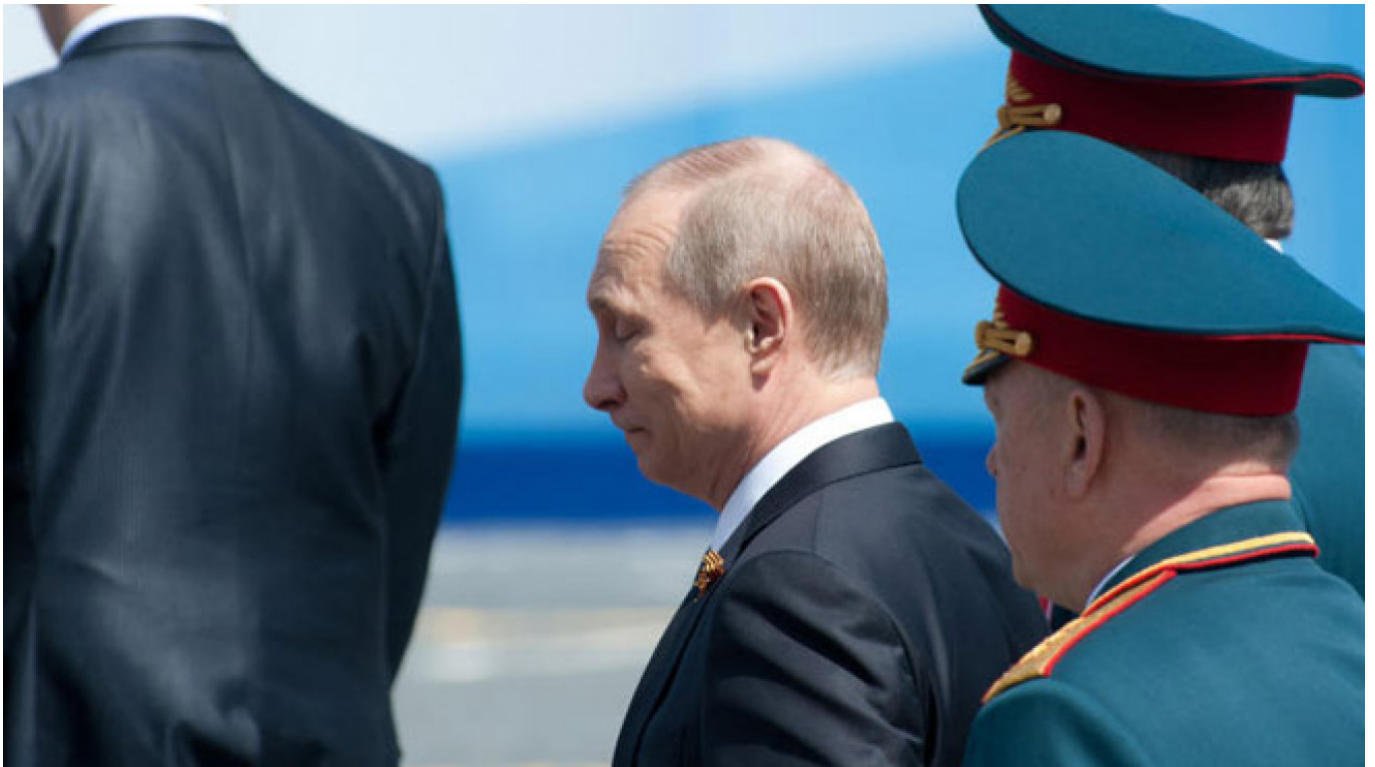


Putin Vows to Further Strengthen Russian Military

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Russia needs a mighty military to fend off threats near its borders, President Vladimir Putin said Thursday, in a stance that reflects soaring tensions with the West over the crisis in Ukraine.

The Russian leader, whose approval ratings reached an all-time high this month despite a bruising recession, said a "powerful army equipped with modern weapons is the guarantor of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia."

Speaking at Thursday's Kremlin meeting with graduates of Russian military academies, Putin also vowed to continue a sweeping military modernization effort that envisions the purchase of large numbers of new weapons.

Despite the fact that oil-rich Russia is now in a recession, Putin's plan aims to spend 22 trillion rubles (over \$400 billion) through 2020 to give the armed forces dozens of navy ships,

hundreds of new planes and missiles and thousands of tanks and other weapons.

Putin added that Russia has no aggressive intentions and aims to "settle any disputes exclusively by political means with respect to international law and interests of other nations."

Relations between Russia and the West have sunk to post-Cold War lows after Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and its support for a pro-Russian insurgency in eastern Ukraine.

The United States and the European Union have responded with sanctions that have sharply limited Russia's access to Western capital markets and curtailed the transfer of military and energy technologies.

Russia retaliated by banning the import of agricultural products from the EU, U.S., Australia, Canada and Norway. The Cabinet formally extended the ban by one year after the EU agreed this week to keep its sanctions in place through January.

Coupled with plummeting prices for oil, Western sanctions helped drive the Russian economy into recession, resulting in a drop in incomes for the first time since Putin took the helm in 2000. But despite the economic woes, Putin's popularity has soared.

The president's approval rating reached an all-time high of 89 percent this month, according to a nationwide poll conducted by the Levada Center, a leading independent opinion research firm. The survey, based on interviews with 1,600 people, had a margin of error of no more than 3.4 percentage points.

Many observers attribute the solid support for Putin to blanket positive coverage of his activities by state television stations and other Kremlin-controlled media that have described the Ukrainian crisis as part of Western efforts to weaken Russia.

Levada head Lev Gudkov called the television propaganda as the main factor behind Putin's popularity.

"This is a very aggressive and false propaganda," he said. "All alternative channels, therefore all alternative points of view, assessments are pushed out of the public sphere."

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