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Syria's Assad Says West Wants to Weaken Russia

By The Moscow Times

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Syria's President Bashar Assad is seen during an interview in Damascus.

Syrian President Bashar Assad has accused the West of trying to weaken Russia by turning Ukraine into a puppet state, a tactic he said had also been used against his own country.

"I keep coming back to the fact that there is a connection between the Syrian crisis and what is happening in Ukraine," he told Russian government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta in an interview, excerpts of which were published on Friday.

"Firstly because both countries are important for Russia, and secondly because the goal in both cases is to weaken Russia and create a puppet state."

The United States and the European Union have imposed economic sanctions on Russia over its role in the crisis in Ukraine.

Russia, a long-standing ally of Assad, denies sending troops and weapons to support

separatists fighting government forces in east Ukraine and says Western powers helped orchestrate the overthrow of a Moscow-backed Ukrainian president last year.

Asked about a second round of meetings between the rival Syrian sides in Moscow on April 6-9, which Assad will not attend, the president said those taking part should not lose sight of the main goal, clearly meaning restoring peace.

Little progress was made at the first round of meetings in Moscow in January. Many Syrian opposition figures shunned the January talks, saying they would appear only at meetings that led to Assad's removal from power.

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