

# Russia: Putin condemns Iraq war as an "error"

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Only hours after the first American missiles landed on Iraqi territory, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a public declaration, condemning the onset of the US invasion as a "great political error."

Putin did not question the goals of the war, nor did he counter the false and contrived arguments given out by the Bush administration and the US media as grounds for this bloody adventure. He merely called for national sovereignty to be respected and international law to be observed, and said that only the UN Security Council could reach a decision about Iraq.

Putin's statement is in line with the attitude taken by Russia before the Azores summit, at which the US, British and Spanish heads of government gave Saddam Hussein their final ultimatum, having failed to obtain the agreement of the Security Council. At that time Putin had solidarised himself with French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who criticized the behaviour of the US.

Putin reacted to the Azores summit with relief, because it freed him of the necessity to vote in the Security Council and embark on a direct "confrontation course" with the US. Now, like the German and French heads of government, he can present himself as a defender of the foundations of the post-war order against American imperialism.

In recent months, Russian diplomacy has strived to slow down America's war preparations without, however, placing a question mark over the strategic orientation towards a military-political alliance with the US as part of the "war on terrorism."

Within Russia's ruling elite a certain consensus had developed that while it did not support the US in a war, it also did not approve of breaking with America in favour of an alliance with Europe. For example, Leonid Slutski, deputy chairperson of the *Duma* (parliament)

Committee for International Affairs, declared, "If Russia moved toward an anti-American tripartite alliance with France and Germany... this tactically favourable step would lead to a strategic defeat."

The reason for this orientation was given by *Izvestia*, which is at present the most important pro-government newspaper in Russia. On March 13, in an article headlined "The Detachment of the Honest Broker," the newspaper argued that a Moscow-Berlin-Paris axis would not bring any benefits to Russia.

"Would [the Europeans] accommodate us in the negotiations with the World Trade Organisation or on the domestic price of Russian energy sources?" *Izvestia* asked. "Would the Jesuit scorn towards Russia cease in the consulates of the European states?... Would France get involved in a 'business partnership' in the nuclear fuels market?"

The price of a conflict with the US could be "far too high," the article continued. "Doesn't the American steel market interest us any longer? Don't we need the support of the World Bank...? Don't we want to displace the Arab oil suppliers on the US market, in return for US investment in our oil market?"

The conclusions of *Izvestia* read as follows: "All this still does not mean supporting Bush's policy in Iraq. Just that he should commit his error alone, if it is an error. To stand in front of a racing steam locomotive, even as it moves towards an abyss, this is, at the very least, short-sighted." It was necessary, the newspaper argued, to find the "golden mean" and "abstain totally from participating in the big brawl, with its completely unforeseeable consequences."

This passive-pragmatic position fully corresponds to the role of Russia in the world economy as a supplier of raw materials, dependent on the good will of its most important customers.

So far, however, skilful manoeuvring between Europe and America has not brought any great benefits for the Putin government. It has failed to receive firm guarantees or promises from either side. Within the Russian establishment, this is regarded with considerable nervousness. The war could lead to a drop in oil prices, which would hit Russian interests hard.

The European dilemma, i.e., the impossibility of accepting the loss of earlier positions and the simultaneous inability to openly stand up to America, assumes even sharper forms in Russia than in Europe itself. The Russian policy of recent weeks resembles the condition of latent hysteria—moving between extremes and gyrating between panic attacks and undefined hopes.

*Izvestia* advocates a course of therapeutic calm and calls for Russia “not to fall into despair” and “not to panic.” “Nothing terrible happened to Russia” following the meeting in the Azores, it asserts.

In contrast to Europe and America, there have as yet been no mass protests in Russia against the war—not because the population supports the war, but because not a single political organisation, including the liberal democrats (SPS or Yabloko) and the nationalist-Stalinist Communist Party of Gennady Zyuganov, has condemned the motives behind the American aggression.

The Russian nationalists propose various scenarios for how the war could be used to stabilise Russian geopolitical influence. The notorious right-wing demagogue Vladimir Zhirinovsky has already declared: “We should behave worse [i.e., more impudently] than the Americans.” He has called alternately for Russia to send a massive military force to the Middle East, to establish pro-Russian regimes in the Trans Caucasus and Central Asia, and to crush the Baltic states economically. By these and other means he proposes to elevate Russia once again to the rank of a superpower. “Of course we are sorry for Iraq,” Zhirinovsky declared, “but the Iraq war is a great moment for Russia.”

However extravagantly Zhirinovsky expresses himself, he nevertheless reflects certain tendencies in sections of the Russian ruling elite.

Against this background, Putin is trying to appear as something of a peacemaker. He condemned the ultimatum coming from the Azores summit and

justified his attitude with the fact that over 20 million Muslims live in Russia. “We cannot ignore their opinion,” he declared, without regard for the fact that in Iraq it is not the fate of a religious regime, but a secular one, that is at stake.

His words, in fact, drip with hypocrisy. In the three years he has been in office, Putin has made Islam the main enemy. For the purposes of official Kremlin propaganda, it is portrayed as the embodiment of terrorism. The peoples of the Caucasus, who since 1991 have come under the influence of Islam, became the target of a vicious chauvinist witch-hunt, which became even more intense after the Moscow hostage drama of last autumn.

Putin’s entire political career has made clear his contempt for popular civil and democratic rights, in particular, those of the religious and national minorities inside Russia. This became especially evident in the course of the referendum that was held last weekend in Chechnya. It was nothing less than a police-organised farce, aimed at legitimising existing power structures at the point of a Russian military bayonet.



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