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Isolated Putin Will Not Go to G20 Summit

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Putin at the 2019 G20 summit in Osaka, Japan. **AP / TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has been shunned by the West over his offensive in Ukraine, will not travel to Indonesia for the G20 leaders' summit next week, officials said Thursday.

The Kremlin, which has been mired in a protracted conflict in Ukraine and threatened the West with nuclear weapons, will instead send Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Putin may take part in the Nov. 15-16 summit by video link, officials said.

"A decision has been made that Sergei Lavrov will represent Russia at the G20 summit," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

A trip to the summit in Bali would have put Putin in the same room as U.S. President Joe Biden for the first time since the Russian leader sent troops to Ukraine on Feb. 24.

Biden has fiercely criticized Putin and ruled out meeting him in Bali if he went, unless they discussed the release of Americans held in Russia.

Yulia Tomskaya, chief of protocol at Russia's embassy in Jakarta said that Putin could participate "virtually."

"President Putin's program is still being worked out," she told AFP.

The confirmation Putin will not be present followed months of uncertainty over his summit plans.

'Sense of dead end'

Observers say the Kremlin is seeking to shield the 70-year-old leader from Western condemnation over the Ukraine offensive, in which Russian forces are suffering setbacks against a Ukrainian counter-offensive.

In 2014, Putin cut short his attendance at the Group of 20 summit in Brisbane where he got a chilly reception and faced intense pressure from the West over Moscow's support for insurgents in Ukraine.

Political analyst Konstantin Kalachev said Putin did not want to step out of his comfort zone and face uncomfortable questions.

Putin's refusal to attend the summit in person also suggests he does not have any firm proposal to end the offensive in Ukraine.

"There is a sense of a dead end, and without concrete proposals Putin simply has nothing to do at this summit," Kalachev told AFP.

Indonesia's coordinating minister of maritime and investment affairs, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, told reporters that Putin would not travel because "maybe (he) is busy in his country" and said leaders should respect his decision.

Lavrov walked out of a G20 foreign ministers' meeting in Bali in July after officials condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Increasing isolation

Indonesia pursues a neutral foreign policy and has rebuffed Western calls to disinvite Russia from the summit.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo had invited Putin despite the Ukraine assault, prompting a flurry of Western criticism. In August, he said Putin had accepted that invitation.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is expected to attend virtually. He had threatened to boycott the summit if Putin attended.

Ukraine is not a G20 member.

Russia refers to its military campaign as a "special military operation" to "de-Nazify" Ukraine and blames subsequent Western sanctions for the global food and energy crises that followed.

While those sanctions have gnawed at Russia's campaign, other countries have maintained economic ties with Moscow. India and China stepped up their purchases of Russian oil.

Global crises

The G20 summit will be the bloc's biggest meeting since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fresh from securing a historic third term, Chinese President Xi Jinping is expected to attend.

The talks will be held under the shadow of divisions over the food and energy crises worsened by the Ukraine conflict, on top of soaring inflation and climate change.

G20 meetings held ahead of the leaders' meeting all ended without a joint communique.

The summit in Bali is also not expected to close with a joint declaration but the Indonesian foreign ministry said "the negotiation for the final document is still ongoing."

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