

Putin warns US seeks to “drag” Russia “into an armed conflict”

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Speaking at a press conference with Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán on Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the written response by the US to Russia’s key demands from December indicated that “the fundamental concerns of Russia have been ignored.”

The main demands from the December 17 document, which the Kremlin made public, were the non-extension of NATO, including a guarantee that Ukraine would not be admitted as a member; a return to its borders as agreed upon in the 1997 NATO-Russia agreement; and a guarantee that it would not station missiles in Eastern Europe and withdraw those that already exist.

NATO has nuclear missiles stationed in Romania, just 1,000 kilometers away from Moscow. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991, NATO has systematically encircled Russia, with all countries in Eastern Europe near its borders—with the exceptions of Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus—now members of the military alliance.

Putin stated that for the US, “Ukraine is just a tool ... They can drag Ukraine into NATO, they can deploy their strike weapons and instigate an offensive to retake Donbass or Crimea with military force and drag us into an armed conflict again.” Putin also pointed out that, in Ukraine, the “retaking of Crimea,” a peninsula in the Black Sea, is part of Kiev’s official military strategy.

The statements by Putin underscore the immense dangers of the situation that has been created by the aggressive moves of NATO and above all, US imperialism. Driven primarily by an extraordinary crisis and enormous class tensions at home, Washington has embarked on a series of reckless provocations—of which the response to Russia’s demands was a part—designed to create conditions and pretexts for war.

While a massive campaign of war propaganda alleging an impending “Russian invasion” of Ukraine was launched in the media, the White House has placed 8,500

troops on alert and has delivered 300 Javelin missiles and other weaponry to the Ukrainian army. Moreover, the Biden administration has threatened Russia with “crippling sanctions,” the implementation of which could only be understood as an act of warfare.

These provocations have created a powder keg in Eastern Europe that threatens to erupt into a war that could engulf not just the entire continent but the entire world.

The Russian newspaper *Gazeta.Ru* reported on Tuesday that officials of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic, both located in the Donbass in East Ukraine and controlled by pro-Russian separatists since 2014, had received information that Kiev was planning a military offensive in the Donbass. The region has been the site of a civil war between pro-Russian separatists and US-backed and trained Ukrainian army and paramilitary forces since the US-EU-backed coup in February 2014, which ousted a pro-Russian government.

Eduard Basurin, head of the People’s Militia of the Donetsk People’s Republic, told *Gazeta.Ru* that Ukraine’s general staff was preparing an offensive operation. Basurin claimed that the plan for the offensive would be discussed later this week by the leadership of Ukraine’s Armed Forces. Separatist leaders also told the business daily *Kommersant* that new Ukrainian reconnaissance groups had recently arrived in East Ukraine, and that additional Ukrainian military units were about to be sent to the area.

Ukraine, which has been at the forefront of NATO’s war preparations since the 2014 US-backed coup, has been deeply destabilized by the war crisis and the ranging pandemic.

Last week, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky rejected US claims of an impending Russian invasion, urging President Joe Biden in a phone call “to calm down

the messaging.”

In the Ukrainian oligarchy and state apparatus, Zelensky has come under fire from various sides, most notably from his predecessor Petro Poroshenko and neo-Nazi forces which have been heavily funded and armed by the imperialist powers. Russian news reports suggest that Washington may view Poroshenko as a potential replacement for Zelensky.

On Monday, Ukraine’s Interior Ministry declared that it had uncovered and prevented plans for violent mass demonstrations across the country against Zelensky’s government. The demonstrations were set to take place on January 31 and designed to involve clashes with the police and create a media sensation. Demonstrators would have carried banners calling for a military offensive to “return” Crimea and the Donbass. The Russian business daily *Kommersant* highlighted the fact that the planners of the demonstrations were clearly very familiar with the modus operandi of Ukraine’s security forces, suggesting that they themselves had or still were part of the latter.

In Ukraine’s working population, which is plagued by inflation and yet another surge of the pandemic, the continuation and let alone escalation of the de facto proxy war against Russia is deeply unpopular. Over the past eight years, the war has already claimed over 14,000 lives and displaced millions. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers have deserted the front, refusing to engage in combat.

Polls have repeatedly indicated the main concern of the overwhelming majority of the population are rising prices, not Putin. These sentiments are a major reason why the imperialist powers and the Ukrainian ruling class are systematically arming fascist forces: both to carry out a war against Russia and to suppress opposition within the working class.

The situation in Russia is hardly any more stable. The pandemic, which has already led to a horrific drop in life expectancy by three years, is now experiencing its biggest surge yet with daily cases topping 125,000 on Tuesday, more than several times the peak during the Delta wave last fall. About 15 percent of the all cases are reported among children, the equivalent of 18,750 children on Tuesday alone. However, the Kremlin, mirroring the criminal response of the ruling class to the pandemic elsewhere, is ruling out any lockdowns and other critical public health measures.

Viewing the working class—not imperialism—as its central enemy, the response by the Russian oligarchy to the war preparations by the imperialist powers has

consisted in a combination of military drills with a series of diplomatic maneuvers, which are aimed not only at potentially achieving a deal with imperialism after all, but also at securing support from potential allies in its conflict with NATO.

In Europe, the Kremlin is trying to play on divisions within the European Union over relations with both the US and Russia. At his meeting with Prime Minister Orbán on Tuesday, apart from Ukraine, Putin discussed increasing Russian gas deliveries to Hungary by another 1 billion cubic meters per year. Hungary already receives almost all of its gas from Russia.

Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry denounced a new deal between Russia’s Gazprom and Hungary last September as “a purely political, economically unreasonable decision taken in favor of the Kremlin.” Relations between Budapest and Kiev have long been strained over ethnic and border disputes.

Europe as a whole relies on Russia for about 40 percent of its gas imports. Amid fears of war over Ukraine, gas prices have spiked in recent weeks, adding to what are already very high inflation rates. Concerns about a potential disruption of oil and gas flows to Europe, and US opposition to the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, have long been a major factor in fueling divisions within the EU over its policy toward Russia and the US.

Despite these divisions, however, the EU has effectively backed the US war drive against Russia. Hungary, for its part, is reportedly discussing the deployment of NATO forces in the country in response to the crisis in Ukraine.

Putin is now traveling to China, where he is set to discuss Ukraine and other issues in a meeting with Xi Jinping. Last week, China openly denounced NATO provocations against Russia over Ukraine. Russian media reports suggest that Xi and Putin will be working out a political document. The *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* carried an editorial on Tuesday, noting that Washington had brought about an “unprecedented rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing.”



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