

Russia-EU Values Gap on Display at Summit

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

June 03, 2013



Putin, center, standing Tuesday with Van Rompuy, left, and European Commission head Jose Manuel Barroso. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

Despite declarations of strategic partnership and cooperation at Tuesday's Russia-EU summit in Yekaterinburg, leaders of the two sides demonstrated an apparently growing rift on a wide array of issues, including civil liberties and ways to resolve the bloody civil war in Syria.

One of the main expected achievements of the meeting, a visa facilitation agreement, failed to materialize due to lingering disagreements, and while President Vladimir Putin emphasized the economic dimension of the Russia-EU relationship, European Council President Herman Van Rompuy focused on shared values and human rights.

"Fundamental human rights is an important, albeit difficult, dimension of our partnership," Van Rompuy said at a news conference following the talks.

Issues of human and civil rights loomed large at the summit after leading Russian economist Sergei Guriev fled to France last month, citing hostile questioning by Russia's Investigative Committee and fears that he could face further pressure from law enforcement.

At the news conference, Putin said the story was overblown and that Guriev was welcome to come back to Russia if he wanted to.

"If [Guriev] did not violate anything, then he is 100 percent safe. And if he is practicing economics, let him do that where he wants to, where he likes it best," Putin said.

"Are there any reasons to put him in jail? I don't know anything about that. I learned his name only recently and don't know if he has any transgressions before the law," the president said.

Guriev reacted quickly to Putin's invitation to come back, saying the president's assurances were not enough for him to change his mind.

"I think it is safer for me to be a free person and not to return," he told Reuters.

Guriev, who until this month served as rector of Moscow's prestigious New Economic School, was questioned by investigators in connection with his participation in an independent report on the case against former Yukos head Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Reiterating earlier comments, Guriev told Kommersant-FM on Tuesday that numerous "high-placed" friends, including government officials, told him in late April that it was not safe for him to stay in Russia and recommended that he leave the country.

Addressing another topic that marks an apparent divide between Europe and Russia, Putin said he would sign a bill banning adoptions by foreign same-sex couples if passed by Russia's parliament. The bill was proposed following the recent passage of a law in France legalizing same-sex marriage.

Putin also reacted to widespread criticism of a bill banning "gay propaganda" among minors that is currently being considered by the State Duma.

"Our legislation is quite liberal and there is no discrimination," he said.

Western governments have frequently criticized authorities in St. Petersburg for a local version of the law currently being considered by the Duma, and gay rights have consistently been a point of contention between Russia and the EU.

The two sides signed an agreement on anti-narcotics cooperation and discussed work on a new foundational Russia-EU agreement taking into account ongoing Eurasian integration, the Kremlin said in a statement.

But one of the expected breakthroughs of the summit, a long-awaited visa facilitation agreement, was not completed, in part due to lack of consensus on the issue of service passports.

The EU wants to limit the number of Russian holders of such passports, which are given to certain officials, to 15,000 and to receive legal guarantees that only bureaucrats going

on business trips to Europe will be issued such documents.

In addition, the EU asked Russia to delay the introduction of a requirement to provide Russian authorities with information on European airline passengers until there is an international agreement setting out a procedure for the process. (See related story, page 7.) As a result, the sides decided to prolong negotiations.

As the summit got underway, over 45 members of European Parliament said they would veto an agreement on visa-free travel for Russian officials unless the EU implements sanctions against Russians implicated in the arrest and death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. The United States passed a law putting such penalties into place last year.

The two sides' lack of accord on Syria was also in evidence Tuesday.

While Putin said Russia had not yet delivered its sophisticated S-300 missile system to Syria, the sale of which the U.S. and its European allies have heavily criticized, he lambasted the EU's failure to extend a weapons embargo for Syria. The EU move has opened the door to EU countries delivering arms to the rebels fighting the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia has been the strongest and most long-standing ally of Assad, while ten European countries have already recognized Syria's National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

Following the talks, the participants viewed a lit-up model of Yekaterinburg's proposed grounds for World Expo-2020, which the city has put in a bid to host.

While the summit presumably gave EU leaders an opportunity to enjoy the sights of the Ural Mountains city, some locals were hassled by the arrival of Putin, whose Federal Guard Service kept security tight. Officers from the service told a local rafting team on Tuesday to stop their exercises in Yekaterinburg's central pond because "Putin is in town."

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/06/03/russia-eu-values-gap-on-display-at-summit-a24679>