

Why Putin Is Mad at Me

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin got very angry last Wednesday when he met with the editors-in-chief of Russia's top media outlets. He complained to Ekho Moskvy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov about the "complete rubbish" that he heard from two defense analysts on a recent program on the radio station. In addition, Putin claimed that the analysts were promoting the interests of a foreign power — implying the United States. I regret to say that the defense analysts who riled Putin so much were Alexander Konovalov and yours truly.

Putin began by saying that if the United States deploys radar installations for a missile defense system in Georgia, Russia might be forced to aim some of its missiles at Tbilisi. The problem with that argument is that Washington has no plans to deploy any radar facilities in Georgia. True, four Republican U.S. Senators proposed this idea last year, but it was little more than a propaganda stunt. No one in the White House — and few in Congress — took the proposal seriously, but the mere idea was grist for Putin's mill in his attempt to produce more anti-U.S. phobia within Russia.

Putin was particularly angry over Konovalov's suggestion that the location of U.S. missile defense installations should not concern Russia's political and military leadership because

they pose little, if any, threat to the country's nuclear deterrence capabilities.

One day after Putin's meeting with journalists, Dmitry Rogozin, Putin's newly appointed deputy prime minister in charge of the defense industry, rushed to Putin's defense in an interview, also on Ekho Moskvy. Rogozin explained that the insidious Westerners are hoping to place their missile defense installations closer to Russia's strategic missiles to intercept them during their initial boost phase.

There are several problems with Rogozin's argument. First, the U.S. Standard Missile 3 interceptors — or SM-3, which the administration of President Barack Obama plans to deploy in Romania and Poland — have ranges too short to reach Russia's intercontinental ballistic missiles at their start position, much less in flight. This restriction applies to advanced versions of the SM-3 interceptor that might appear in 2018 or 2020. Thus, Russia's nuclear deterrence would not be threatened either now or later.

Second, the United States recognized that trying to intercept an intercontinental ballistic missile during its boost stage would be futile because of the extremely narrow window of opportunity — just a few seconds. There is simply not enough time for a missile defense system to react to a missile launch. Thus, it is no surprise that the United States officially abandoned this strategy in 2009. Instead, the Pentagon stated that the most effective point to intercept a missile is during the intermediate phase.

In his interview, Rogozin describes a scenario in which the United States could deliver a massive, crippling nuclear missile strike against Russia, presumably hitting all of Russia's land-based missiles at once — and hitting them so quickly that Moscow would have no time to respond with a land-based retaliatory strike. But, Rogozin argues, since the United States may not be able to hit every sea-based nuclear missile in its initial strike, Washington needs a small missile defense system of 30 or so interceptors to strike the two or three missiles Russia might still be able to launch in retaliation from one of its submarines.

At the same time that Rogozin and others describe this apocalyptic nuclear scenario, they are indignant that the United States won't share every single technical detail about its missile defense system. Then, they claim that Washington not only has no interest in building a strategic partnership but is actually plotting to weaken Russia's nuclear deterrence capabilities.

The Kremlin's stance is schizophrenic. On the one hand, it proposes developing a joint missile defense system with the United States as a key step to boost the "reset," while at the same time it suggests that the United States is developing its own missile defense system to allow it to launch a massive first strike and protect itself against a retaliatory strike.

It is as if Rogozin, Putin and many other top officials are living in the early 1980s, when the Kremlin truly believed that the United States might deliver a "decapitating" nuclear first strike, undermining the mutually assured destruction theory. What they conveniently ignore, however, is the fact that Russia has an effective early-warning system that can detect a massive missile launch from the United States about 20 or 30 minutes before they would hit their targets. This is more than enough time for Russia's nuclear arsenal, consisting of about 500 delivery vehicles and 1,500 nuclear warheads, to respond. Moscow would be able to launch a counterstrike in retaliation within minutes after a U.S. first strike is detected

in flight. This serves as the basis of nuclear deterrence and mutually assured destruction. Because the United States understands that a massive U.S. nuclear first strike would be met with a massive retaliatory strike before its missiles could reach Russian targets, this is a priori a guarantee against a U.S. nuclear first strike.

The irrationality of Rogozin's and Putin's arguments proves that Russia's hysteria over U.S. missile defense has no relationship whatsoever to the country's national security. My suspicion is that the real reason behind the Kremlin's obsession with missile defense is to deflect attention away from any discussion about the deterioration of democracy in Russia, whether it be censorship of television, corruption among top officials or election fraud. This is probably the real reason Putin lost his temper.

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