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Putin Rebukes EU Actions in Ukraine

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Putin, center, being welcomed by European Union leaders Herman Van Rompuy, left, and Jose Manuel Borroso ahead of Tuesday's summit in Brussels. **Yves Herman**

At the EU-Russia summit in Brussels on Tuesday, President Vladimir Putin promised that Russia would not interfere in the political conflict raging in Ukraine and rebuked European Union officials for visiting the opposition protests.

Putin argued that too many mediators getting involved in the 2 1/2-month-long conflict could have a negative effect.

"Regarding advice to Ukraine, how and what to do, I think that the Ukrainian people is able to figure things out for itself," Putin said, Interfax reported. "In any case, Russia will never interfere in [the conflict]."

He referred obliquely to a visit to the Kiev protests in December by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, saying he "couldn't imagine how our European partners would react if at the height of the crisis in, say, Greece or Cyprus, the foreign minister appeared at an anti-

European protest and began issuing appeals of some kind. We think that this is not a very good thing to do."

Noninterference in internal political struggles has been one of the cornerstones of Putin's foreign policy over his more than 13 years leading Russia and serves as one of the Kremlin's main arguments for blocking international military action in the Syrian civil war. But speculation has been rife, especially among Ukrainian opposition protesters, that Putin could move to assist his ally President Viktor Yanukovych.

Putin was in Brussels to meet with top EU officials amid tensions between Russia and the EU mostly over Ukraine, but also over trade and other issues.

The Russia-EU summit has traditionally been held over two days, but this 32nd edition consisted only of a working lunch at the request of the European body, with EU President Herman Van Rompuy saying earlier that the EU would use the meeting with Russia to address its complaints over Ukraine.

After Yanukovych backed out of an association agreement with the EU in favor of closer ties with Moscow in November, the EU accused Russia of putting trade pressure on Ukraine and of pushing its neighbor not to sign an association agreement with the EU within the Eastern Partnership project. The decision triggered a wave of protests in Kiev that have since escalated and turned violent, leading to the resignation of Ukraine's prime minister on Tuesday.

While the EU said earlier that it was prepared for a tough discussion with Russia over Ukraine in order to help resolve their differences over the association deal, it appears that no particular strategy was agreed upon. Rompuy said only that Russia and the EU interpreted the Eastern Partnership differently and that experts would hold consultations to estimate possible economic consequences for both sides.

"It is long overdue to synchronize watches on an expert level ... to understand how possible decisions on this matter will influence our economic well-being," Putin said at a news conference after the summit, Interfax reported.

The summit consisted of some three hours of discussions between Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and first Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov from Russia and Rompuy, Ashton and European Commission head Jose Manuel Barroso. Ahead of the summit, Putin, Rompuy and Barroso held a separate meeting behind closed doors.

Russia had expected the agenda for the summit, which was originally planned for late December but was rescheduled at the EU's request, to include discussion of a new agreement on the EU-Russia strategic partnership and the signing of a visa facilitation deal. But those items were dropped after the EU shortened the summit.

An unidentified EU diplomat told The Financial Times on Monday that the only time EU-Russia relations were as strained as they are now was during the Russia-Georgia conflict in 2008. Besides over Ukraine, tensions also exist over trade and energy issues, while the strategic partnership agreement that expired in 2007 still has not been replaced.

Barroso said that discussion on a new strategic agreement could be started only at the next

Russia-EU summit that would take place in Sochi in June, even though Russia expected a new round of negotiations to be launched shortly after the summit.

"We are waiting for necessary political signals [from the EU] concerning certain areas of partnership, including dialogue on a new partnership agreement. We do not need a formal decision on renewal of the talks but such a signal would be very handy," Russia's ambassador to the EU, Vladimir Chizhov, said last week.

Talks on a new agreement have been held since 2008, but after Russia joined the World Trade Organization in 2012, Russia-EU relations became more tense over trade issues.

The EU alleged that Russia illegally protected its carmakers, and the EU's executive Commission has launched an investigation into whether Russian state gas giant Gazprom was hindering the free flow of gas across Europe and imposing excessively high prices.

"We are against the idea of confrontation," he said. "On the contrary, we think that Russia and the EU would develop further cooperation. Moreover, we need to think how to turn the idea of partnership into a partnership of voluntary choice and partnership of consent."

Putin said Tuesday that economic disagreements between Russia and the EU were "technical in nature" and proposed considering the possibilities for a free-trade zone between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Community.

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