
Russia, the OSCE, and EU Travel Sanctions



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Background

The covert deployment of the Russian military in Crimea last year, originally repudiated by Moscow,¹ preceded the formal annexation of the territory on March 18, 2014 by Russian President Vladimir Putin.² The international response was immediate and wide-ranging. It included such punitive measures as targeted U.S. and European Union (EU) sanctions against several dozen top Russian officials, along with less tangible punishments, like the suspension of Russia's membership in the G8. Moscow does not appear eager to re-instate its membership.³ Although Moscow claims that the economic sanctions have to date inflicted only "psychological, not tangible" damage,⁴ targeted EU travel restrictions against top Russian officials have proven to be more problematic for the Kremlin.

Entry Visa: Denied

Most recently, six members of the Russian delegation to the July 5-9, 2015 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly in Helsinki, Finland have been denied entry visas to the country. The group included Sergei Naryshkyn, speaker of the Russian Duma, or lower house of Parliament. Although Finnish authorities cited EU travel bans and European sanctions against the six individuals as the reasons for declining entry visas, the Kremlin was outraged. Terming the decision "unacceptable and disgraceful,"⁵ Moscow lodged a formal complaint with the Finnish Ambassador to the Russian Federation.⁶ Similarly, Naryshkyn decried the development, and called for a boycott of the ongoing OSCE meeting to "protest against arbitrariness, against a violation of the principles of democracy."⁷ None of the original delegation is in attendance. In this telling, at least three aspects of the exchange remain unstated.

Skeletons in the Closet

¹ Putin eventually admitted the involvement of Russian special forces in Crimea. However, he continues to dispute assertions that these soldiers do not don military uniforms or insignia in an effort to pose as local

² Meyers, Steven Lee and Barry, Ellen. "Putin Reclaims Crimea for Russia and Bitterly Denounces the West." *The New York Times*. March 18, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/europe/ukraine.html?_r=0. Accessed on May 3, 2014.

³ Unattributed. "Russia not clinging to G8 if West does not want it - Russian FM." *RT*. March 25, 2014. <http://rt.com/news/lavrov-g8-crimea-kerry-933/>. Accessed on June 19, 2014.

⁴ Baker, Peter; Andrew, Kramer. "So Far, U.S. Sanctions Over Ukraine May Be Inflicting Only Limited Pain on Russia." *The New York Times*. May 2, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/02/world/europe/so-far-us-sanctions-over-ukraine-may-be-inflicting-only-limited-pain-on-russia.html?rref=world/europe&module=Ribbon&version=context®ion=Header&action=click&contentCollection=Europe&pgtype=article>. Accessed on May 4, 2014.

⁵ Balmforth, Tom. "Russia To Boycott OSCE Session After Finland Blocks Delegates." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. July 1, 2015. <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-osce-finland-naryshkin-27104453.html>. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

⁶ Morello, Carol. "Russian boycott European meeting after Finland denies visas to 6 officials." *The Washington Post*. July 2, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russians-boycott-european-summit-over-finnish-blacklist/2015/07/02/6b3d20bb-10cd-4b49-8057-353460fb8ceb_story.html. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

⁷ Balmforth, Tom. "Russia To Boycott OSCE Session After Finland Blocks Delegates." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. July 1, 2015. <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-osce-finland-naryshkin-27104453.html>. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

Before commiserating with Moscow, observers should note several facts omitted in the official Russian version of events. Perhaps most importantly, this is not the first case in which Russia's selection of parliamentary delegates has led to objections by the OSCE. Moscow attempted to send Olga Kovitidi, a representative of Crimea in Russia's upper house of parliament, to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in February 2015.⁸ Ukraine objected, arguing that her acceptance as a delegate would be tantamount to recognizing Moscow's annexation of Crimea, and OSCE officials concurred. Second, Mr. Naryshkyn was added to the EU travel ban list in March 2014 because he "publicly supported the deployment of Russian forces in Ukraine, and the annexation of the Crimean peninsula."⁹ Third, although termed "illegal" by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov,¹⁰ the EU travel restrictions on Russian officials have created considerable problems for Moscow. The Kremlin's attempts to overcome these have been unsuccessful to date.¹¹

Why Attend?

The Russian delegation was eager to participate in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly as originally constituted. The group had hoped to partake in the discussions surrounding two pending resolutions on Ukraine which, in Moscow's view, could be perceived as "biased and excessively critical of the Russian Federation."¹² In addition, the delegation had prepared six additional resolutions for debate. Of those, one sought to develop OSCE norms to stem manifestations of neo-nazism, while another focused on the inadmissibility of the use of sanctions against OSCE parliamentarians. The latter resolution highlights further the importance attached by the Kremlin to the current sanctions and travel bans against Russian officials. A likely consequence of the boycott, which stripped the meeting of the entire original Russian delegation, is a significantly less productive gathering. At the present meeting Moscow is represented solely by "a colleague of the Russian Embassy in Finland."¹³ Likely neither Russian nor OSCE officials are content with that development.

Conclusion

Far from being inconsequential, the EU travel restrictions against Russian officials have proven troublesome for Moscow. Most recently, the ban has prevented critical members of the Russian delegation from attending the ongoing OSCE parliamentary assembly. As a result, key Russian

⁸ Unattributed. "Statement on the rejection of Russia's designation of Olga Kovitidi as a Member of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly." Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly. February 18, 2015. <https://www.oscepa.org/news-a-media/press-releases/2105-statement-on-the-rejection-of-russia-s-designation-of-olga-kovitidi-as-a-member-of-the-osce-parliamentary-assembly>. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

⁹ Feldschreiber, Jared M. "Russia to boycott OSCE meeting after diplomat barred." United Press International. July 2, 2015. http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/07/02/Russia-to-boycott-OSCE-meeting-after-diplomat-barred/1111435854419/. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

¹⁰ Feldschreiber, Jared M. "Russia to boycott OSCE meeting after diplomat barred." United Press International. July 2, 2015. http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/07/02/Russia-to-boycott-OSCE-meeting-after-diplomat-barred/1111435854419/. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

¹¹ Morello, Carol. "Russian boycott European meeting after Finland denies visas to 6 officials." The Washington Post. July 2, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russians-boycott-european-summit-over-finnish-blacklist/2015/07/02/6b3d20bb-10cd-4b49-8057-353460fb8ceb_story.html. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

¹² Dudina, Galina, et. al. "Duma Speaker was not Admitted into Finland." Kommersant. July 2, 2015. <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/2759121>. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

¹³ Dudina, Galina, et. al. "Duma Speaker was not Admitted into Finland." Kommersant. July 2, 2015. <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/2759121>. Accessed on July 5, 2015.

objectives for the gathering are less likely to be achieved. Moscow has tried unsuccessfully to circumvent the travel restrictions. A more fruitful, if highly unlikely, course of action would be to re-assess its policy in Crimea and Ukraine, the lynchpins of the current sanctions regime against Russia.