

Leaks Show U.S. Embassy Is Lacking Access

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President Dmitry Medvedev, center in front row, chatting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at an OSCE summit on Wednesday. Leaked cables suggest U.S. diplomats in Moscow lack access to high-level officials. **Vladimir Rodionov**

A new batch of classified embassy cables published by the WikiLeaks web site shows that U.S. diplomats in Moscow possess impressive writing skills but have trouble tapping government sources for information.

In fact, many of the 37 reports published at cablegate.wikileaks.org since late Wednesday cite the same political experts that are widely quoted by national and international media, including The Moscow Times.

They also feature interviews with journalists like Ekho Moskvy editor Alexei Venediktov and at least one reference to a Moscow Times report on illegal logging in the Ivanovo region.

The cables, which date from May 2006 to February 2010, reveal that the diplomats seem to have little more access to the inner circles of power than foreign correspondents.

“They complained to me regularly that they have trouble accessing government sources,” said political analyst Alexei Mukhin, who appears in a November 2008 cable about the relationship between President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Mukhin, who heads of the Center for Political Information, a think tank, is quoted in the report as saying that Medvedev’s first state-of-the-nation address showed that his political clout was on the rise.

Andrei Soldatov, a security expert and head of the Agentura.ru think tank, said U.S. representatives were not alone in their difficulties getting access government officials.

“Diplomats of all countries have had that problem for a long time,” he told The Moscow Times.

Soldatov argued that the situation worsened since Medvedev’s presidency began in 2008, because a number of liberal analysts hitherto regarded as independent had become associated with the Kremlin.

As an example he named Olga Kryshtanovskaya, a prominent sociologist, who joined United Russia in April 2009. She said at the time that she decided to join the party because of her frustration with the “destructive” forces that prevail among opposition politicians.

Kryshtanovskaya is quoted in a February 2010 cable as saying Putin was likely to return to the Kremlin in 2012 because he was “hostage to the system he had built.”

“Those formerly regarded as independent are now being used by the Kremlin,” he said.

Soldatov also said that while Putin was probably offended by some of the reports, he could ultimately profit from them depicting him as less acceptable to the United States.

“This only confirms his image in the country,” he said.

Mukhin said in an interview that he believed the leak was the work of U.S. intelligence agencies. “This is a whole supermarket of compromising material and nobody profits more from the goods offered than those services,” he said.

Putin told CNN’s Larry King in an interview broadcast Thursday that “experts believe that someone deceived WikiLeaks — to undermine the site’s reputation and to use it later for their own political purposes.” Putin did not elaborate.

A February 2010 cable titled “The Luzhkov Dilemma,” which was approved by Ambassador John Beyrle, argues that under former mayor Yury Luzhkov, City Hall had direct links to organized crime.

The 2,100-word report offers no concrete evidence but quotes a number of informants — whose names were withheld by WikiLeaks — as saying the Luzhkov’s administration “operates more as a kleptocracy than a government.”

Allegations of criminal links within City Hall have been made infrequently in the past — and while investigators have opened corruption probes against some of Luzhkov's senior officials, no criminal charges have been brought against the mayor since Medvedev fired him for a loss of confidence Sept. 28.

The embassy cable's authors were right in their prediction that "ultimately, the tandem will put Luzhkov out to pasture, like it has done with fellow long-term regional leaders."

A cable dated May 2006 lists Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, who was head of the Kremlin administration at the time, as a potential successor to Putin as president. While Sobyenin was mentioned less often later, his profile as "lacking ambition" fits descriptions forwarded this fall when he was picked as Luzhkov's successor.

Another cable dated March 2009 cites proliferating "rumors" that Putin is resisting his workload as prime minister, preferring to work from home while leaving much of the day-to-day operations to First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov.

The report's sources were also removed, but doubts about Putin's work ethic have been put forward by political analysts in the past, most notably Mukhin.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Thursday that the latest publications were "rubbish" and could not hurt relations with Washington.

"This is so comical ... that I don't think it can have any influence" on ties with Washington, he said, Interfax reported.

Ambassador Beyrle wrote on his Russian-language blog that diplomats' work had remained "nearly unchanged" for centuries and that the leaks would not disrupt that.

"Our main task is to help build trust between governments, without which it is impossible to solve common problems or reach agreement," he wrote. "A diplomat from any country is something like a correspondent, who talks to people from varying professions and with varying views and writes home what he found out, and sometimes adding his own conclusions."

Beyrle, who did not specifically address the contents of the leaks, said diplomatic ties had stood up against this "minor trial," though he said he regretted the damage caused by the release of "confidential diplomatic correspondence."

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