

Opinion: Putin gets his way as West scrambles

Russia's President Putin is set to bask in the global limelight as a series of high-profile conferences on security in Europe kicks off this week. What could be better for an autocratic ruler, says DW's Bernd Riegert.

Vladimir Putin must be thrilled as he gears up for a week of high-stakes diplomacy between the Kremlin and Western powers. A series of conferences and summits is planned in Geneva, Brussels, Vienna and Brest, France that all aim to serve the same purpose: keeping the Russian president in a good mood and averting a feared Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The diplomatic flurry kicked off in December with two telephone conversations between the American and Russian presidents.

That was followed by a video conference of NATO foreign ministers on Friday, in which the "Western" position on Russia was hammered out.

United States President Joe Biden has promised to closely consult with the Europeans on this issue, and he has stuck to his word. On Monday, top US representatives are set to hold "strategic talks" with Russians delegates in Geneva.

NATO mulls way forward

On Wednesday, there will be a meeting in Brussels of the NATO-Russia Council, a consultation forum that hasn't met in several years. At the same time, NATO's military chiefs of staff will come together to consider troop reinforcements on the Black Sea or NATO's eastern border.

On Thursday, talks will continue in the broader format of the Vienna-based Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which includes the US as well as Russia, Ukraine and other former Soviet states.

The European Union, too, is determined not to be left out. EU defense and foreign ministers will meet in the French town of Brest on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. As with all the other planned conferences, the main topic on the agenda

will be Russian demands for security guarantees and possible reactions to an escalation by Putin in Ukraine.

EU sidelined on European security

The main takeaway is that the Russian president has managed to get the “West” scrambling, laying bare differing viewpoints in the opposing camp. When it comes to the relationship with Russia, there are clear differences within NATO and the EU, depending on the interests of the member states.

The EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, has even complained that the bloc has been left out — he said he wasn’t even asked — when it came to security in Europe and in Ukraine.

To date, the Europeans have not managed to agree on exactly which tough sanctions they want to use to threaten Russia. The only thing the EU has decided is that Moscow should have a high price to pay if it escalates its aggression against Ukraine.

Compromise for the Kremlin

The EU is understandably reluctant to target the sector that would really hurt Russia, namely energy supplies. Without oil and gas from Russia, several countries in Europe, including Germany, would be in serious trouble.

Putin will probably not have to reckon with any serious resolutions being taken during this intense week of diplomacy. It’s likely that we’ll simply see the same warnings that have been issued since 2014, when Russia first deployed its troops on Ukraine’s eastern border.

Neither the US nor other NATO states will be deploying their own military to assist Ukraine. And it remains out of the question that NATO will respond favorably to Moscow’s demand that NATO categorically deny membership to Ukraine and Georgia.

Western powers will not accept Russian blackmail, and Putin knows that very well. However, Biden has already assured the Kremlin that the accession of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO is not on the agenda for the foreseeable future. After all, this state of limbo has existed since the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest.

Keeping the dialogue going

euvering, relying on diplomacy in a bid not to provoke military action by Russia. And Putin will keep the West on its toes with his deliberate provocations.

Putin will keep the conflicts in and around Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and Armenia simmering in order to prevent these countries from moving closer to the West. For him, the West, which couldn't even organize its own withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, seems militarily indecisive in the extreme.

For now, Putin won't expand the war against Ukraine, which he started back in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. After all, the unpredictable Russian president has basically achieved what he wants.

The US, NATO and the EU will want to keep talking, counting on the fact that Putin cannot afford a full-blown war on the domestic front and at a time when he is busy consolidating his influence in Kazakhstan.

This upcoming week of intense diplomacy is unlikely to be the last. And that is hugely valuable in itself: People who talk to each other usually don't shoot at each other.

This opinion piece was originally written in German.

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