

Putin's Non-Response to Netanyahu

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



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Warming Russian ties with Israel, the recent meeting suggests, will not include actual steps to curb Israeli foes such as Iran or Hezbollah.

On August 23, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi -- the two leaders' second meeting this year, and sixth since Moscow's intervention in Syria in September 2015. Netanyahu's chief goal was to discuss Iran's growing military presence in Syria, particularly its proxy Hezbollah's presence in the Golan. Putin expressed satisfaction at the development of Russia-Israel ties, but beyond general diplomatic niceties provided no public response to Netanyahu's concerns.

Earlier this month, Poland excluded Russia from a commemoration project for victims of the Sobibor Nazi extermination camp in eastern Poland. Israel said it supports Russia's participation, but Moscow, it appears, expected Israel to pressure Warsaw to change its position. The Russian Foreign Ministry summoned Israel's ambassador, Gary Koren, for an explanation, while the ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said she considers Israel's position "absolutely unacceptable" and "bordering on historical betrayal." It is unlikely that Zakharova, who in November 2016 suggested Donald Trump won the U.S. presidency "thanks to the Jews," could have made such a statement without Putin's prior approval.

In this context, before turning to the issue of Iran, Netanyahu tried to smooth over the incident and highlighted to Putin that Israel always remembers the Soviet Union's role in victory over fascism and reminded that he initiated a memorial in the city of Netanya honoring the Red Army which Putin attended. In this context, of course, Israel cannot speak against Russia's participating in the important project in the former Nazi camp Sobibor, he said.

Most Russian publications reported on the Putin-Netanyahu meeting in neutral tones, but several described Netanyahu as overly emotional and highlighted that there is little Putin can do to respond to his concerns. Business-oriented daily *Kommersant* suggested that Putin can only offer "psychotherapeutic help" -- that is, he could intently

listen to his colleague. Mainstream *Pravda.ru* (separate from the Communist Party *Pravda* newspaper) wrote sarcastically, "While Netanyahu, in a cold sweat, was feverishly describing the sinister scenario [of Iran in the Middle East] to Putin, the latter was sighing with sympathy, as if to say, 'Unfortunately, we cannot help you.'"

It is doubtful that neither Putin nor Netanyahu said anything that each didn't already know, but it was important for Netanyahu to tell Putin in person that Israel will not hesitate to act in self-defense. For all of Putin's attempts to improve relations with Israel, the Sobibor incident is the latest example of the fact that he views allies as subjects, not equal partners, and highlights the limits of Russia-Israel cooperation.

Putin's approach to Israel was always pragmatic. His pursuit of better relations with the Jewish state did not stop him from simultaneously pursuing closer ties with Iran, refusing to label Hezbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations, inviting Fatah and Hamas to Moscow, and looking the other way when Russian weapons fell into Hezbollah's hands. Neither Russia nor Israel seeks a bilateral crisis. However, Putin's public nonresponse to Netanyahu suggests he's unlikely to give Israel's concerns the consideration the Israeli leader had hoped for.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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