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Putin Sees U.S. 'Snobbery' in Snowden Affair

By Natalya Krainova

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President Vladimir Putin has accused U.S. intelligence services of a lack of professionalism for their failure to round up NSA leaker Edward Snowden, whose arrival and subsequent stay in Russia fractured U.S.-Russia relations in early August.

Incidentally, Putin's comments came around the same time that he was originally meant to meet with U.S. President Barack Obama, but Obama canceled that meeting in August after learning of Russia's decision to grant Snowden asylum.

And now, with his remarks on the eve of the G20 summit in St. Petersburg on Thursday, Putin, himself a former spy, could have hit a nerve — if not for the looming U.S. attack on Syria, analysts said.

In an interview to Russia's state-run Channel One and The Associated Press published Wednesday, Putin responded to various questions about touchy subjects in U.S.-Russia

relations.

When asked about Snowden, who found himself the world's most wanted fugitive after leaking top secret documents on U.S. surveillance programs, Putin said U.S. authorities could have grounded the plane that Snowden boarded to come to Moscow from China's Hong Kong just as they did with the plane of Bolivian leader Evo Morales after they suspected that Snowden was on board.

Or, he said, U.S. intelligence officers could have let Snowden leave Russia —which was initially meant to be only a transit stop on his way to another country that would grant him asylum — and then could have grabbed him in a country "with a relaxed security regime," Putin said, the Kremlin website reported.

"They could have done that in relation to Snowden. What prevented them" from doing that? Putin said.

Putin also stressed that Russia, through diplomats in Hong Kong, had insisted prior to Snowden's arrival that he "stop any activities that could ruin U.S.-Russia relations."

As for the outcry from U.S. officials that followed Snowden's arrival in Moscow, Putin reiterated his stance that the whole situation could have been resolved if the U.S. had only agreed to sign an extradition treaty with Russia.

"Why demand extraditions from us in such a one-way fashion? What's with the snobbery?" he said.

But while some may see Putin's comments as a dig against the U.S., political analysts rejected the idea that his remarks Wednesday were meant to deliver any particular message to Obama.

"Putin's goal from the very beginning was to demonstrate that this situation [with Snowden] is accidental," Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs magazine, said by telephone.

Snowden's case can not harm U.S.-Russia relations significantly because the two countries "cooperate only in narrow spheres," Lukyanov said.

Valentin Zorin, a veteran foreign policy expert for the Voice of Russia, downplayed the importance of Snowden's case amid the Syrian crisis.

"The events in Syria put Snowden so far on the back burner that his case would hardly be an important issue" at the G20 summit, Zorin said by telephone.

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