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C O N F I D E N T I A L HELSINKI 001093

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TAGS: PREL, PGOV, PHUM, FI, MOPS, ENRG, ETRD, EUN, RU
SUBJECT: PUTIN IN LAHTI: MAKING FRIENDS AND INFLUENCING
PEOPLE

REF: A. (A) HELSINKI 1058

B. (B) BRUSSELS 3646

Classified By: ECONCHIEF JANE MESSENGER FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND
(D)

1. (U) Summary: Russian President Vladimir Putin was the guest of honor at a dinner following the EU Heads of State or Government summit in Lahti on October 20. The leaders were also joined by Finnish President Halonen who has faced criticism for inviting Putin at all. Prime Minister Vanhanen took pains that evening and in public statements since the dinner to stress that the EU was unified in its approach and message to Russia; however, other EU leaders and press in attendance immediately stated that the dinner had not been as pleasant as portrayed in the final press conference and that deep divisions within the EU persist as the Presidency looks to the EU-Russia summit next month. End Summary.

FACING OFF OVER HUMAN RIGHTS

2. (U) According to press contacts and later confirmed by an advisor in the Finnish Prime Minister's office, the dinner turned sour during discussions of human rights, not energy as had been predicted. Finnish hosts had warned member states in advance that this dinner was not the place to air lengthy criticisms of the Russian state. Instead, the Presidency hoped to control the event by gaining member state consensus on talking points and having one or two pre-selected speakers address each topic (see ref A). According to a press contact with sources in the French President's office, the discussion deteriorated to "yelling and screaming" when the leaders of Poland, Latvia, and Denmark questioned Putin on escalating tensions with Georgia. Putin's anger was still apparent hours later at the closing press conference where, in response to a reporter's question on Georgia, he emphasized that Georgia alone is responsible for the worsening situation and implied that he had information proving Georgia planned to use force to settle its frozen conflicts. "This is heading for disaster," Putin said. The question elicited Putin's longest and most emotional answer of the night.

3. (C) Johan Schalin, Finnish Prime Minister Vanhanen's foreign policy advisor, confirmed to emboff that the dinner had gotten tense when discussing Georgia, Chechnya, and the recent murder of a prominent Russian journalist critical of the Kremlin. He was hesitant, however, to characterize the dinner as anything other than a frank and open discussion with brief flashes of anger and a few sharp exchanges. (Comment: Given the Finnish tendency toward understatement and the clear desire to confirm Vanhanen's assessment of the dinner, the atmosphere was probably a good mix of both the French and Finnish interpretations.) When questioned about corruption, Putin asked how many Spanish mayors were in jail for real estate fraud. When questioned about organized crime, the Russian president snapped that "Mafia" is an Italian word, not Russian.

ENERGY: THE PAPER TIGER

4. (U) Pre-summit press focused on energy security and supply as another source of potential conflict with Putin during the dinner. In contrast to the human rights discussion, the EU leaders appear to have stayed on the Finnish message that a new, legally-binding agreement spelling out Russia-EU energy cooperation is necessary. Though Putin publicly brushed aside the idea that the Kremlin would sign the European Energy Charter, he expressed Russian support for its general concepts and appeared willing to discuss either an energy

section within the next Partnership and Cooperation Agreement or a separate bilateral agreement.

COMMENT

5. (C) Since Lahti, Vanhanen has made several public comments, including a speech to the European Parliament on October 25 where he emphasized that the EU needs to speak to foreign partners with a single voice to avoid the perception of weakness and that Lahti was a success because the EU did so with Putin. The Finns' reputation for quiet diplomacy and working behind the scenes limited the potential damage that a free-for-all approach to Putin could have caused, although some member states chafed at the organization the hosts imposed on the dinner, making the strain of the unified approach more evident. The Finnish presidency appears to have set the stage for a productive energy discussion at the EU-Russia bilateral summit next month, despite the disagreement over human rights.

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