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Putin to Take First Foreign Trip to Belarus May 31

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Putin, left, with Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko in 2006. **Denis Grishkin**

President Vladimir Putin will travel to Belarus on May 31 for his first foreign visit since taking office earlier this month, followed by a trip to Germany and France.

After a two-day official visit to fellow customs union member Belarus on May 31 and June 1, Putin will visit Germany and France on June 1, at the invitations of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and newly elected French President Francois Hollande, the Kremlin announced in a statement Friday.

The statement confirmed news reports from earlier this month that said Putin's first foreign trip would be to Belarus.

Putin had been slated to travel to the United States for a Group of 8 summit May 18 and 19 at Camp David in Washington, D.C., but cancelled the trip in what was interpreted by some observers as a snub to the U.S. Putin justified his absence by saying he needed to conduct interviews with candidates for Cabinet posts.

The president's trip comes amid an ongoing crisis in the eurozone, with a possible messy exit from the economic union by Greece threatening to trigger unpredictable consequences for European economies. A study released Thursday ordered by former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin said things could spiral down into violence and chaos in Russia if the economy slows or dips in the wake of Europe's mounting troubles.

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