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Medvedev Defends Role in Georgia War

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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A souvenir seller standing beside bags stitched with the likenesses of the ruling tandem on Ploshchad Revolyutsii. **Igor Tabakov**

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on Thursday defended his role as commander in chief during the August 2008 war with Georgia over criticism that analysts described as a high-level smear campaign against the former president.

Medvedev reiterated that he made the decision to send troops to the breakaway province of South Ossetia independently and at the right time.

"In the night from Aug. 7 to Aug. 8, when [Georgia's] aggression started, I only talked to the defense minister [Anatoly Serdyukov] and to Foreign Ministry staff. I ordered the defense minister at about 4 a.m. to return fire," Medvedev said, Interfax reported.

On Wednesday, Medvedev told reporters in the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali that his order came 2 1/2 hours after Georgia's armed forces had crossed the cease-fire line.

The prime minister was responding to a film that appeared online last Sunday in which retired top generals accuse the former president of causing hundreds of deaths by sending troops too late.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Thursday backed Medvedev and rejected the film as an attempt to sow discord, stressing that all decisions in the military operation "were exclusively made by the commander in chief, who at that moment was Dmitry Medvedev."

"There were no kicks from Beijing," Peskov told Izvestia, referring to a quote from former Chief of General Staff Yury Baluyevsky, who claims in the film that Medvedev had only acted after receiving a kick from Putin.

Peskov said it was "unfortunate" that the film's authors "used the president's words and statements in order to spread rhetoric of a split" in the ruling tandem.

Putin has merely said the decision to send troops was a difficult one, though he supported the film's position that the violence in the Caucasus region had escalated even two days earlier.

But Putin put Medvedev in an awkward position by telling reporters Wednesday that he had called him twice on Aug. 7 and 8 to discuss the crisis, contradicting Medvedev's version that the two did not speak before late Aug. 8.

Medvedev reiterated this Thursday: "With Putin, who was in Beijing [for the Olympics], I spoke for the first time after the start of the conflict in the second half of Aug. 8., at around 6 p.m.," he was quoted as saying.

Putin was prime minister from May 2008 until he swapped jobs with Medvedev this spring.

Analysts said Thursday that the film, whose authors remained obscure, is part of an ongoing campaign by Kremlin hardliners who want to see Medvedev removed as a head of government as soon as possible.

"Obviously this was ordered by someone close to Putin," said Gleb Pavlovsky, a political scientist and former Kremlin insider.

He said the campaign would continue and predicted that Putin would be forced to dismiss the prime minister during the next three years. "It won't happen later than the first half of his presidency," Pavlovsky said. Putin was elected for a 6-year term this spring.

Medvedev said Wednesday that he had only seen excerpts from the film and that he does not know its authors or who commissioned it. But he hinted that personal bitterness might play a role by pointing out that among its key figures is Baluyevsky, who was sacked by Medvedev in early 2008.

Without mentioning his name, Medvedev complained that Baluyevsky during his subsequent tenure as a Security Council member "somehow never commented" on the subject. "Obviously his desire to speak out only arose after he left," Medvedev told reporters in Tskhinvali, according to a transcript on his website.

It remained unclear Thursday who was behind the film. The South Ossetian leadership denied media reports that the film had been produced by the region's state television.

Reached by telephone, Gana Yanovskaya, spokeswoman for South Ossetian President Leonid Tibilov, suggested that the film had been shot by TV Center, a channel owned by Moscow's City Hall that has a bureau in Tskhinvali. But the channel's spokesman, Alexander Pavlov, denied this, saying TV Center had "nothing to do with the film."

Vladimir Pribylovsky, head of the Panorama think tank, suggested that the film was the work of Medvedev's enemies, whom he identified as hardliners surrounding former Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, who is now CEO of Rosneft.

He argued that their motivation is fear of another Medvedev presidency, not least because the prime minister automatically assumes the responsibilities of the head of state when the president dies. "This is a horror for them," he said.

Pribylovsky also argued that while Putin had given him significant freedoms, it was unlikely that Medvedev had alone made the decision to send troops to Georgia.

He argued that Putin had found out from Western leaders in Beijing how they would react. "When he found out that they would react favorably, he gave the green light," Pribylovsky said.

By contrast, Pavlovsky, who was an external Kremlin adviser at the time, was adamant that Medvedev had made the decision alone.

He argued that Putin had shied away from intervention during previous spikes of violence in Georgia's breakaway regions.

Pavlovsky pointed out that Medvedev had taken a gamble when he ordered the troops to cross the border, because it was unclear how the United States would react. Georgia was and remains a staunch U.S. ally.

"He was taking a colossal risk," Pavlovsky said about Medvedev.

Reports at the time said that when he met George W. Bush, then the U.S. President, at the opening of the Beijing Olympics, Putin informed Bush about the start of the war.

Russian experts have suggested that Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's decision to send troops to Tskhinvali was influenced by the fact that an unexperienced president — Medvedev — was alone while his mentor Putin was in Beijing. They have also argued that Saakashvili was emboldened by a NATO summit in Bucharest four months earlier, which had raised Georgia's hopes of joining the military alliance.

However, Saakashvili has argued that the Bucharest summit had delayed Georgia's membership bid, sending the "wrong signal" to Moscow, which subsequently started the war. Tbilisi says Georgian troops entered South Ossetia only after receiving intelligence that Russian troops were moving across the border. Saakashvili said earlier this week that "those who say Georgia started the war do not love Georgia." http://

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