

Western Rejection Rains on Russia's Victory Day Parade

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World War Two veteran Boris Runov, 89, poses for a picture in Red Square in Moscow, Apr. 14.

The Kremlin's iconic watchtower has been renovated especially for the occasion, new military hardware will be unveiled on Red Square and the clouds will no doubt be seeded to prevent any chance of rain on the parade — but a host of world leaders have rejected invitations to Russia's grand party.

The intense attention being paid in Russia to which world leaders are coming to upcoming Victory Day celebrations in Moscow — and which are not — is a sign that despite its confrontation with the West over Ukraine, Russia's leaders still believe their country is a part of the West, and any sign to the contrary offends them, experts told *The Moscow Times* on Monday.

Russia will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Allied victory against Nazism on May 9 with a large-scale military parade on Red Square. Commemoration of the war, in which the Soviet

Union lost more than 20 million people, is considered sacred in Russia.

In contrast to the last big Victory Day anniversary one decade ago, most high-profile guests of the upcoming Red Square parade are coming not from Western countries, but from Asia, Latin America and Africa, with Chinese President Xi Jinping being the most prominent confirmed international guest so far.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel will not come to the parade on May 9, but will attend a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in front of the Kremlin the next day, RIA Novosti reported in March.

U.S. President Barack Obama will not be coming due to Russia's role in the Ukraine conflict, the White House said last week. Even Alexander Lukashenko, president of Russia's closest ally Belarus, said Saturday he won't be attending the parade because he will preside over another one in Minsk.

Russian leaders have attempted to demonstrate indifference over the issue. Answering a question about the absence of Western leaders at the parade during his annual call-in show on Thursday, President Vladimir Putin said that their presence was not essential.

"It is up to them to decide. We are celebrating our national holiday. ... We pay tribute to the generation of victors. We do this so that the present generation, both here and abroad, never forgets about this and never allows anything like this to happen again," Putin said.

Sergei Ivanov, head of the presidential administration, has said 25 foreign leaders have preliminarily confirmed they will come to the celebrations.

"As a rule, normal people invite their friends and loved ones. Whoever comes or doesn't come, Russia will survive. This is our celebration," he told the TASS news agency earlier this month.

According to Andrei Piontkovsky, a veteran Russian political analyst who is also active with the opposition movement, the Russian government is in a situation of cognitive dissonance in its relationship with the West.

"On the one hand, our leaders are launching an anti-Western campaign, but on the other, they still think of themselves as respectable members of the West," he said in a phone interview.

"This whole hybrid war over Ukraine was an attempt to obtain higher status within the West, not to become fundamentally separate from it. The Soviet Union was separate, Russia is not," Piontkovsky said.

The Way We Were

One decade ago, the atmosphere surrounding Victory Day celebrations could not have been more different. The leaders of all major Western nations, including U.S. President George W. Bush, came to Moscow to see the anniversary parade. Bush drove Putin in a renovated Soviet GAZ-21 Volga car in the presidential dacha estate near Moscow.

In a series of meetings arranged around the commemoration event, Putin signed a statement

on the creation of a Russian-Ukrainian intergovernmental commission with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, who had been brought to power after a series of pro-Western public protests in Kiev just months before the celebrations.

The Russian leader also signed with EU leaders the most important integration agreement between Russia and Europe since the Soviet collapse.

This time, Russia is under sanctions by the United States, European Union and other countries and organizations over the situation in Ukraine, and the implementation of all previous agreements has been put on hold. Ukraine has declared Russia an aggressor, while Obama listed Russia as an international threat alongside the Ebola epidemic and Islamic terrorists in Syria and Iraq.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin is still not willing to accept that Russia is isolated from the West, and events such as the upcoming Victory Day celebrations demonstrate only too clearly that it is in fact isolated, said Alexander Morozov, a political analyst and editor-in-chief of the online magazine Russian Journal.

"It is very important for Putin to demonstrate that Western representatives will come to the celebrations, there is a struggle for every European leader," he said in a phone interview.

"At the same time, Russia has made a huge about-face in the last decade, because it failed to forge something new to replace the Soviet identity," he said.

The failure to create a new identity has forced Russian leaders to look for inspiration in the past, making Russia's victory over Nazism the main justification of its status as a great power, said Vladimir Gelman, a political science professor at the European University in St. Petersburg.

"Victory in the Great Patriotic War [as World War II is known in Russia] is the main source of national pride for Russia on the global level. The fact that Western leaders are not coming to its anniversary shows that they don't see Russia as a great power," Gelman said in a phone interview.

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