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Russia Rejoices Over Trump's G7 Readmission Offer

But Putin doesn't actually want to be part of the group anymore.

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Alex Brandon / AP / TASS

President Donald Trump's suggestion that Russia should be readmitted to the Group of Seven industrialized democracies and his no less extravagant proposal that the U.S. should purchase the island of Greenland have two things in common.

Neither calls are likely to be materialized, at least in the near future, and both serve as useful distractions for Trump to deflect attention from his growing isolation during annual G7 gatherings.

This was exactly the tactic Trump resorted to last year on the eve of the G7 meeting in Charlevoix, Canada, when in roughly identical terms he called for the unconditional re-entry of Russia to the G7. This turned the tables on his fellow G7 leaders and helped divert attention

from his disastrous performance at that summit.

On most issues on the G7 agenda, from climate change to the Iran deal, Trump faces strong push back from the G7 leaders and is likely to find himself in a lonely position in Biarritz. By changing the agenda and focusing the talks on Russia's readmission, Trump is simultaneously making himself the center of attention, thus taking him back into his comfort zone.

Last year, Trump's Russia suggestion was quickly shot down by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Theresa May. Only Italy was somewhat sympathetic but had to swiftly hide behind the qualifying conditions for Russian readmission that were proposed by Emmanuel Macron — full implementation of the Minsk-2 agreements and the restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty in Donbass.

This year, Trump has seized on president Macron's meeting with Vladimir Putin ahead of the G7 gathering in Biarritz where the French president has essentially reaffirmed this condition to Putin directly — there will be no readmission of Russia into the G7 as long as the Ukrainian crisis continues.

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It is not clear exactly what Macron then told Trump in his phone call the following day, but the White House tried to spin it to show that Trump and Macron had agreed that they both wanted to invite Russia to the G7 next year.

Paris quickly rebuked this by telling the media that Macron simply took note of the "U.S. desire to reintegrate Russia into the G7 next year" when Trump holds the chairmanship. Macron then quickly reaffirmed that his country's condition of ending the crisis in Ukraine still stood and that reinstating Russia to the G8 without any preconditions would be a sign of weakness.

Just hours earlier the German government, followed by Chancellor Angela Merkel together with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, further scrutinized the idea with Johnson adding the condition of ending "Russia's provocative actions against the West." The G7 operates by consensus.

While the G7 debate has ended almost exactly where it started last year, this time around it would seem the story carries more weight. For one thing, Macron believes that with the new leadership in Ukraine, there are real prospects of ending the conflict in Donbass.

Indeed, president Zelenskiy has shown willingness to implement those parts of the Minsk agreements that do not require changes to the Ukrainian constitution — separation of forces, the secession of hostilities, prisoner exchanges, the reestablishment of economic ties, etc.

What Zelenskiy cannot do is grant the pro-Russian separatist of Donetsk and Donbass a constitutionally decreed "special status" of a vaguely-defined nature that would make Ukraine's actual control of those territories pretty nominal and challenge the country's sovereignty.

Likewise, he cannot implement the so-called "Steinmeier formula" that would allow the republics to run their own elections to the local governing bodies on the basis of "provisional special status."

These measures would undermine and destabilize the Ukrainian state and Zelenskiy — even with his majority in the Ukrainian parliament — does not have the power to implement those parts of the Minsk agreements.

"*But fully rejoining the G8? No, thank you.*"

This is precisely the reason why Russia will firmly insist on granting the republics special status in Ukraine's constitution and on blocking Kiev's effective control over them and the border with Russia in the final settlement.

Some of Russia's ideas towards a solution in east Ukraine are quite outlandish, for example, a "one-state two systems solution" modeled on China and Hong Kong. These terms, realistically, cannot be accepted by Kiev.

The prospects for a final settlement in Donbass are still remote, yet some progress is possible. Whether that progress would be sufficient to justify Russia's reinstatement to the G7 next year would be a matter of debate. For Russia, however, what really counts is the discussion surrounding Russia's returning to the G7, not the actual re-entry to the club.

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It increases Western pressure on Ukraine to accept Russia's conditions and creates leverage for Moscow on a host of other issues.

No wonder Moscow wants to turn this talk into formal negotiations with the G7 to haggle over the conditionality of re-entry and create a viable platform for communications, particularly with the next G7 host — Donald Trump. In fact, President Putin went on record to say Russia would welcome back all the G7 leaders who didn't show up for their scheduled summit in Sochi in 2014.

But fully rejoining the G8? No, thank you.

The format of the club is now viewed by Russia as awkward, since it naturally lends itself to the G7 ganging up on Russia, while the G20 format eschews this unpleasantness. In the old G8, Russia struggled to lead the agenda and hated being reduced to a mere follower.

The range of issues where the Russian and the G7 outlook is not confrontational and where Russia could be a solution as opposed to a block is quite small. Even when it comes to the fight against terrorism, Russia doesn't see eye to eye with the West.

Russia is at the moment much more comfortable dealing with the U.S., the EU and Japan separately, rather than as a group. What Moscow cannot tolerate is allowing the G7,

particularly the U.S., to frame the effort to reinstate Russia into the club as a strategy to weaken and dismantle China's embrace of Russia and to bring Moscow "on the right side of history" in Trump's confrontation with China.

Even Macron's latest rhetoric, underscoring Russia's Europeanness as a way to put it in alignment with the EU to resist China, raised alarms. Russia views this as an attempt to restrict its freedom of action, although it understands that Western courting increases Moscow's leverage with Beijing.

Still, returning to the G8 at the cost of raising suspicion and ill will with China is not worth it for Moscow. Russia's preference would be to end the G7 as we know it by bringing in China and India, but that is hardly an appealing proposition for the rest.

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