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Kremlin Aide Tries to Smooth Over G8 Attendance Flap

By Irina Filatova

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Correction appended

The leaders of seven of the world's largest economies have made it clear that they are ready for productive work with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev at the G8 summit where he will represent Russia instead of President Vladimir Putin, acting Kremlin economic aide Arkady Dvorkovich said Thursday.

Russia's participation in the two-day meeting, which starts Friday, will be "absolutely full-fledged," as Medvedev has "huge experience working" at such events, Dvorkovich told a news conference.

Two days after he was sworn in for his third term in the Kremlin, Putin told U.S. President Barack Obama in a phone conversation that he would have to skip the summit because he would be busy finalizing Cabinet appointments. Putin said Medvedev would replace him at the summit to be held in Maryland.

“All the leaders — I saw their reaction to the Russian president’s decision — are ready to work with the Cabinet head at the summit,” Dvorkovich said.

But Putin’s snub of the high-profile meeting with his counterparts has caused harsh criticism by some members of the international community.

Outspoken U.S. Senator John McCain slammed the Russian president, saying Putin showed disrespect skipping the G8 summit.

U.S. President Barack Obama was trying his best to the make the “reset” of the countries’ relationship bear fruit, but Putin acted like he wasn’t interested in it, McCain said in an interview with French newspaper Le Figaro on Wednesday.

McCain, for one, criticized Russia over its position on the conflict in Syria, as Russia cooperated with China earlier this year to block a UN Security Council resolution that would have urged Syrian President Bashar Assad to give up power.

McCain echoed the thoughts of Anders Åslund, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, who said Putin’s excuse for not attending the summit was “implausible.”

Having castigated Putin for neglecting the principles of democracy, Åslund, who advised the Russian government in the 1990s, called for kicking Russia out of the G8, which is considered a “democratic club.”

“Russia’s new president, Vladimir Putin, has recognized that he does not belong at the G8 summit,” he said in an article published in Foreign Policy magazine Tuesday.

Åslund urged Obama — who was due to welcome Putin at his Camp David residence, where the summit will be held — to “rethink his reset” of relations with Russia “as conditions have changed” after the power shift in the Kremlin.

While Medvedev as a president has improved Russia’s image abroad, “Putin has systematically transformed Russia from a semi-democracy to an authoritarian state,” Åslund said.

“Because Russia is no longer a democracy by any stretch of the word, the basis for Russia’s membership in the G8 has evaporated,” he said.

In 1997, Russia was welcomed into the G8 — a forum for the leaders of eight of the world’s largest economies, including the United States, Britain, France, Japan, Germany, Canada and Italy.

Experts might express their personal opinion, but it’s not up to them to decide which country deserves G8 membership, said Dvorkovich, who is Russia’s sherpa to the forum.

“It’s a consensus of the G8 member states,” he said, adding that the G8 has proved its efficiency, because the countries have common interests and a common approach to addressing global issues.

This year's summit will focus on the situation in the Middle East, global energy security, as well the problems in the global economy amid the crisis in the euro zone, he said.

Medvedev is slated to hold a series of bilateral meetings with the countries' leaders, including Obama, Dvorkovich said, pointing out that Russia's political and economic ties with the United States had improved significantly over the last few years.

"Of course, the prejudices from the Cold War time remain in many people's heads, but the reset has been completed," Dvorkovich said, adding that the reset had resulted in most U.S. companies intensifying their presence in Russia.

The reset policy introduced by Obama and then-President Medvedev between 2008 and 2010 was completed successfully, having borne such fruit as the conclusion of the New START treaty and Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, said Fyodor Lukyanov, chief editor of Russia in Global Affairs magazine.

However, no new priorities in mutual relations are likely to be set until early 2013 when the United States gets a new Cabinet after the November presidential election, Lyukanov said by telephone.

The U.S. leader will skip the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit hosted by Russia in September as its dates coincide with the Democratic National Convention, which Obama is slated to attend to be officially nominated as a candidate for the presidency, the White House said earlier this week.

But Dvorkovich hinted that hope remains that the U.S. president will attend the summit to be held in Vladivostok.

"There are a few months before the summit, so we can't say yet whether President Obama won't be present there. ... It's premature to say who's attending the summit," he said.

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the G8 consists of the world's eight largest economies; in fact, G8 members Canada and Russia are not among the world's eight largest economies, while non-members China and Brazil are.

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