

Russia Wants 'United and Flourishing' Europe, Putin Claims in Rare Interview

By [Reuters](#)

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Kremlin.ru

Russian President Vladimir Putin, in an interview broadcast on Monday, said he did not want to divide the European Union as he prepared to visit Austria in his first bilateral trip to a West European country in almost a year.

"We do not pursue the objective of dividing anything or anyone in the EU," Putin told broadcaster ORF.

"We are far more interested in the EU being united and flourishing because the EU is our most important trading and economic partner."

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Putin, who has not made a bilateral visit to a West European country since he went to Finland

last July, will meet government and business leaders in Austria in a trip which officially marks 50 years since the two countries' energy firms Gazprom and OMV first signed a gas supply deal.

He will attend a business conference with envoys from both countries.

But the issue of EU sanctions, imposed on Russia because of its support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, will weigh in any official talks he has.

Moscow's ties with EU countries remain strained after Russia's annexation of Crimea, its involvement in Syria and eastern Ukraine and the poisoning of a former Russian double agent in Britain. London has blamed the nerve agent poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter on Russia but Moscow has denied any involvement.

Austria's coalition government of conservatives and the pro-Putin far right was in a minority of EU governments that did not expel any Russian diplomats over the Skripal case and Austria, despite its membership of the EU, points to its history of neutrality and its relatively warm relations with Russia.

Moscow wants the EU to lift sanctions, but the bloc has linked that to progress on the ground, which has not happened.

Austria, which takes over the rotating EU presidency in July, has said it wants to act as a bridge between east and west.

The leader of the far-right Freedom Party, which has a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia party, called this weekend for sanctions to be lifted.

But Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and his conservatives, who control Austria's EU policy, have said Austria will toe the EU line.

"We decide pragmatically whether to cooperate with someone politically," Putin said when asked in the interview about United Russia's ties with far-right parties.

"We try to work with those who publicly express the wish themselves to work with us," he added.

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