

## **At meeting with heads of international news agencies, Putin discusses NATO summit & war in Ukraine**



President Putin meeting with heads of international news agencies  
at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum Wednesday evening.

In a two-hour meeting Wednesday evening with the heads of the major international news agencies on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, Russian President Vladimir Putin was asked what message he would convey to the NATO leaders who will meet in The Hague on Tuesday and Wednesday and consider a proposal to raise their annual spending on defense to 5 percent of GDP if he were invited to address them. He said he would tell the NATO leaders, “We do not view NATO’s rearmament as a threat to the Russian Federation. Our security is fully self-reliant, and we are continuously enhancing both our Armed Forces and our overall defense capabilities. Whatever actions NATO takes inevitably pose certain risks, but we will effectively counter any threats that may emerge; there is no doubt about that. In this context, efforts to rearm or raise military spending to five percent of GDP by NATO member countries are meaningless. That is the first point. Second, and this is an unfortunate but well-founded observation: for centuries, the notion of a threat from Russia has periodically resurfaced in the West. Western elites have long found it convenient to invoke this perceived threat as a tool for shaping domestic policy. By pointing to an imagined danger from the East, they could justify extracting more funds from taxpayers and deflect blame for their own economic mistakes. If we take a moment to look through the pages of history, we will see that this narrative has been repeatedly revived time and again”

Continuing, Putin said, “It is evident that the current crisis in relations between Russia and Western Europe effectively began in 2014. However, the issue is not that Russia, as it were, incorporated Crimea, but rather that Western countries facilitated a coup d’état in Ukraine. You see, we were constantly told previously: we must live by the rules. What rules? What kind of rule is it when three states – France, Germany, and Poland – travelled to Kiev and, as guarantors, signed an agreement between the opposition and the authorities led by President Viktor Yanukovich? The three states signed it, their foreign ministers signed it, and a few days later, the opposition carried out a coup, and no one so much as batted an eyelid, as though nothing had happened, you understand? And then we hear: we must live by the rules. What rules? What are you inventing? You write rules for others, but you yourselves have no intention of following them – is that it? Well, who would live by such rules? This is where the crisis began. But not because Russia acted from a position of strength. No, those whom we until recently called partners began acting from a position of strength. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, our Western partners have always acted from a position of strength, at the very least. It is clear why – and I have written about this, and not only me. Because the post-World War II international order was based on a balance of forces among the victors. But then one of the victors ceased to exist – the Soviet Union disintegrated. And that was it – the West began rewriting all these rules to suit themselves.”

“After Crimea, events unfolded in south-eastern Ukraine. What happened? The people in the southeast of the country did not recognize this coup. Instead of negotiating with them, the authorities began using the army against them. We watched this, observed it, tried to reach agreements – for eight years, do you understand? This was not five days. For eight years, we tried to broker agreements between the Kiev authorities, whose source of power was the coup, and what was then south-eastern Ukraine – that is, Donbass. Yet in the end, the current authorities declared: “We are not satisfied with the Minsk Agreements, meaning we will not implement them.” For eight years, we endured this, do you understand? But I feel for the people: after all, they were subjected to abuse for eight years. Even now, the Russian Orthodox Church is being persecuted, and the Russian-speaking population continues to suffer mistreatment. Everyone pretends not to see what is happening. In the end, we made the decision to put an end to this conflict – yes, by using our Armed Forces. But what does that mean? That we are planning to attack Eastern Europe? NATO countries currently spend \$1.4 trillion on defense, more than the rest of the world combined, including Russia and the People’s Republic of China. The population of NATO countries exceeds 340 million. Russia’s population, by comparison, is around 145–150 million. Our military spending is not even remotely comparable. And we are the ones supposedly planning an attack on NATO? It is absurd.”

“Everyone understands it is absurd. But people are being misled to justify inflated defense budgets – 3.5 percent, 5 percent of GDP – and to distract from failures in the economy and social sphere. Germany, for example, the leading economy

in the European Union, is teetering on the edge of recession. And to this day, I still do not understand why the Federal Republic gave up Russian energy supplies. We continued gas deliveries to Europe via Ukraine, and Ukraine earned \$400 million annually in transit fees. Yet Germany chose to stop receiving Russian gas. Why? There is no rational explanation. None. So, if NATO countries choose to further increase their defence spending, that is their decision. But it won't benefit anyone. On the contrary, it will only increase risks – of course it will. Still, these are NATO's decisions, not ours. I believe it is irrational and pointless. There is no threat coming from Russia – none at all. It's simply nonsense."

Turning to the origins of the crisis, Putin, said, "Now, regarding high-level meetings. You know, I participated in the Minsk negotiations when we sought principles for a peaceful settlement, and we spoke for 17 hours straight, throughout the night. Indeed, we agreed on those principles, but the Western side did not implement them. The former Chancellor publicly stated that the goal was simply to buy time in order to arm Ukraine. She said this openly – no one coerced her. The former President of France confirmed the same. They said it themselves, you understand? So, it turned out that our so-called Western partners never intended to fulfil any of the agreements."

"We must find a solution that will not only end the current conflict but also create the conditions necessary to prevent such situations from recurring in the long-term historical perspective. When the conflict first broke out, we urged the Ukrainian side to reunify the breakaway region of Ukraine as provided for by the Minsk agreements, but they refused to do so. The armed conflict ensued. Here is what we did. I mentioned this to UN Secretary-General Guterres and said so publicly as well. You can provide any argument you want. You can blame Russia for starting an aggression as much as you like. But listen to me: you do not have to be an expert in international public law to grasp the logic I am about to unfold."

"A portion of a country decided to secede from the mainland. Southeastern Ukraine – Donetsk and Lugansk – decided to secede. Were they within their rights to do? Strictly speaking, under international law and the UN Charter, they did have that right. The corresponding article speaks of the right of nations to self-determination. I believe the first article says that. You see, this is about the people's right to self-determination. That is the first point. Second, was this portion of the country under obligation to seek permission from central authorities in Kiev during that process? No, it was not. There is a ruling by the International Court of Justice regarding the precedent set by Kosovo. The UN International Court of Justice explicitly stated that if a portion of a country decides to secede, it is not obligated to ask the central government for approval."

"So, Donbass seceded. Did we have the right to recognize their independence? We did not recognize them for eight years. For eight years, we tolerated that state of affairs and tried to come to terms [with Ukraine]. Eventually, they declared independence. Did we have the right to recognize them? Why not? We recognized them. Having recognized them, we signed a mutual assistance agreement with them. Were we within

our rights to do so? Of course, we were. And we did. Under that agreement, which was ratified by our parliament, we were under obligation to provide assistance, including military assistance. They officially requested our help, and we are providing that help.”

“So, the point is that we are ready to hold talks. By the way, I said I was ready to sit down and talk with anyone, including Zelensky. That is not a big deal. If the Ukrainian state entrusts someone with conducting talks, fine, let it be Zelensky. That does not really matter. What really matters is who is going to sign the document?... According to Ukraine’s constitution, the President is elected for a five-year term. There is no mechanism for extending presidential powers, not even under martial law. It clearly states so, go ahead and read it carefully: under martial law, only the powers of parliament, the Rada, can be extended. It says elections shall not be held under martial law. That is true. But does it say anywhere that the President’s powers can be extended. Nowhere. That is it.”

“Under Ukraine’s constitutional arrangements, that country is not a purely parliamentary or a presidential republic, but a mixed presidential and parliamentary one. What does it mean? It means that all branches of government are formed by the President. Everyone thinks it is a democratic society. A state can be structured in a way where all appointments are made by the President: all military leaders are appointed by the President, all ministers are appointed by the President, and all governors are appointed by the President. There is no election involved in this process. But if the head of state is illegitimate, the entire public administration system becomes illegitimate as well.”

“Why am I saying this? We do not care who conducts the talks, even if it is the current head of the regime. I am even willing to come to a meeting on a final stage, just so that we do not sit there dividing things up endlessly, but to come to a meeting and put a full stop to it. But that full stop – the signature – must come from legitimate authorities. Otherwise, the next person who will assume office will throw the whole thing in the trash. That is not acceptable. We are dealing with serious matters. So, I am not ruling out talks, but I am saying that a lot of preparatory work needs to be done first.”

“Finally, the key thing, or maybe not the key but still very important. Before the conflict began, we were pleading with the Ukrainian authorities to comply with the Minsk agreements, but they refused. Then the special military operation began. Shortly after it started – we told them openly, “Withdraw your troops from the Donetsk and Lugansk republics, which we have recognized as independent states, and it will all be over the next day.” They said, “No, we will keep fighting.” Well, all right, here we are fighting.”

“Some time later – I have also mentioned this publicly – a Western colleague of mine asked me: “Could you imagine the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions..? You were fighting for Donetsk and Lugansk, and these two regions do not seem to be part of it.” I said, “That was the logic of the combat operations.” Then he asked, “Could you

imagine withdrawing from there?” I said, “We might consider some form of Ukrainian sovereignty, but only with mandatory servitude, that is, a guaranteed right of overland pass to Crimea. Why? Because they keep threatening to destroy the Crimean Bridge. It is a simple matter. He asked: “Can I say this in Kiev?” I said, “Go ahead.” So, he went there and said it. They told him he was a Kremlin agent. He is a top government official from a foreign country. Sheer nonsense. They just rejected the idea outright.”

“Alright, fine. As requested by the people residing in that territory, we held a referendum, and this region is now an integral part of the Russian Federation. As I said earlier, the situation would get worse for them, and it did. Now, the issue is not just about Donetsk and Lugansk, but two more entities that are now subjects of the Russian Federation, plus, of course, Crimea. Let us talk about that.”

”By the way, when we held talks in Istanbul in 2022 – many thanks go to President Erdogan – it may sound strange, but we have actually come to terms with them on everything. A draft agreement was put together that addressed denazification and territorial issues. We came up with the language that was acceptable to us and Ukraine. But then those who want to increase defense spending in Europe and overseas came and said, ‘No, Russia must be defeated on the battlefield.’ And everything we had agreed on was thrown in the trash. And from then on they have been pursuing that admirable goal.”

“The situation has changed. They say, “Let us talk.” Okay, let us open up those “packages” and resume talks. After all, we are not going to sit there day and night for a whole year. So, we are ready to continue these talks.... At the humanitarian level, the situation warrants such talks. We have agreed to exchange 1,200 POWs. We are bringing our people back home, which is a good thing. We have handed over 500 men and received 400 in return. I think it will be a fair exchange, and we will get back everyone we are supposed to get. Sadly – and it is a painful and tragic matter to mention – we have returned over 6,000 dead bodies, even more than 6,000, and received in return, I believe, 57. That is, we’ve returned over 6,000 bodies of Ukrainian military personnel. We are ready to return 3,000 or so more. But again, these are sad, tragic numbers. However, this is a humanitarian matter and, ultimately, a positive outcome of the Istanbul talks. Thank you very much for providing the venue, and thanks go to President Erdogan as well.”

”We are also ready to hold substantive talks on the principles of negotiated settlement. The Ukrainian side needs to be willing to hold them as well, though. Its Western sponsors and “allies” should stop pushing them to fight to the last Ukrainian, and instead urge them to face the existing realities and to work towards reaching agreements, not continuing hostilities. That is all. We remain in contact. Our negotiating teams maintain contact. I just asked Medinsky [the head of the Russian negotiating team in Istanbul], and he told me he spoke with his counterpart from Kiev today. They are basically making arrangements for holding a meeting after June 22. But I must say right away that Mr. Fidan [Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs]– not to mention President

Erdogan – is doing much to facilitate this settlement. US President Trump, in my view, is genuinely striving for a resolution as well... Believe me, we are willing to end it too, the sooner, the better, preferably through peaceful talks, in case we are able to come to terms.”

With Putin’s comments Wednesday evening as a lengthy prelude, the world now awaits the resumption of discussions between the Russian and Ukrainian negotiating teams in Istanbul next week.

David R. Cameron

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