

Former French President Sarkozy in Moscow proposes closer ties to Russia

By Stéphane Hugues
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Ex-French President Nicolas Sarkozy met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Wednesday to discuss an end to current financial sanctions on Russia imposed by Europe, an end to the Ukrainian crisis, and a joint coalition with Russia on the war in Syria.

Sarkozy is now the leader of the main opposition party in France, The Republicans (LR), and aims to run again in the 2017 presidential elections. While Sarkozy has no official role in foreign policy, his visit testifies to rising divisions in European ruling circles over Washington's aggressive policy aimed at Russia and China.

Asked about the Moscow trip, Thierry Mariani, an LR deputy representing French expatriates, bluntly said that Sarkozy was going with "a particular message, which I think is that Europe should maintain a dialog with Russia; that France within Europe has a particular role to play and in my opinion France hasn't been playing it for a long time. ... We are totally aligned on American policy."

In Moscow, Sarkozy laid out a policy agenda that largely contradicted hard-line US policies to financially starve Russia through sanctions and crush Russian-backed forces in Ukraine and Syria.

On the Ukraine crisis, which he had previously criticized as "a new cold war with Russia", Sarkozy said he was happy that the end of the crisis was in sight and that they were "on the right path". He asked Putin to "put pressure on the [east Ukrainian] separatists to apply the Minsk agreements".

Though the United States continues to demand that Russia hand over Crimea to NATO's puppet Ukrainian regime in Kiev, Sarkozy told Putin: "Nobody who is credible, as far as I know, is asking for the return of Crimea to Ukraine ... those who want to forcibly

integrate Ukraine into the European Union pursue a nonsensical policy. If you force Ukraine to choose a side you cut it off from the other. You blow it up, and that is exactly what is happening."

On Syria, Sarkozy did not abandon the US-NATO policy of regime change against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but sought to win Russian support for a policy of ousting Assad through some sort of negotiated settlement with the NATO-backed Islamist opposition in Syria.

"The national reconciliation of Syria can never be accomplished under Bashar al-Assad," Sarkozy said, but he added that Assad's ouster is not a "precondition" of finding a solution "in the ranks of his family, in the Baath Party or in the Alawite minority. Between 'Assad until the end' and 'Assad out tomorrow' we must find a compromise." Sarkozy said Putin's position on this "was much closer to the target than people say."

Finally, Sarkozy said that he was for "a clear perspective for the lifting of sanctions" on Russia by the US and NATO powers and he asked Putin to "not underestimate Europe, even if it seems weakened and divided, it will always reemerge."

Sarkozy's current attempt to unofficially mend fences with Putin flagrantly contradicts the policies he pursued as president. When Sarkozy was elected in 2007, he was nicknamed "Sarkozy the American". He aligned French policy on the US war in Iraq, which the French government had opposed in 2002-2003, and then brought France back into NATO. Sarkozy also worked closely with US and British forces in the 2011 war in Libya.

From Paris, Prime Minister Manuel Valls protested that Sarkozy should not "put into question" French foreign policy from outside the country. Valls said,

“What I ask of leaders of the opposition is that they don’t put into question policies that are being carried out today. ... I cannot remember us behaving like that when we were in opposition.”

Nonetheless, Sarkozy’s decision to serenade Putin with a very different scenario reflects broader concerns in European foreign policy circles. There is growing fear that aggressive US policies of carrying out proxy wars with Ukrainian fascists and Islamic State (ISIS) terrorists is creating a growing crisis in Europe. The refugee crisis in Europe is also the consequence of such wars in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and now Syria.

Amid escalating conflicts between the United States and Russia and China, French President François Hollande has repeatedly warned of the danger of “total war” between NATO and Russia, a nuclear-armed power.

The day after Sarkozy’s visit, Sigmar Gabriel, the vice-chancellor of Germany, arrived in Moscow for a similar discussion with Putin. He thanked Putin for finding time to meet “in these days, when [Putin] has a great deal of work related to the conflict in Syria”.

Gabriel stated that the disputes between the United States, the European Union and Russia seriously limit their common ability to fight certain threats.

“My personal opinion is that we must do everything possible to implement the agreements we have reached and as far as past situations and various interpretations of events are concerned, we should leave them in the past and find new ways to renew co-operation, especially between Germany and Russia,” Gabriel added.

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