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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russians Seethe Over Western Snub of Victory Day Parade

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (5th R) watch the Victory Day parade in Moscow's Red Square in this May 9, 2014 file photo.

One of Boris Lisitsyn's happiest memories is of being swept by a huge, joyous crowd through the streets of Moscow and onto Red Square in spontaneous celebrations when World War II ended in Europe.

He was too young to fight but, like most Russians, sees the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 as one of his nation's great achievements, albeit as part of the Soviet Union.

"I remember the end of the war so well. It was such an all-embracing joy, when people poured on to the streets with bottles, with songs, half-drunk," the 86-year-old retiree said in his apartment on the outskirts of the Russian capital.

"Everyone went, intuitively, to Red Square, to the center. There were so many people. Any soldier, any soldier was swung in their arms, people sang to them: 'You guys are great!'"

He is less enthusiastic when asked about plans by Western leaders not to attend a military parade on Moscow's Red Square on May 9 marking the 70th anniversary of the victory in 1945.

"It is of course not nice," Lisitsyn said quietly, before adding with a shrug: "They have the right to do so."

The Western boycott is intended to show displeasure over President Vladimir Putin's support for pro-Russian separatists fighting government forces in eastern Ukraine.

But many Russians see the snub as disrespect for their country's heavy wartime losses, intended to undermine the significance of Moscow's role in winning the war.

Putin has not only whipped up patriotism as the anniversary approaches, but has used the boycott to fan the anti-Western sentiment that has helped unite people behind him and distract them from their economic problems.

He has accused the United States of putting pressure on allies not to attend the parade and accused Russia's "enemies" of rewriting history to play down the significance of Moscow's role in defeating Nazi Germany.

"Their goal is obvious: to undermine Russia's power and moral authority ... to divide peoples and set them against each other and use historical speculation in their geopolitical games," Putin said last month.

Geopolitical Guest List

The guest list for the military parade has come to embody Russia's place in the world as it struggles to avoid being isolated over the events in Ukraine.

Since Western powers imposed economic sanctions on Russia last year, Moscow has accelerated attempts to build ties with Asia, Africa and South America, as well as warming up relations with its former Soviet-era allies.

U.S. President Barack Obama and European leaders are staying away but Chinese President Xi Jinping, North Korea's Kim Jong-un and the heads of many former Soviet republics — some of them autocratic rulers — are expected to attend.

Relations between Russia and the West have soured to such an extent that Konstantin Kosachev, head of the upper house of parliament's foreign affairs committee, says "they [the West] would have tried to spoil our 70th anniversary victory celebration in any case."

It is a contrast to the 60th anniversary events in 2005, attended by the U.S., French and German leaders of the time — George W. Bush, Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel will skip the parade but is expected to pay respects at a Moscow war memorial the next day and her foreign minister will go on May 7 to Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad, where Soviet forces won a decisive victory.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko will not attend. Trust is so low that Kiev will have tens of thousands of police on guard for fear of an attack by separatists or Russian agents during

its own World War II commemorations.

In Russia, blockbuster war films have hit cinemas and anniversary photographs and posters are plastered across Moscow to honor the Soviet victims of World War II, widely estimated at 27 million people.

Some state television presenters wear the St. George ribbon, a 19th century bravery award that has been used as a symbol of Victory Day for years, but has recently come to show patriotism in the face of the Ukraine crisis.

Surge of Patriotism

There is little doubt this will help keep Putin's popularity ratings at the high levels they have seen since Russia annexed Crimea last year, six decades after Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gifted the Black Sea peninsula to Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Union.

But some worry that state media, now showing constant war films in addition to war footage from east Ukraine, are fuelling aggression and xenophobia.

"I sincerely support Putin in calling for peace in Ukraine," Dmitry Muratov, editor-in-chief of the investigative newspaper Novaya Gazeta, said of the president's assurances that he wants the conflict to end in east Ukraine.
"But this atmosphere of violence and poison in the country is also his responsibility."

Some Western commentators and officials regret a chance has been missed by the West to build bridges with Moscow.

Amid such concerns, U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Tefft underlined this month that Washington still valued highly the cooperation with Moscow during World War II.

"In America we've not forgotten that legacy," he told a conference, adding that better mutual understanding remained a critical goal "today more than ever."

For elderly Russians, the constant evocation of war and a common enemy recalls a tactic used by the Soviet Communist leadership to unite the people.

"Since the end of the war, 70 years have passed. For all those 70 years, whatever leaders we had, it's always been the same ideologically — war, war, war," Lisitsyn said.

"They need to remind us because they need to keep people in a state of tension ... and this is a way to distract people."

Asked what he will be doing on May 9, he lifted a bottle and said: "Maybe some friends will come over."

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