

Putin threatens nuclear response to NATO troops if they go to Ukraine

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MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin used his annual State of the Nation address on Thursday to take aim at the West, threatening to use nuclear weapons against NATO countries if they send forces to help defend Ukraine from a Russian victory.

In a speech to Russia's Federal Assembly that was predominantly dedicated to Russia's domestic affairs, Putin delivered a tough warning, threatening retaliatory strikes against the West in the event of attacks on Russian territory.

"They must understand that we also have weapons that can hit targets on their territory," he said, warning of "tragic consequences" if NATO forces were ever deployed to Ukraine. "All this really threatens a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons and the destruction of civilization. Don't they get that?"

Western leaders, he continued, thought that war "is a cartoon," adding that Russia's "strategic nuclear forces are in a state of full readiness." He boasted that Russia's most advanced hypersonic nuclear-capable weapons, such as the Kinzhal and Zircon missiles, had been used in Ukraine, while others were in the final stages of testing.

Putin has hinted before of Russia's readiness to use its nuclear weapons, but Thursday's warning was unusually sharp.

"They are talking about the possible deployment of NATO military contingents to Ukraine," said Putin, referring to this week's comments by French President Emmanuel Macron, who suggested that the deployment of foreign forces to Ukraine remained an option — one that some NATO leaders including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have since contradicted.

"We remember what happened to those who once sent their contingents to our country's territory. Now, invaders will suffer much more tragic consequences," said Putin, adding that Russia would also strengthen its western military district now that Sweden and Finland — which shares a long land border with Russia — have joined the alliance.

Sweden cleared the final hurdle for admission to NATO when the Hungarian parliament approved its bid to join the alliance on Monday. Both Sweden and Finland applied to join NATO after Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years ago.

As Putin touched on his familiar anti-Western themes, including his accusation that Western nations were determined to destroy Russia from within, his audience was composed of members of the military, Russian parliamentarians and handpicked members of the public such as sports stars, film directors and patriotic volunteers. Some in the audience nodded along and took notes during the president's speech. Some stared blankly into space, while others chuckled and applauded on cue.

The speech was also broadcast live on advertising screens on shopping malls across the nation, as well as in movie theaters.

At the start of the address, which lasted for just over two hours, a moment of silence was observed for Russian soldiers fighting on the front line.

"The special military operation was supported by the absolute majority of the people. People were adamant about this decision," said Putin, using the Kremlin's name for the war in Ukraine.

The Russian leader is poised to remain in power for the foreseeable future, with a presidential election next month that has been manipulated by the Kremlin to exclude real opponents. Only three other candidates have been allowed to run, part of the Kremlin's effort to convey the sense of democratic competition without posing any threat to Putin's rule.

All three have stated their support for Putin, while two antiwar candidates were both barred from running.

The speech comes at a sensitive moment politically — on the eve of the burial of his main political rival Alexei Navalny, in Moscow on Friday. Navalny's widow, Yulia Navalnaya, on Wednesday accused Putin of ordering her husband's murder and of preventing the family from renting a private hall where his coffin could be laid for a public farewell ahead of the funeral.

On Thursday, Navalny's aides said that, with less than 24 hours before the funeral, the family had not been able to secure a hearse to transport his body.

"At first we were not allowed to rent a funeral hall to say goodbye to Alexei. Now ... agents tell us that not a single hearse has agreed to transport the body," wrote Kira Yarmysh, Navalny's spokeswoman, on social media. "Unknown people call all the firms and threaten them in order to prevent them from taking Alexei's body anywhere."

Navalny was barred from running against Putin in the 2018 presidential election, was poisoned by Federal Security Service agents in 2020, was jailed in 2021 and died in the "Polar Wolf" prison on Feb. 16.

After Russia's recent capture of the town of Avdiivka and nearby village of Lastochkyne — both settlements virtually leveled after months of Russian bombardment — Putin projected his growing confidence of a victory in Ukraine.

Uncertainty about Ukraine's capacity to prevail against Russia has deepened with the failure of its counteroffensive last year — and with a \$95 billion U.S. security assistance package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan stalled in Congress after Republican Speaker Mike Johnson (La.) sent the House on a two-week vacation without bringing the bill to a vote.