The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Putin's Italy Visit Aims to Exploit EU Rifts - Analysts

By Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber

June 09, 2015



President Vladimir Putin with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi

President Vladimir Putin's visit to Italy this week represents an attempt by the Kremlin to capitalize on Rome's affinity to Moscow despite the stormy ties Russia currently maintains with many other Western states, political analysts told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

European members of the G7 — Italy, France, Germany and the Britain — signaled at the group's summit earlier this week that they would support extending EU sanctions against Russia when they convene again at the European Council later this month. The leaders of the former G8 were meeting for the first time since Russia was exiled from the group last year over its annexation of Crimea.

Italy has demonstrated a willingness to foster close ties with Russia, despite the European Union's overarching position on Moscow's alleged role in fueling strife in Ukraine. Facing trying economic circumstances, the Kremlin has toiled to nurture every friendship it can find

in Europe.

Putin will take part in festivities at Expo Milano 2015, a universal exhibition about food security, alongside Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, according to presidential aide Yury Ushakov.

Appearances are expected to be made by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, Rosneft head Igor Sechin and the ministers of industry and economic development, Denis Manturov and Alexei Ulyukayev.

Putin's talks with Italian authorities are expected to focus on bilateral economic and energy issues.

Putin will then head to Rome to meet with Italian President Sergio Mattarella. His trip will include a stop at the Vatican to meet Pope Francis.

## Exploiting EU Rifts

G7 summit leaders adopted a declaration Monday that said the duration of sanctions against Russia would be linked to "Russia's complete implementation of the Minsk agreements and respect for Ukraine's sovereignty." Russia meanwhile continues to deny that it is involved in the Ukrainian crisis.

The Kremlin seems to have attempted to exploit cracks in the EU's position, flirting with European governments and political parties that have expressed sympathy toward Russia. Putin hosted Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, a staunch opponent to EU sanctions against Russia, in the Kremlin in April. The president also met with Euroskeptic Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Budapest to discuss energy issues in March.

Russian officials have also reiterated that the West's position toward their country is not homogenous. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said earlier this week that Russia viewed "nuances" in the approaches of the G7 powers toward sanctions against Russia.

"Putin's meetings in Italy are meant to send the message that it is not only capable of having friendships with the East and the South, but also with the West," said Alexei Arbatov, a scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank. "Putin wants to show that the West is not united in its position on the Ukrainian crisis and that the G7 can meet all it wants, but its members will still be open to having strong relations with Russia."

According to Alla Yazykova, a scholar specializing in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions, Italy provides Putin with one of his only opportunities to visit the West. Although it is unlikely that Italy could sway EU policy toward Russia, maintaining warm relations with Rome will help Moscow keep one foot in the West while ensuring that the countries' bilateral relations will not suffer unnecessarily from the current political tensions between Moscow and Brussels, said Yazykova, who works for the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Europe.

Renzi has reportedly expressed his objection to EU sanctions against Russia in private. The Italian Prime Minister visited with Putin in Moscow in March, one of the few leaders of European states to have done so since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. Although no

agreements were signed during the visit, Putin said Italy was "one of Russia's most important partners in European affairs." Renzi's visit in March had been his third encounter with Putin since December.

## Strong Ties

Sanctions imposed in connection with the crisis in Ukraine have caused upwards of 5 billion euros' ($5.96 billion at the current exchange rate) worth of direct losses for the Italian economy prior to the plunging of the ruble in late 2014, according to Italian banking group Intesa Sanpaolo, the TASS news agency reported in February.

Arbatov claims that Russia's ties with Italy are "extensive" in economic, humanitarian and cultural terms. In an interview with Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera this weekend, Putin said that bilateral trade between the countries had increased elevenfold in recent years, reaching nearly $50 billion annual. Italy, Putin claimed, was the third largest consumer of Russian energy resources. Putin also said that Russia had always enjoyed a "privileged" relationship with Italy and that trust dominated the countries' political interactions.

"I would say Putin views Italy as a weak link within the European Union," Yazykova said. "Russia is looking for a compromise, for the harsh conditions created by the EU to rescind. Out of all EU countries, Italy is one of the few that has been more open to compromising with Russia as a state, but also with Putin as its leader."

## A History With Berlusconi

During his Italian escapade, Putin is also scheduled to drop in on an old friend: former Italian Prime Minister Sylvio Berlusconi, who is currently serving a two-year community service sentence after having been convicted of tax fraud in 2013. He has been ostracized by the current Italian leadership.

Putin and Berlusconi have reportedly entertained friendly ties since the early 2000s. Berlusconi has been a guest at Putin's dacha in the Black Sea region and has attended Putin's birthday celebrations. Putin defended the former Italian leader when the "bunga bunga" scandal erupted, a term used to reference the wild sex parties Berlusconi allegedly hosted with underage prostitutes, saying that Berlusconi's private life would not have ended up in court had he been gay.

Many EU politicians viewed the camaraderie between Putin and Berlusconi with scorn and suspicion. The former Italian leader had also advocated for Russia to join the European Union, much to the dismay of European diplomats. Berlusconi, unsurprisingly, has been a staunch critic of EU sanctions imposed against Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

Although Putin's bromance with Berlusconi is unlikely to help him win over the current Italian leadership, Italian authorities have expressed a willingness to work with Russia, according to Yazykova. Putin told Corriere della Sera that he was once told by a high-ranking Italian official that he was the only person would could maintain friendly relations with both the flamboyant Berlusconi and the reputedly modest former Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi.

“The current Italian leaders have always been interested in maintaining contact with Russia and Putin,” Yazykova said. “Italy’s economy has suffered because of the sanctions. The country is interested in keeping the spirit of its relations with Russia from before the Ukrainian crisis. They are interested keeping commonalities alive.”

Contact the author at g.tetraultfarber@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/06/09/putins-italy-visit-aims-to-exploit-eu-rifts-analysts-a47273