The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why Putin Skipped Out of the G8

By Michael Bohm

May 17, 2012



When U.S. President Barack Obama congratulated President Vladimir Putin by telephone on the May 9 Victory Day holiday — an appropriate gesture considering that the United States and the Soviet Union fought together against Nazi Germany — Putin returned the courtesy in a strange way: He announced that he would not attend the Group of Eight meeting that Obama will host at Camp David this weekend.

To make matters worse, Putin offered a flimsy excuse that few believe — that he is needed in Russia to help form a new Cabinet, a job that is the direct responsibility of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Putin could have just as well told Obama that he couldn't make the summit because his dog Koni ate his only tie.

At the same time, however, it is understandable why Putin wants to skip the event. The G8 has always been an exclusive "gentlemen's club" of the world's leading industrial democracies, where Putin, much like former President Boris Yeltsin, has always felt like a fifth wheel.

Putin wants to avoid uncomfortable and unpleasant questions that may be raised by journalists and some participants, such as electoral fraud in recent elections, Magnitsky

blacklists, Kremlin threats of preemptive strikes on U.S. missile defense installations, recent police crackdowns on protests and the failure during Medvedev's four years as president to liberalize the country.

Putin clearly prefers warmer receptions, like the one he received in Nizhny Tagil two days after his inauguration. Putin went to the city to visit Russia's largest tank factory and meet with the workers who, during Putin's annual call-in show in December, offered to help break up Moscow protests, if needed.

If Putin was seen as getting too close to Obama at Camp David, it would have been a blow to his tough-guy image as someone who stands up to the United States. Video images of a smiling Obama patting an uncomfortable Putin on the back wouldn't play well in Nizhny Tagil and hundreds of other blue-collar cities. In addition, at a time when the protest movement is gaining momentum in Moscow and other cities, Putin could ill afford to be seen schmoozing with Obama — whose administration, in Putin's own words, serves as the opposition's main sponsor.

What's more, Putin would look bad among his supporters if his first foreign trip in his third presidential term were to the United States. Although the first trip is largely symbolic, images are important for a national leader who has made anti-American rhetoric such a significant part of his brand of patriotism — and the country's foreign policy vector as a whole. Instead, Putin's first foreign trip will be to Belarus on May 31 — a gesture Putin surely doesn't want to be lost on anyone, including Washington.

To be fair, Putin is correct in implying that G8 summits have become heavy on protocol and light on substance. No major decisions have emerged from these summits in years.

Nonetheless, if this year's G8 summit were held in, say, Italy or France rather than the United States, Putin probably would have made the trip. He could have easily let Medvedev handle the Cabinet formation by himself for a couple days, particularly since most of the assignments were reportedly agreed to by the tandem several weeks ago.

Putin, who likes to play the spoiler role to hinder major U.S. foreign policy initiatives, may consider another snub: letting Medvedev attend all G8 summits in the future in his place. This would be a serious break in protocol, because the summits have always been attended by the members' top leaders since the group's inception as the G6 in 1975. (Imagine Obama sending Vice President Joe Biden to a G8 summit.)

But at the same time, dispatching Medvedev to future G8 summits would make it easier for Putin to focus on the G20, where the United States plays a less dominant role and where Putin feels more comfortable next to autocratic countries like China and Saudi Arabia.

Echoing Senator John McCain during his 2008 presidential campaign, economist Anders Åslund made a compelling argument in the May 15 issue of Foreign Policy magazine to kick Russia out of the G8 because of its rampant corruption among the ruling elite and its poor record on human rights.

"Russia is no longer a democracy," Aslund writes, "and the G7 no longer has any reason to invite Russia to this democratic club. ... Benefiting from trade with Russia is in America's

interest. But it's also very much in U.S. interests to put Russia's leader in his place."

To his credit, Obama played down Putin's G8 demarche, saying he understands Putin's need to work on government matters.

Although Obama did everything possible to make Putin's trip to the G8 convenient — including reportedly moving the venue to Camp David from Chicago, the location of a NATO summit on Sunday and Monday — he may, in the end, be relieved that Putin will not attend. Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney would surely criticize Obama over even the slightest sign that he had warmed up to Putin, claiming, once again, that he is too soft on Russia.

When the then-G7 extended an invitation to Russia in 1997, many world leaders and analysts criticized the decision, saying Russia was not mature enough politically and economically to join the club. Putin's decision not to attend this year's G8 summit has proven them right.

Michael Bohm is opinion page editor of The Moscow Times.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/05/17/why-putin-skipped-out-of-the-g8-a14841