The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Year of Germany Will Commence Without Putin

By Nikolaus von Twickel

June 18, 2012



Vladmir Putin reportedly invited German President Joachim Gauck to visit at this meeting in Berlin on June 1.

Wednesday's opening ceremony for the Year of Germany in Russia will have music by Bach and Shostakovich, an exhibition about a millennium of common history and a gigantic puzzle — but not its two most prominent guests.

Neither Russian President Vladimir Putin nor his German counterpart, Joachim Gauck, is planning to show up.

Consisting of a string of events over the coming 12 months throughout the country, the celebration is meant to highlight the special relationship between Moscow and Berlin in all spheres, ranging from culture, politics and business, German officials say.

Originally, organizers planned to have the two heads of state meet on Red Square to put in the

final pieces of a 300-square-meter puzzle depicting a self-portrait of Renaissance artist Albrecht Durer.

Instead, the puzzle will be assembled on Manezh Square, and two officials from the respective foreign ministries, Cornelia Pieper and Mikhail Shvidkoi, will insert the last of the 1,023 pieces.

Both Russian and German officials said the presidents could not make it because of scheduling difficulties.

That explanation sounds strange because Putin announced after talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on June 1 that he would personally hand an invitation to Gauck.

"I hope I will have the pleasure to hand this invitation to him personally," Putin told reporters in Berlin, according to a Kremlin transcript.

"The main aim of the ensuing meeting with Gauck was to agree on the timing of [the German president's] visit to Russia. The start of the Year of Germany in Russia hinges upon that date," Deutsche Welle's Russian service reported at the time.

While spokespeople for both governments did not deny that Putin issued an invitation, it is unclear whether it actually contained a date.

A Kremlin spokesman did not know of any date and said Putin could not make it Wednesday because of the G20 summit in Mexico.

"This is just logistically impossible," said the spokesman, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to go on the record.

But a spokesman for the German president's office said Gauck had planned to come to Russia on Thursday.

"This plan could not be realized, and he will not come Wednesday," the spokesman, Andreas Schulze, wrote in an e-mail. He added that both sides were currently looking for a new date.

Putin is due to address the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on Thursday at 2 p.m.

A spokeswoman for the Goethe Institute, the cultural arm of the German Embassy, which is in charge of the organization, said one plan was that Gauck would travel with Putin to St. Petersburg.

"But it became clear by June 8 that this was not going to happen," said the spokeswoman, Simone Voigt.

Even more puzzling, German media reported before Putin's visit to Berlin that the Kremlin had already informed the German leadership that Putin would not come for the puzzle event in June.

The reason given was much clearer.

"The former KGB agent Putin does not want to give a big stage to the freedom fighter Gauck, who has only contempt for the communist spying system," the weekly Der Spiegel wrote in its May 29 edition, without saying where it got the information.

But few expect that a meeting with Gauck in Moscow would be smooth. A former dissident in communist East Germany, Gauck earned a name as a hunter of members of the East German secret police, or Stasi. He headed the German Federal Commission for the Stasi Archives from 1990 to 2000.

Putin served as a KGB spy in the East German city of Dresden from 1985 to 1990.

Analysts said they could hardly imagine Gauck visiting Moscow without meeting opposition members.

In fact, Memorial, a nongovernmental organization that campaigns for the investigation of Soviet crimes, invited Gauck to visit their offices in Moscow.

"I think he will do everything he can to visit us, and I hope he will lay flowers at the memorial stone outside Lubyanka," Memorial executive director Yelena Zhemkova told The Moscow Times.

The stone close to the former KGB headquarters is from the Solovki prison camp in memory of the victims of the Soviet gulag.

Experts were divided about whether the inability to organize a meeting with Gauck was a sign of further trouble for Putin's relations with Germany and the West.

Putin has long held that relations with Germany are "privileged," and as confirmation he chose Berlin as his first destination in the West on June 1, only after stopping by Minsk for talks with controversial Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko.

But while the talks with Merkel were said to be constructive, German media reports have suggested that the German chancellor was deeply disappointed by Putin's decision to return to the presidency because she had invested more than other Western leaders into his predecessor, Dmitry Medvedev.

Alexander Rahr, a Berlin-based veteran Russia watcher, suggested that while Berlin was partly to blame for the scheduling difficulties, the troubles were part of a bigger picture.

"The mess started with G8 and the APEC summit," he said.

Putin raised eyebrows last month when he canceled a visit to the summit of the eight leading economies at Camp David because he was too busy with forming the government.

Media reports subsequently said U.S. President Barack Obama would not attend the Asia-Pacific summit hosted by Russia this fall in Vladivostok.

Analysts have offered various explanations for Putin's decision, and Rahr said it was so far unclear who was to blame.

Philipp Missfelder, a member of the German Bundestag's foreign policy committee for Merkel's Christian Democrats, said that while the failure to get the presidents to Moscow was regrettable, he hoped they would meet in the near future.

"The symbolism of the Year of Germany in Russia should help overcome this," he said.

Vladislav Belov of the Moscow State International Relations Institute agreed, saying ties between the two countries are strong as it is.

"The failure to find a date was largely caused by bureaucracies — on both sides," he said.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/06/18/year-of-germany-will-commence-without-putin-a15533