

Italy's Renzi Welcomes Putin to Rome But Highlights 'Differences'

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (L) smiles as he meets Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Expo 2015 global fair in Milan, northern Italy, June 10, 2015.

MILAN — Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi welcomed visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday but offered no sign of breaking ranks with international partners over European Union sanctions against Moscow.

Two weeks before the EU is due to decide whether to extend economic sanctions over Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, Renzi praised the "traditional Italian Russian friendship" but spoke of "divergent positions" on some issues.

"We are in a difficult international situation, not just on account of issues which do not unite us but also for issues which should see us ever more on the same side in a very complicated international scenario, starting with the global threat of terrorism," he said at a ceremony at the Milan Expo.

Russia enjoys better relations with Italy than with most other EU countries. It regards Rome as a reluctant backer of sanctions and a leading proponent of dialogue with Moscow.

Renzi, who meets Putin for talks on Wednesday, made no explicit reference to the Ukraine crisis. But referred to the need to face "challenges, both those that see us holding divergent positions as well as those that unite us."

However in a more conciliatory vein, he said he was looking forward to attending the 2018 soccer World Cup in Russia with the Italian team, implicitly ruling out Italy's involvement in any move to boycott the event over the corruption scandals which have shaken the global football body FIFA.

Reacting to G7 criticism on Monday, the Kremlin said there were nuances of opinion in the group of industrialized nations, an apparent reference to Italy, and Moscow has sought to exploit divisions over the sanctions.

"My Italian partners have always put the interests of Italy, of the Italian people, first and believed that in order to serve the interests of their country, including economic and political interests, they must maintain friendly relations with Russia," Putin told the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

Putin referred to a "special relationship" with Rome.

He will also hope for a sympathetic reception in Vatican City from Pope Francis, who has played a behind-the-scenes role in discussions on a Palestinian state and in U.S.-Cuba relations.

The United States urged the Vatican on Wednesday to criticise Russia's involvement in the Ukraine conflict more forcefully.

"Maybe this is an opportunity where the Holy Father can privately raise concerns," said Ken Hackett, the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican.

Blame Game

Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni signalled no change in Italy's stance on Ukraine in a separate interview with *Corriere della Sera*.

Underlining what he said was Italy's consistency in relations with its European and U.S. allies, Gentiloni said: "Italy has been combining loyalty to its allies with a special relationship with Russia."

He did not subscribe to Putin's version of events in Ukraine, he said.

Putin blames the crisis on Kiev and the West, which he says plotted a coup in Ukraine. He denies sending arms and troops to back pro-Russian separatists in east Ukraine, where more than 6,400 people have been killed in just over a year of fighting.

U.S. President Barack Obama, whose country has also punished Russia with sanctions, puts the blame directly on Putin. He accused him on Monday of wrecking Russia's economy by

trying to recreate the glories of the Soviet empire.

Putin is making a rare foray onto EU soil since the Ukraine crisis stoked the worst tension between Moscow and the West since the Cold War ended, though it is his second trip to Italy in eight months following a Europe-Asia summit in October.

Putin cemented ties with Hungary during a visit to Budapest in February, but the former Soviet bloc ally is not expected to block the extension of sanctions at an EU summit on June 25-26.

A visit in June 2014 to Austria, a longstanding energy customer for Moscow, was also not followed by splits in the EU.

Putin will be accompanied by business leaders including Vladimir Dmitriyev, head of Russian state development bank VEB, and Igor Sechin, chief executive of state oil company Rosneft. The Kremlin announced no plans for major deals to be signed.

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