

Putin's Foreign Policy Goes on the Road

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A lighting display making a political statement Thursday at Savyolovsky Market with the president declaring "I'll be all right" above signs reading "exit." **Vladimir Filonov**

In a highly symbolic gesture, President Vladimir Putin on Thursday arrived in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, to pay his first foreign visit as head of state to controversial Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko.

Putin will continue on to Berlin and Paris on Friday to pay lightning visits to newly elected presidents Joachim Gauck and Francois Hollande, as well as for talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. His busy schedule continues Sunday evening in St. Petersburg, where he hosts a two-day summit with EU leaders.

He then flies to Tashkent for talks with Uzbek president Islam Karimov and to Beijing for a summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

On his way back, Putin has scheduled a stopover in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, for talks with president Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Analysts said that by starting his travels in Belarus, Putin is signaling that relations with former Soviet republics and Asia take priority over relations with the West.

“Minsk might lie to the west geographically, but it lies firmly in the east politically,” said Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Belarus, which has been governed by the authoritarian Lukashenko for 18 years, has become something of a pariah state since a violent crackdown on the opposition in 2010. Earlier this year, the European Union stepped up its sanctions upon the execution of two convicted bombers.

Despite frequent irritations caused by Lukashenko’s erratic behavior, Moscow has stood firmly by its neighbor, to whom it is tied through a customs union and a union state — although the latter is largely a paper tiger.

Putin and Lukashenko are expected to discuss further economic aid for Belarus, which is battling a severe economic crisis.

In other signs of defiance toward the West, Putin snubbed the G8 summit in Camp David two weeks ago, sending Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev instead. He then chose the presidents of Georgia’s breakaway republics Abkhazia and South Ossetia to become the first “foreign leaders” to meet him after his reinauguration as president May 7.

Western diplomats say they will be watching extra carefully to see what sort of atmosphere develops during the talks in Berlin and Paris on Friday and in St. Petersburg on Sunday and Monday.

“All eyes will be on Putin — how will he act?” said one senior European diplomat, requesting anonymity in order to speak candidly.

The Kremlin suggested in statements that trade and investment to modernize the country’s economy will top the agenda in Berlin and Paris, but most observers believe that the dramatic situation in Syria will steal the show.

Merkel said Thursday that she would raise the issue with Putin.

“What is happening in Syria is a catastrophe, and we will do everything to reduce human suffering,” she told reporters according to a [transcript](#) of her remarks on her website.

Observers will also watch how Putin gets on with Joachim Gauck, a former East German dissident who was elected to the largely ceremonial post of Germany’s head of state last month. Putin served as a KGB spy in East Germany during much of the 1980s.

The subsequent talks in Paris are promising to be prickly after President Hollande announced that he will try to persuade Moscow not to veto military intervention in Syria. Putin and the new French head of state have not met before.

The Kremlin has been a staunch supporter of President Bashar Assad despite his ongoing crackdown on the opposition. However, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov softened his position slightly this week by saying Moscow was unhappy with Syria’s implementation of the peace

plan forwarded by UN envoy Kofi Annan.

Syria is also likely to be high on the agenda of the EU summit, which will be held in Constantine Palace, a summer residence of Peter the Great outside St. Petersburg.

The talks with European Council President Herman van Rompuy and European Commission President Manuel Barroso will also focus on trade and investment, energy and visa policy.

But the summit is unlikely to yield any concrete results. The senior European diplomat said the fact that the event is taking place so soon after Putin's inauguration was already a success.

Leaders of the EU and Russia have agreed to meet regularly twice a year.

Relations with Brussels have long been fraught by Moscow's protectionist trade policies. While this obstacle is largely out of the way since the country's accession to the World Trade Organization, other problems are expected to persist.

Among them are Putin's preference for engaging EU member states bilaterally rather than through Brussels, a policy highlighted by his decision to visit Berlin and Paris, the Union's key capitals, before the summit. Another cause for concern is his aim of creating a Eurasian Union with former Soviet states.

The Kremlin said in its statement that the talks with Merkel should be expected to give "a powerful impulse" to bilateral relations and stressed the fact that Germany is the second country that Putin visits after Belarus.

"Russo-German cooperation is an important stabilizing factor in European and global politics," it said.

Analysts have argued that Putin's diminished enthusiasm about Europe was also captured in a Feb. 27 article he wrote that spelled out his foreign policy priorities.

"He talked at length about China and Southeast Asia as strategic partners, but very little about the EU," said Vladislav Belov of the Institute of International Relations.

Others said that by shifting its focus eastward, Moscow is only rectifying failures of the past. "In the 1990s we lost influence over much of Asia, Africa and the Arab world while trying to be equal partners with the West. But the West has accepted Russia only as a second-tier partner," said Ivan Safranchuk, of Moscow's Diplomatic Academy.

He added that the ongoing euro crisis makes ties with Asia even more attractive.

However, Malashenko of the Carnegie Center had another explanation.

"Putin just feels more comfortable with leaders in authoritarian countries like China and Uzbekistan, where there are fewer critical journalists who ask him annoying questions," he said.

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