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Putin Ally Says Russia-EU Crisis Over Ukraine May Be Easing

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Alexei Pushkov

A senior Russian politician suggested Thursday that the worst was over in a crisis in relations between the European Union and Moscow over the conflict in Ukraine and called for better cooperation with Brussels.

The remarks by Alexei Pushkov, an ally of President Vladimir Putin, signaled a softening of Moscow's anti-Western rhetoric as it prepares to host a military parade on May 9 to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe.

Pushkov, the head of the lower house of parliament's foreign affairs committee, has been an outspoken critic of Western sanctions on Moscow over its role in Ukraine but said Russia and the European Union should now look beyond the events there.

"It seems the period of an open, full-on crisis in ties between Russia and the EU is passing ... Europe is increasingly ready to restart cooperation with Russia, not only on Ukraine but also other international matters," he said.

"We need to go beyond Ukraine in our ties with the European Union. We cannot reduce everything to the Ukrainian crisis," he said a day after hosting talks between Russian lawmakers and the bloc's ambassadors to Moscow.

Putin has been fierce in his criticism of the West over Ukraine and accused the United States last week of putting pressure on allies not to attend the anniversary events in Moscow, which many Western leaders are refusing to attend.

But, in remarks broadcast at the weekend, the president took a relatively conciliatory line, saying Washington and Moscow should work together on matters of mutual interest.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov echoed that when calling for cooperation with the West in a radio interview on Wednesday.

Pushkov has been hit by a visa ban and assets freeze under U.S. sanctions but is not on EU sanctions lists.

He praised France, Greece and Hungary for trying to engage with Moscow but reiterated criticism of other EU member states from eastern Europe a well as Britain and Germany.

"France today sees ties with Russia in a much broader context than Berlin ... understands that global politics don't all boil down to Ukraine," he said.

France has frozen a contract on the sale of Mistral helicopter carriers to Russia but both sides have signaled lately they are looking for a mutually acceptable way out of the dispute.

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