, food security and regional economic integration. The United States is being approached by the Russian side for organizational "quality control" advice, Klemm said.

There have been some concerns that Russia will not complete an ambitious infrastructure construction program in Vladivostok in time for the Sept. 1 summit opening. In December, an 11-hour fire spread along part of a \$1.3 billion bridge being built from the city to Russky Island.

"We have been reassured repeatedly and with a great deal of confidence from the Russian side that they will have it done," Klemm said.

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