

Russian, European Far-Right Parties Converge in St. Petersburg

By [Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber](#)

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The first International Russian Conservative Forum took place in St. Petersburg on Sunday.

ST. PETERSBURG — High-ranking members of some of Europe's most controversial parties descended on St. Petersburg on Sunday to participate in the first International Russian Conservative Forum, an ultranationalist convention glorifying Russia as a refuge for the world's most marginalized far-right political forces.

The forum's speakers collectively ticked off all the boxes of intolerance and anti-Western sentiment, egged on by the enthusiasm of the audience filling a conference room at the St. Petersburg Holiday Inn. Through the course of the day, U.S. President Barack Obama was called a Nazi, white Christians were urged to reproduce, gays were referred to as perverts and murdered Russian opposition activists were said to be resting in hell.

Russia's Burgeoning European Ties

Although European Union leaders decided last week to uphold sanctions against Russia, the general appetite for snubbing Moscow seems to have waned among certain EU member states.

A string of European leaders have gone against the grain, calling for their own countries' rapprochement with Russia in spite of a year-old European Council agreement not to hold regular bilateral meetings with Moscow in response to its annexation of Crimea last March.

In recent weeks, President Vladimir Putin has laid out the red carpet for a handful of EU leaders, many of whom have been reluctant to adopt the uncompromising approach to Russia that their Western peers have embraced. The Moscow Times has compiled a list of the Kremlin's most recent European guests and one it expects to host soon.

Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades

In the days following the takeover by pro-Russian rebels of the eastern Ukrainian city of Debaltseve last month, Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades flew to Moscow for a two-day visit, raising eyebrows in the West. Putin and Anastasiades signed a slew of bilateral agreements on matters ranging from cultural exchanges to the more contentious issue of Russia's use of Cypriot ports for counter-terrorism and anti-piracy operations.

Putin insisted that Russia's military cooperation agreement with Cyprus was not directed against any third party, media reported at the time.

Cyprus, which acceded to the EU in 2004, has served as an outpost for some of Europe's most powerful armed forces.

The island is home to British military bases and lends its facilities to French aircraft and German ships.

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi paid an official visit to Putin earlier this month to discuss a series of bilateral and multilateral issues. Although no agreements were signed during the encounter, Putin said Italy was “one of Russia’s most important partners in European affairs.”

Renzi — who during his visit laid flowers on the Moscow bridge where opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was gunned down last month — stressed that Russia should play a key role in fighting terrorism in Libya, a country whose stability is being jeopardized by the Islamic State.

Renzi mentioned that his visit to the Kremlin was his third encounter with Putin in the last four months, according to a partial transcript of their meeting published on the Kremlin’s website.

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras

Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Greece’s radical leftist party Syriza, was elected Prime Minister on an anti-austerity platform in January. The Eurosceptic leader is reportedly set to make an official visit to the Kremlin in April.

Tsipras’ party has been a staunch opponent of EU sanctions against Russia. Observers have speculated that the newly-elected prime minister could use his Moscow visit to seek a loan for his cash-strapped country or agree to Russian investments in Greece’s strategic assets.

Tsipras is no stranger to Russian political

circles, having forged ties with the country's officials prior to his election. Like other leaders of formerly marginal European political parties, Tsipras is warmly received in Moscow. Last May, he visited with Russian officials including senator Valentina Matviyenko, the chairman of the Russian State Duma's upper house.

United in their contempt for all things EU and their yearning for a socially conservative society, Russia and the extremes of the European political spectrum have forged a tacit alliance. Far-right leaders' periodic visits to Moscow, combined with Russian banks' magnanimity toward political entities that European creditors have shunned, have suggested that these parties' gains in popularity could shift EU policy in Russia's favor and undermine the union's stance on the crisis in Ukraine.

Ties between Europe's far-right and Russia became a little more concrete on Sunday, when radical right-wing party Rodina ("Motherland"), the organizer of the forum, adopted a resolution on the creation of a permanent committee to coordinate Russia's and Europe's conservative political forces.

The resolution was the culmination of a full day of 10-minute speeches by more than 30 ultranationalist commentators and the leaders of radical right-wing parties from seven European Union countries, including Greece, Italy, Germany and Britain. They blamed the United States for the Ukraine crisis, deplored the erosion of traditional values in the West and praised President Vladimir Putin's peacemaking skills.

"The American way of life is not at the center of our politics, nor are gays and lesbians," said Udo Voigt, a member of the European Parliament and the former head of Germany's far-right National Democratic Party. "Our focus is on our families and our children."

The parties rushed to sign the resolution after the Holiday Inn received a bomb threat some 20 minutes before the scheduled end of the speeches. Organizers, who announced the evacuation order, claimed that their "enemies" had called police to sabotage the event. The origin of the bomb threat remains unknown.

A police van stood idle in the hotel's front parking lot throughout the course of the International Russian Conservative Forum. Security personnel and bodyguards with dangling earpieces scrutinized participants. A handful of Cossacks equipped with leather whips, members of a quasi-militant group presented as guardians of traditional values, secured the entrance to the conference room.

Fraternizing With Russia

The event's organizers — members of the St. Petersburg branch of far-right party Rodina, a party founded in the early 2000s by current Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin — claimed that it represented the "first forum of the national-oriented political forces of Europe

and Russia in world history."

Organizers were up-front about the objectives of the event, claiming it was meant to unite European and Russian conservative forces "in the context of European sanctions against Russia and the United States' pressure on European countries and Russia."

The Kremlin has neither formally endorsed the event, nor spoken out against it. In an apparent bid to draw parallels between their own views and those of the federal authorities, forum organizers included in their press kit and on their website an excerpt of Putin's speech at the 2013 Valdai International Discussion Club.

"We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization." Putin said at the time. "I am convinced that this opens a direct path to degradation and primitivism, resulting in a profound demographic and moral crisis."

There were no Russian lawmakers or high-ranking officials among the speakers, though State Duma Deputy Alexei Zhuravlyov, who also heads Rodina, was present. Russian Senator Igor Morozov did not speak, despite initially having been scheduled to do so.

The forum's speakers echoed the Russian state narrative on the pervasiveness of an ill-defined "fascism" in Europe.

"When I see in the press that this is called a gathering of neo-Nazis and radicals, I laugh," said Fyodor Biryukov, the head of Rodina party's information policy. "The extermination of Russians in the eastern part of what was formerly Ukraine, the Kiev junta. That's fascism."

The guest list of the International Russian Conservative Forum was filled with individuals whose parties have been accused of inciting hate crimes against migrants, anti-Semitism, homophobia and of using Nazi symbolism. Still, the vast majority of the participants rejected the "fascist" label.

"My family died because of the Nazis. Russians died too," Scottish pro-life activist Jim Dowson said as he flipped through his PowerPoint presentation featuring the image of a bare-chested Putin on horseback. "How dare you called me a Nazi? The EU are Nazis."

Fostering Ties

Far-right parties in 15 out of 21 European Union member states have openly professed sympathy toward Russia, according to a study published by the Budapest-based Political Capital institute last March.

The representatives of Europe's far-right parties present at the forum had mingled with Russia in the past.

Delegates of Greece's Golden Dawn — whose leader Nikos Michaloliakos was released Friday after 18 months pretrial detention on suspicion of involvement in the murder of left-wing rapper Pavlos Fyssas in 2013 — have reportedly met with Russian officials on various occasions. A website affiliated with Golden Dawn reported that Michaloliakos even received a letter in prison from Kremlin ideologist Alexander Dugin in which he reportedly expressed

support for the party's views.

Former British National Party leader Nick Griffin — who has had several run-ins with the law on suspicion of inciting racial hatred — served as an observer for Russia's 2011 parliamentary elections, which were marred by reports of mass irregularities. Griffin said at the time that Russia's elections were "much fairer than Britain's."

Griffin, who is currently building a social media program he said could counter "American and liberal war propaganda," told The Moscow Times that his participation in the International Russian Conservative Forum marked his third visit to Russia.

"I would very much like to develop a business relationship, mutually beneficial, between myself, my social media operation and Russia," Griffin said. "This is not the same, in any way, as politicians being bought, which is usually done under the counter, behind the scenes."

Reports emerged in November that France's far-right National Front party, which was not represented at the forum, had borrowed 9 million euros (\$9.7 million) from the First Czech-Russian Bank based in Moscow. Other far-right party leaders have denied receiving financial support from Russia. The support they receive from Russia, they claim, is intangible.

"I've never come looking for money in Russia," Roberto Fiore, the head of Italy's far-right Forza Nuova, told The Moscow Times. "What I'm looking for in Russia is deep political and philosophical understanding. This is why I have connected with people, mainly from the Russian intelligentsia, but now we are coming to a more political [arrangement]."

Fiore said he has been visiting Russia regularly since 2005, forging ties with Rodina, as well as members of the Academy of Sciences and Christian movements. He claims to have "very good relations" with Alexander Prokhanov, a Russian writer who serves as editor-in-chief of ultranationalist newspaper Zavtra.

Winning the War

Russian officials have reiterated their scorn for anything — or anyone — they associate with "fascism." The country bases much of its present-day identity on the Allied forces' defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. Preparations are already under way for a lavish, large-scale nationwide celebration of the 70th anniversary of Victory Day on May 9.

Putin justified Russia's annexation of Crimea last year in part on the notion that authorities in Kiev were "nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites," and that the Russian inhabitants of the peninsula were not safe in a country run by such unsavory characters. In the immediate aftermath of the ouster of then-Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich last February, Russian state media referred to the new authorities in Kiev as a fascist "junta."

A gathering of such delegates in St. Petersburg, Russia's old capital, is all the more incongruous because of the exceptional distress its population suffered during the war. St. Petersburg, known as Leningrad during the Soviet era, was held under siege for 900 days between 1941 and 1944, losing hundreds of thousands of its residents.

Reminders of the city's trauma — from discreet commemorative plaques to extravagant

monuments — are sprinkled across the cityscape.

Resistance

Communist regional lawmaker Irina Komolova and representatives of opposition party Yabloko had urged St. Petersburg governor Georgy Poltavchenko to cancel the forum, local media reported last week. Komolova's appeal, as of Thursday, had not been answered.

On Sunday morning, the forum's website featured a red banner bearing a brazen warning: "enemies of Russia will not stop the International Russian Conservative Forum from taking place."

As of noon on Sunday, three picketers had gathered outside the Holiday Inn, holding signs condemning neo-Nazi ideology. Policemen outnumbered the protesters.

Alexandra Pechyonkina, a 40-year-old schoolteacher, brandished a sign that read "Every Nazi gets a Nuremberg," referring the military trials that prosecuted the Nazi leadership in the postwar era. Two forum participants — one of them sporting a traditional kubanka, a circular-shaped Cossack hat — confronted Pechyonkina, accusing her of unfairly calling him a Nazi.

"I don't want my country to become a place run by fascists or Nazis," she told The Moscow Times. "I know what happened in Germany in the 1930s. I don't want that future for my country."

Contact the author at g.tetrautfarber@imedia.ru

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