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Putin Bristles Over Leaked U.S. Cables

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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A terracotta statuette of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, front, in a shop on Via San Gregorio Armeno in Naples. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has assailed Washington for comments in diplomatic cabl
Salvatore Laporta

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin assailed Washington on Thursday for comments in diplomatic cables released by the WikiLeaks group, raising fresh doubts about the revelations' effect on U.S.-Russian relations.

"Do you think the American diplomatic service is a crystal clear source of information? Do you think so?" Putin said when asked about the cables at a news conference with visiting French Prime Minister Francois Fillon.

The government has previously said it would not let the leaks affect the "reset" of mutual ties, which is in a difficult phase as the Republicans, emboldened by gains in last month's midterm elections, are threatening to block the Senate's ratification of the New START arms treaty.

U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle told The Moscow Times earlier this week that he was

"heartened" by the official reaction from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who said relations should be based on actions, not words.

Beyrle also said the leaks were a "crime" and that the United States was weighing its legal options.

But on Thursday, Putin lambasted the imprisoning of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who was arrested in London on Tuesday on a request by authorities in Sweden, who have pressed sex charges against him.

"If it is full democracy, then why have they hidden Mr. Assange in prison? That's what, democracy?" Putin said.

"So, you know, as they say in the countryside, some people's cows can moo, but yours should keep quiet. So I would like to shoot the puck back at our American colleagues," Putin said, using a Russian saying similar to "the pot calling the kettle black."

While British and Swedish authorities have said the charges have nothing to do with Assange's work at WikiLeaks, his arrest was followed by a string of comments by officials in Moscow that the case was politically biased.

On Wednesday, even the Kremlin seemed to be testing a new line when an unidentified official from the presidential administration suggested to nominate Assange for the Nobel Peace Prize.

"Public and nongovernmental organizations should think about how to help him. Maybe by nominating him for the Nobel prize," the official said in Brussels during a visit there by Medvedev. The remarks were carried by national news agencies.

Medvedev's spokeswoman Natalya Timakova later said the comment had been just "a joke."

But the suggestion fueled speculation that the government is deeply offended by the language in the cables, including one dispatch that said Medvedev is playing Robin to Putin's Batman.

Vladimir Pribylovsky, a political analyst with the Panorama think tank whose name appears as a source in some of the leaked cables, said Assange was in some ways a natural ally for all countries wary of the United States.

"He is a left-wing critic of American power, and that goes down well with some," he said.

Several mid-ranking Russian officials have hinted that the charges might have been fabricated by U.S. authorities hoping to detain Assange.

"The real reason for his arrest is to find out by any means who leaked the confidential diplomatic information to him and how," State Duma Deputy Gennady Gudkov, a member of the Kremlin-friendly A Just Russia party, said hours after Tuesday's arrest, Interfax reported.

On Thursday, Dmitry Rogozin, the country's representative to NATO and a former Duma deputy for the nationalist Rodina party, said on his Twitter blog that the case was an example for human rights violations and lack of media freedom in the West.

Alexander Prokhanov, editor of the nationalist Zavtra newspaper, said the leaks revealed Western contempt for Russia. "WikiLeaks showed that the West has absolutely no regard for today's Russia and that it does not give a damn," he said on Ekho Moskvy radio.

Meanwhile, questions remain about the handling of the stories in national media. While WikiLeaks did not mention Russian outlets among the select media that were given early access to the cables, Russian Reporter magazine said Thursday that it did have privileged access.

The magazine has been in close contact with Assange since this summer and had access to hundreds of cables containing Russia-related information, deputy editor Vladimir Shpak said.

Shpak refuted criticism that Russian Reporter, which belongs to the Kremlin-friendly Expert publishing group, was withholding material damning to the authorities.

"You can read allegations arguing the exact opposite — that we just publish damning material — in the patriotic press," he said by phone.

The magazine has cooperated with Israel Shamir, a Russian-born Israeli journalist, on WikiLeaks.

But Shpak denied that Shamir alone was responsible for the magazine's access to WikiLeaks.

Shamir said by phone that he was a freelancer who was "accredited" to WikiLeaks. "This means I have working relations with them but does not mean going to the banya together," he said.

He also denied allegations that one of the cables quoted by Russian Reporter was forged.

Writing in The Moscow Times earlier this week, liberal journalist Yulia Latynina said the magazine had made up quotes from a report about EU diplomats' instructions before a speech by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"The cable is real, it has just not been published yet," Shamir said.

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