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Gay Rights Issue Winds Up on G20 Agenda

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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President Vladimir Putin and British Prime Minister David Cameron in Sochi, May 2013.

President Vladimir Putin will likely find himself responding to Western criticism of Russia's anti-gay propaganda law at the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg this weekend, as British Prime Minister David Cameron has announced plans to raise the issue and U.S. President Barack Obama has scheduled a meeting with LGBT activists.

In an interview on the eve of the summit, Putin answered a series of questions on touchy issues that are currently plaguing Russia's relations with the West, including Syria, U.S. intelligence leaker Edward Snowden and Russia's recently passed legislation banning gay "propaganda" among minors.

But if he had been hoping that the interview would serve as a preemptive strike to prevent such topics from overshadowing trade and economic issues at the forum, it seems he will be disappointed.

Western leaders plan to use the G20 to see firsthand what rights gays have in Russia.

British Under Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, Alistair Burt, confirmed Wednesday that Cameron would raise the gay rights issue with Putin on the sidelines of the summit, where he has been asked to persuade other G20 leaders to sign a joint declaration against homophobia in Russia.

Peter Tatchel, one of those behind the request for such a declaration, said: "This would be a very effective rebuke to Putin." The activists' request for such a declaration had been forwarded to Cameron, he said.

The anti-gay law stipulates fines of 4,000 rubles to 1 million rubles ($125 to $31,000) for promoting homosexuality among minors and has provoked a wave of criticism from Western politicians and international human rights groups.

Many Western activists have said that only pressure from the international community could change what they say is a homophobic atmosphere in Russia.

Russian activists, however, have expressed skepticism regarding the attempts of Western leaders to press Putin over gay rights at the G20.

Veteran human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov said a meeting with the U.S. president would do nothing to change the situation in Russia.

"This is a hospitality event for the sake of appearance, it is not aimed at a serious discussion; gay rights activists would not be able to raise any questions anyway, and the event will mostly consist of Obama's own speech," Ponomaryov said by phone, adding that it was obvious that gay rights in Russia were not a priority for Obama.

Both Ponomaryov and Lyudmila Alexeyeva, who first said they would take part in a meeting with Obama on Friday, said later they would not be able to attend due to a postponement of the meeting.

Russia's most well-known gay rights activist, Nikolai Alexeyev, said he would also not be taking part in the meeting with Obama, adding that he would prefer to meet with Putin rather than Obama.

"What can Obama decide? He'll come and he'll leave, while we'll stay here with our own problems. So we need to talk to someone who can solve them," Alexeyev said by phone.

Alexeyev might just get his wish. He sent an official request to the presidential administration on Wednesday to meet with Putin after the Russian president said in an interview with Channel One and The Associated Press the night before that he would be willing to consider meeting with LGBT activists if any of them would ask him to, though according to him, none

had.

Alexeyev, who said he hoped his request would be granted due to the increased public attention to the issue of gay rights, said he had asked the president to meet before on numerous occasions but had always been denied.

He said he intended to discuss with the president the issue of gay rights rallies and gay pride parades and ask him to make amendments to Russian legislation so that crimes motivated by homophobia would carry more severe punishment and there would be no discrimination against gay people at work places.

But according to Alexeyev, neither Obama's nor Cameron's efforts at the G20 will lead to any results, and they are nothing more than a symbolic gesture.

Analysts agreed that efforts by Western leaders would not change Putin's stance on the issue.

"Putin has already responded to all the possible questions that Western leaders could ask him at the G20 on the matter of gay rights. He knew that this issue would be raised, and his position was voiced rather clearly in his usual tough demeanor," said Lilia Shevtsova, a political analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

In the interview in which Putin tackled all these issues, he rejected the idea that gay rights in Russia were being violated and that the "propaganda" law was directed against gay people.

"I work with such people. I sometimes present them with national awards for their achievements in different areas. There's no need to make a mountain out of a mole hill, nothing horrible is happening in Russia," he said.

He also said concerns about possible gay rights violations at the upcoming Sochi Olympics were unfounded and aimed at discrediting the games.

While many activists were likely glad to hear of Western leaders taking a stand on the gay rights issue, meetings between U.S. presidents and human rights activists in Russia is nothing new. Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama have all held such meetings in the past. Secretary of State John Kerry also held a similar meeting during his visit to Russia this spring.

This time around, the activists were invited to the meeting by the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg, whose representative said by phone that the meeting would be held as part of the White House's 10-year tradition of such meetings.

Anna Anisimova, the head of a prominent St. Petersburg-based LGBT rights group, said her organization had chosen not to take part in the meeting.

Igor Kochetkov, an activist with Russia's LGBT Network, however, said he would attend as a representative for St. Petersburg gay rights activists.

According to Kochetkov, the meeting with Obama will be quite productive, and though it has been rescheduled three times already, he still intended to go.

"I would be interested to talk with Obama about creating international mechanisms that

would ensure the observance of gay rights in Russia," he said.

Contact the author at e.kravtsova@imedia.ru

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