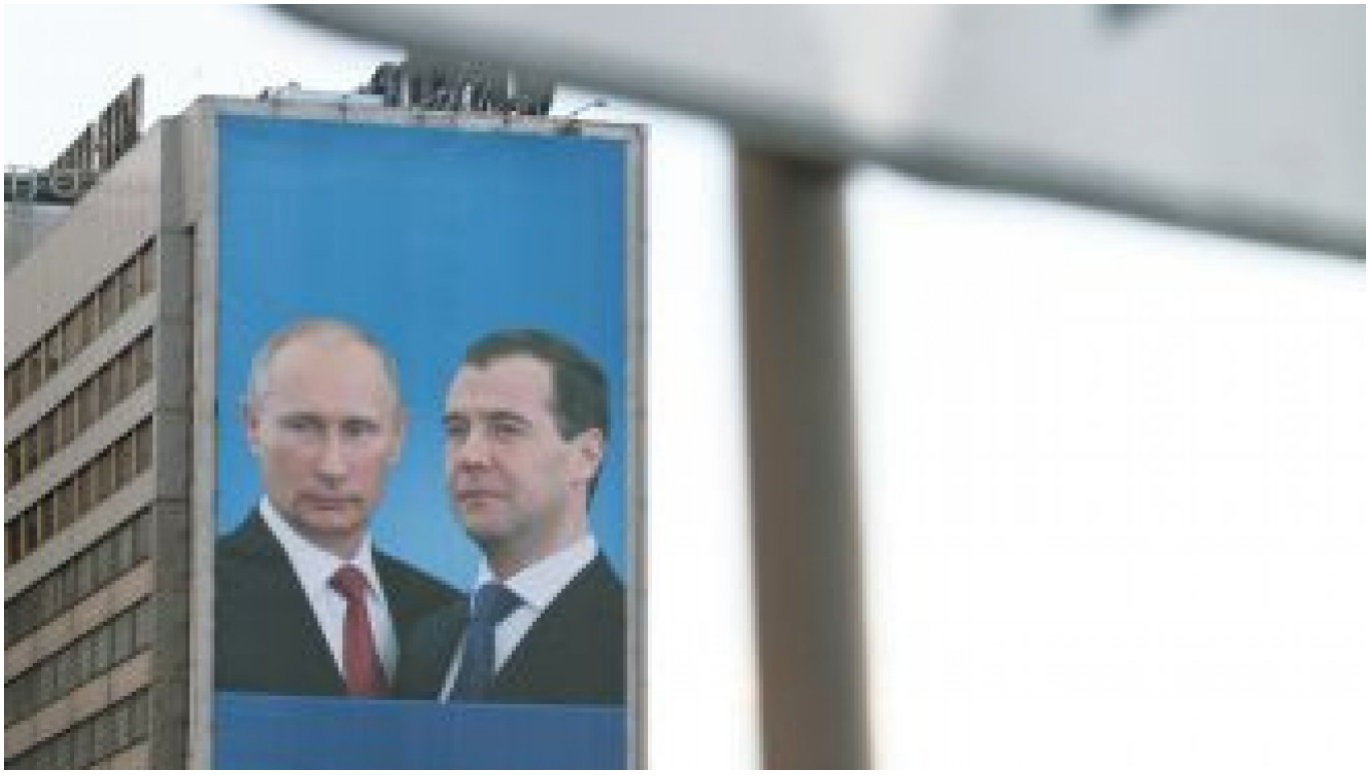
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In Snub to the West, Putin Will Skip G8 Forum

By Jonathan Earle

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Putin said he will not attend the G8 summit at Camp David, but will send Medvedev instead

Forty-eight hours into his third term, President Vladimir Putin has backed out of a high-profile meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama and other G8 leaders in a snub that raises questions about whether he is re-establishing the chilly relationship with the West that characterized his first two terms as president.

The Kremlin confirmed Thursday that Putin had telephoned Obama to say he would not attend the Group of Eight summit in Maryland next week and would send Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in his stead.

In a short statement, the White House said Putin explained in the phone conversation Wednesday that he was busy finalizing a new government after his inauguration this week.

"Noting his responsibilities to finalize Cabinet appointments in the new Russian government,

President Putin expressed his regret that he would be unable to attend the G8 summit at Camp David on May 18-19," the White House said.

Analysts were skeptical about the official explanation, given that the Kremlin has presumably been preparing for the Cabinet reshuffle at least since Putin won the presidential election in early March.

G8 leaders have angered the Kremlin recently by criticizing elections in December and March and a crackdown on subsequent pro-democracy protests.

Obama, who is hosting the summit, would seem to be the most immediate target, given that the meeting would have been the first between him and Putin as presidents.

To make matters worse, the Obama administration reportedly moved the G8 summit from Chicago, the site of a NATO summit on May 20-21, to Camp David at Putin's request, although White House officials have denied this.

The announcement provided clues about what Putin's return to the presidency could mean for Russia's relationship with the West, especially coming after four years of friendly posturing by his predecessor and protege, Medvedev.

"Putin is sick of diplomatic routines and protocols," said Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the Russia in Global Affairs journal. "He prefers meetings with business leaders, who have concrete goals, rather than with politicians."

Under the banner of the "reset" policy, which Obama and Medvedev embraced in 2008, Russia and the United States concluded the New START treaty, boosted partnership on terrorism and nuclear proliferation, and paved the way for Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization.

But Putin's decision could prove a win-win for the new president because it allows him to express his disapproval of the West's perceived support for recent pro-democracy protests and get a political bump at home.

"It's soft retaliation for their criticism of the regime's handling of the elections and subsequent protests," said Gleb Pavlovsky, an analyst and former Kremlin insider. "At the same time, it will please Putin's base, which tends to be anti-Western and isolationist."

Putin, who has grown angry at criticism in the past, may have been displeased that a U.S. State Department spokesman on Tuesday said he was "disturbed" by reports of a crackdown on pro-democracy protesters.

Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, speculated that Putin wanted to avoid facing criticism at the G8 summit over the Kremlin's tough crackdown on this week's protests, which began Sunday after a two-month lull.

But Lukyanov disagreed, saying: "This is not a factor. He really doesn't give a damn about their criticism and hasn't for a long time. ... He thinks that the protesters are marginal and under control."

Arkady Dvorkovich, an economic aide to Medvedev, said the speculation was baseless "idle

chatter. ... I don't think that Putin is afraid of anything political," he said, RIA-Novosti reported.

The change of plans also signals that Medvedev will likely continue in his role as the Kremlin's representative abroad, a niche he cultivated as president, Pavlovsky said. "Medvedev is being given more authority than a typical prime minister. He's becoming something more like a vice president," he said.

Putin might have decided that now is not the time to make deals: Obama is facing an election in November, and Russia and the United States are still deadlocked over the Obama administration's planned missile defense system in Europe.

"There's nothing to talk about until after the U.S. presidential election in November," Lukyanov said. "The meeting is a formality; nothing significant will happen."

During Obama and Medvedev's last meeting as presidents in Seoul in March, Obama was overheard telling Medvedev that he would have more room to maneuver on missile defense after the November election. Medvedev replied that he would relay the information to Putin.

"Putin is very unhappy with America's position on anti-missile defense," Pavlovsky said. "It was understood in advance that there wouldn't be any breakthrough on this issue. Why go?"

Putin's first meeting with Obama is now scheduled for a G-20 summit in Cabos, Mexico, on June 18-19.

Alexei Mukhin, an analyst at the Center for Political Information, said Putin would have a stronger bargaining position there.

"By all appearances, the G8 will discuss a range of problems that Vladimir Putin is not yet ready to discuss from the position he considers necessary," Mukhin said, according to Kommersant. "Russia's position is strengthened by the presence of its natural allies [at the G-20] — China and other countries. That's why he's going."

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