# Vladimir Putin warns against further anti-Russian provocations

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With Russia and US-allied Ukraine on the brink of war, Russian President Vladimir Putin warned in his annual address to the nation on Wednesday that "the organizers of any provocations that threaten the fundamental interests of our security will regret what they have done in a way that they have not regretted for a long time."

Stating that thus far Moscow has tempered its response to "unfriendly actions" by foreign nations and continues to seek healthy relations with these powers, Putin added, "We really do not want to burn bridges. But if someone interprets our good intentions as indifference or weakness and they themselves intend to burn or even blow up these bridges, they must know that Russia's response will be asymmetric, rapid, and tough."

For years the United States, backed by its NATO allies, has led a ferociously anti-Russian campaign involving the installation of governments loyal to Washington in the former Soviet sphere, the expansion of NATO to Russia's borders, the imposition of sanctions intended to cripple the country's economy, and endless accusations that Vladimir Putin is responsible for everything from meddling in American elections to attempted cyber-attacks on US infrastructure to murder.

Currently, the government in Ukraine, armed to the hilt by Washington, has escalated attacks on Russian-allied forces in the country's breakaway eastern republics and declared its intention to retake Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that was annexed by Russia in 2014 after a coup brought to power a far-right, anti-Russian government. The population of Crimea overwhelmingly voted in favor of joining the Russian Federation.

As Putin was speaking to the nation on Wednesday, press reports emerged that Kiev is moving tank divisions and military brigades towards the Crimean border. The dangers involved in such actions are made clear by Putin's speech. "I hope that no one gets into their head the idea of crossing, as they say, a red line in their relationship with Russia. Where this red line is, we will determine ourselves in every concrete instance," stated the Russian president.

Putin denounced efforts to overthrow the Russian-allied government of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus and kill the head of state and his family. Minsk just announced the arrest in Moscow of conspirators accused of plotting against President Lukashenko's and his children's lives. Putin described these methods as beyond the pale and compared them to the US-orchestrated ousting of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine and attempt to kill Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela. The American ties of Maduro's attempted assassins have been definitively proven.

Nonetheless, the head of the Kremlin made no mention of the breaking developments in Ukraine in his speech. And later in the day, government spokesman Dmitry Peskov indicated Putin would review Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's statement that afternoon that he is willing to hold talks with Russia. Despite staging a show of force by amassing troops on its Ukrainian border, the Kremlin is aware that the situation could totally spin out of control and its military prove incapable of handling a situation that will draw in the imperialist powers, above all the US and Germany, becoming a bloodbath and vipers' den of competing interests.

In yesterday's remarks, Putin also made no mention of Alexei Navalny—the far-right, anti-immigration chauvinist turned "democrat," "anti-corruption" crusader, and "freedom fighter" who has been turned

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into a cause célèbre by Washington, Berlin and the bourgeois media in the West. Nationwide protests called by Navalny's supporters to coincide with the Russian president's address drew only small crowds yesterday. The government arrested numerous demonstration organizers for holding unauthorized meetings.

Even as he confronts a serious geopolitical crisis to Russia's west, the Russian president devoted more than eighty percent of his speech to domestic issues, in particular the coronavirus and the economy.

He promised one-time payments of 10,000 rubles ($130) for each school-age child in every Russian family, monthly stipends of 5,650 rubles ($73) for single-parent households and 6,350 ($83) for poor, pregnant women, and 100 percent wage coverage for parents who leave work to take care of a sick child under the age of seven.

Highways are to be extended, partial reimbursements for the costs of going to health resorts and sanitoriums continued, financial aid and debt relief granted to the regions. The crisis in the labor market, which has resulted in mass layoffs, will supposedly be resolved by the end of the year. By 2030, Russia's average life span will rise to 78. Doctors, nurses, and scientists battling COVID-19 received their thanks and citizens were urged to get vaccinated. Putin has made similar limited social promises countless times before, and almost none of them were ever fulfilled.

Moreover, when considering the state of Russian society, all of this amounts to very little. While the initiation of mass vaccination has brought down coronavirus daily cases from their peak of over 10,000 earlier this year, Russia's agency for consumer rights and human well-being just declared the COVID-19 situation in the country "unstable," with new infections continuing to hover around 8,000 to 9,000 a day. The official death toll of over 105,000 is widely believed to be a gross underestimate. Furthermore, despite major efforts, vaccine hesitancy—an expression of the lack of confidence in the Putin government—remains a problem and the country has administered just over 16.5 million vaccine doses, enough to cover only 5.7 percent of the population with a two-dose regimen.

Families have still not recovered from a 4.8 percent official drop in real incomes in 2020. The average monthly wage of 51,100 rubles ($667) is not adequate to meet basic expenses or cover the costs of rising prices for basic goods, so household debt has risen. Experts predict personal bankruptcies will rise to 178,500 by the end of 2021, as compared to 119,000 in 2020. And, while COVID-19-related stimulus payments prevented some families with children from slipping into poverty in 2020, the poverty rate among childless households doubled since the onset of the pandemic.

Last week, Gazeta.Ru published a report detailing the income of government officials. Prime Minister Mishustin officially made $260,800 (20 million rubles) and his wife an additional $834,560 (64 million rubles). The Minister of Industry and Trade, Denis Manturov, saw a 27 percent rise in his income to almost $2 million (154 million rubles). This is still almost nothing compared to the riches controlled by the oligarchs. The ten richest Russians owned a combined wealth of $151.6 billion in 2020.

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