

EU Links Easing of Visas to Russia's Rights Record

By [Yekaterina Kravtsova](#)

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Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov

An official from the European Union spoke out about several concerns over Russia during a visit to Moscow on Friday, warning that plans for a visa-free regime would be put on hold until issues of corruption and human rights are addressed.

The meeting came shortly after the EU decided to cut short a planned meeting with Russian leaders in Brussels later this month, a move which observers have attributed to an ongoing spat over Ukraine.

Justice Minister Alexander Konovalov said Friday's meeting of the Russia-EU Permanent Partnership Council was more about preserving ties than anything else.

"We are trying not to turn our relations completely sour and maintain a certain level of dialogue," Konovalov said after meeting with EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia

Malmström, adding that the EU was not willing to take further steps in the dialogue for a visa-free regime with Russia.

Konovalov added that Russia was not going to pressure the EU over the visa deal. "We have a feeling that our colleagues in the EU are not committed and do not feel a need to eliminate the barriers between Russia and the EU," he said.

Negotiations about the visa-free regime have been ongoing for more than 10 years, and Russia has accused the EU of deliberately delaying the process on several occasions. In December, Russia said it had prepared a visa agreement and that it hoped the EU would sign it at the next Russia-EU summit, which has now been shortened from two days to a few hours on Jan. 28.

At the request of the EU, the summit, which is usually held over two days with numerous meetings, will consist solely of a working dinner in Brussels on Jan. 28 between President Vladimir Putin, Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

Relations between Russia and the EU hit a rough patch after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich backed out of an association agreement with the EU in favor of closer ties with Moscow.

At Friday's meeting, Malmström said the EU was still committed to creating a visa-free regime with Russia, but she could not say when such a measure would be taken, as the EU still had several concerns.

Malmström emphasized that one of those concerns was Russian legislation that "did not fully coincide with values shared by EU countries," such as a law requiring NGOs funded from abroad and "engaged in political activity" to register as foreign agents, as well as a ban on "homosexual propaganda" among minors.

She also mentioned the case of former Hermitage Fund lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in prison after accusing officials of corruption. Malmström said the Magnitsky case signified that there was no rule of law in Russia.

"We want a visa-free regime to be established in a safe and secure environment, which means there is no corruption, and human rights and the rule of law are observed," Malmström said, adding that an agreement to facilitate the process of getting visas would be set soon but would not happen at the summit.

Konovalov said that criticism from the EU was "off the mark," adding that Russia also had concerns about the state of human rights in the EU. The Foreign Affairs Ministry's report on human rights in the EU published on Jan. 14 cited a growth in xenophobia and racism in Europe, restrictions on freedom of the press, and multiple cases of police overreaching their authority.

At the upcoming summit, officials will concentrate on defining their strategic partnership rather than confronting divisive issues, Vygaudas Usackas, head of the EU delegation

in Russia, said, Interfax reported.

Major disagreements that have arisen over the past year will also be discussed, he said, including the EU's economic integration with Ukraine, trade terms within the WTO and foreign policy issues.

Vyacheslav Nikonov, deputy head of the State Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, said further EU delays on the visa deal would prevent strategic cooperation at the summit, adding that the EU was no longer a promising partner for Russia since it was experiencing a period of stagnation.

"The summit is a completely absurd and meaningless event because it sees the president meeting with people who are not authorized to solve any issues and who make anti-Russian statements," Nikonov said by phone.

Vladislav Belov, an expert with the Institute of Europe at the Russian Academy of Sciences, said he was not surprised that the summit was shortened, since it justified the current state of Russia-EU relations.

It was unlikely that there would be any progress at this summit, he said, adding, however, that Putin had likely prepared some statement or proposal for the EU that could lead to an unexpected result.

"I know that Putin prepared something for this summit," he said. "It is difficult to predict what that would be, since Putin has not ceased to surprise us lately; it could be something that would make the EU reconsider its position," he said.

Contact the author at e.kravtsova@imedia.ru

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