

Putin criticizes the US and pleads for a change in course

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4 November 2016

With tensions between Washington and Moscow at their sharpest point since the Cold War, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a lengthy critique of the United States in a speech delivered last week to the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi. The Russian leader painted a picture of a global order destabilized by Washington's pursuit of hegemony and its targeting of Russia. All the while, he persisted in referring to his "partners" in the West.

Putin's remarks, which included delusional appeals to the United Nations and praise for the principle of national sovereignty, revealed both the dire situation facing Russia's ruling elite and its inability to offer any form of progressive opposition to Washington's war drive.

The Russian president began his comments to the assembly of policy experts, government officials, journalists and academics by declaring that since his previous appearance at the forum, "nothing has changed."

While making no direct reference to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, much less the role played by the social forces he represents in restoring capitalist market relations, Putin found himself compelled to make reference to the consequences of that event. "Some countries saw themselves as victors in the Cold War," he complained. They attempted "to bring the entire world under the spread of their own organizations, norms and rules," and "chose the road of globalization and security for their own beloved selves."

This entailed "airstrikes in the center of Europe, against Belgrade," Putin continued. He characterized the 1999 US-led Kosovo war as a criminal operation that paved the way for violations of international law that were to come in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

The Russian president went on to charge Washington with creating and arming terrorist groups that have plunged the world into "chaos." The US is engaging in a "dangerous game" of continuing to supply and train these forces, he added.

He pointed to the hypocrisy of American policy makers, saying, "If the powers that be today find some standard or norm to their advantage, they force everyone else to comply. But if tomorrow these same standards get in their way, they are swift to throw them in the bin, declare them obsolete, and set or try to set new rules."

Despite his "personal agreements" with President Barack Obama, Putin lamented, "There were people in Washington ready to do everything possible to prevent these agreements from being implemented in practice."

He expressed frustration over the continual references to the "Russian military threat," insisting, "This is a profitable business that can be used to pump new money into defense budgets at home, get allies to bend to a single superpower's interests, expand NATO, and bring its infrastructure, military units and arms closer to our borders."

He continued: "The only thing is that Russia has no intention of attacking anyone. This is all quite absurd." He noted that Russia has only 146 million people compared to NATO's 600-million population.

Putin described allegations of Russian meddling in the US elections as "hysteria" and "another mythical and imaginary problem." He asked rhetorically: "Does anyone seriously imagine that Russia can somehow influence the American people's choice? America is not some kind of 'banana republic,' after all, but is a great power."

He argued that the anti-Russian line is an effort to divert the attention of the American people away from the country's domestic problems, including the massive accumulation of public debt, "cases of arbitrary action by the police," and an "eviscerated" political system.

Putin derided the current US elections as consisting of "nothing but scandals and digging up dirt," adding later, "And honestly, a look at various candidates' platforms gives the impression that they were made from the same mould—the difference is slight, if there is any."

"People sense an ever-growing gap between their interests and the elite's vision of the only correct course, a course the elite itself chooses," he said. "The result is that referendums and elections increasingly often create surprises for the authorities."

Because the political establishment is unable to come to grips with this new reality, he observed, it insists that "society does not understand those at the summit of power and has not yet matured sufficiently to be able to assess the authorities' labour for the public good ... Or they sink into hysteria and declare it the result of foreign, usually Russian, propaganda."

"Friends and colleagues," he declared, "I would like to have such a propaganda machine here in Russia, but regrettably, this is not the case. We have not even global mass media outlets of the likes of CNN, BBC and others."

In the limited press coverage that Putin's speech has received in the US, his remarks have been seized upon to further the McCarthyite-style denunciations of the Trump campaign. An October 31 editorial in the *Washington Post* was headlined "Trump, Putin share frightening worldview."

The commentary treated the Russian president's observations as absurdities. The *Post* wrote, "For every crime committed by his Kremlin, Putin was ready with a comparison to a supposedly identical outrage by the American 'ruling class,' as he likes to call it."

Putin's speech is an expression of the objective crisis in which the ruling capitalist oligarchy in Russia finds itself. Facing ceaseless military and economic pressure from the US, the European Union and NATO, the Kremlin chief is compelled to make certain accurate

observations about the state of affairs. However, he does so from the standpoint of an enfeebled and corrupt ruling class desperately trying to find a way out of a disaster of its own making.

The oligarchs and security services on whose behalf Putin rules were the architects of the restoration of capitalism in the late 1980s and 1990s. The Stalinist bureaucracy, increasingly frustrated by the limitations on its power and privileges and frightened by the growth of opposition in the Russian working class, transformed itself into a new ruling class by stealing the wealth built up during the Soviet period and liquidating whatever remained of the conquests of the Russian Revolution.

This counterrevolution was hailed by the bureaucracy as not only a new form of “social justice,” but the starting point, in the words of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, of a new era of “co-development, co-creation, and cooperation.” In 1990, speaking before the last Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, Gorbachev declared that “inclusion of our national economy in the world economy is necessary... for the construction, in conjunction with other peoples, of the material foundations for an irreversibly peaceful period of history and for the solution of mankind’s global problems.”

This has all proven to be delusional. In reality, Washington views Russia as an intolerable obstacle in the way of its exploitation of and control over Eurasia. The ruling elite in Moscow is now confronting the consequences of its own stupidity and blindness.

Despite Putin’s efforts to portray Washington’s policies after the Cold War as some sort of unforeseeable and unexpected betrayal of the principles of world peace and equality among nations, the actions of the United States were entirely predictable. As Leon Trotsky, the co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution and leader of the socialist opposition to Stalin, noted in 1929, “A capitalist Russia could not now occupy even the third-rate position to which czarist Russia was predestined by the course of the world war. Russian capitalism today would be a dependent, semi-colonial capitalism without any prospects. Russia Number 2 would occupy a position somewhere between Russia Number 1 and India.

In the face of this impossible situation, the Kremlin attempts to shore up its rule by appealing to nationalism and populism. Denouncing “ideological ideas that... are destructive to cultural and national identity” in his Valdai Club speech, the Russian president went on to advocate for Russia’s “identity, freedom and independence.” He called national sovereignty “the central notion of the entire system of international relations.”

The “sovereignty” demanded by Putin is the sovereign right of Russian capitalism to exploit its own population. Like right-wing political figures in the US, France, Britain and elsewhere, he attempts to harness popular anger over disastrous economic conditions and channel it in a nationalist direction.

Putin presides over a society with extremely high levels of social inequality and rising discontent. Some 36 percent of Russian households cannot meet essential living expenses, and the statistical agency VTsIOM has recorded a massive drop in popular support for the government, falling to just 26 percent, the lowest level in five years.

The Kremlin vacillates between seeking an accommodation with the US, issuing impotent appeals to the United Nations, and carrying out military adventures.

Having referred throughout his speech to his “partners” in the West, Putin declared: “It is my firm belief that we can overcome these threats and challenges only by working together on the solid

foundation of international law and the United Nations Charter. Today it is the United Nations that continues to remain an agency that is unparalleled in representativeness and universality, a unique venue for equitable dialogue.”

Within less than 24 hours of these remarks, Russia was voted off the United Nations Human Rights Council in a historically unprecedented move. The action was part of the US-led effort to criminalize Russia and the Putin regime for its intervention in Syria in support of the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The efforts of Washington to bring down the regime in Damascus and install a puppet government have been frustrated by Moscow’s military intervention, which began in September of 2015.

The Russian-backed Syrian government offensive in Aleppo threatens to dislodge from the city’s eastern sector the anti-Assad Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces that have been armed and supported by the CIA and Washington’s regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. In the face of an impending major defeat for the US-backed “rebels,” Washington is spearheading a propaganda campaign to brand Russia as a “rouge state” and accuse it of war crimes.

While the UN obligingly voted Russia off of its fraudulently named Human Rights Council, it reelected the despotic Saudi regime, which earlier this month added to its human slaughter in Yemen by killing upwards of 140 civilians in the bombing of a funeral in that nation’s capital.

The criminal character of the Putin regime and its policies was highlighted in last week’s speech in Sochi by the Russian president’s pleas for the US to join in a more effective “anti-terror” campaign and his citing of Israel as a model for the conduct of such an enterprise.

The Kremlin regards Russia’s nuclear arsenal as its ultimate tool of defense. The prospect of a “hot” war is now regularly discussed in the Russian media. Continuing a policy that was begun in 2012, at the start of October the Putin regime held civil defense drills involving 40 million people, including 200,000 rescue personnel. Nothing could be more expressive of the dead end of Russian capitalism than the fact that its last line of defense is its ability to incinerate masses of people in a nuclear holocaust.



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