

Isolated Russia Celebrates Tsar Who Opened 'Window to Europe'

By [Marina Koreneva for AFP](#)

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Celebrations will be held in Peter's namesake city St. Petersburg and Moscow to mark the anniversary of his birth on June 9, 1672. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

More than three centuries after he sought to bring Russia closer to Europe, Russians on Thursday marked the 350th birthday of tsar Peter the Great with the country deeply isolated over the Ukraine conflict.

Inspired by time spent abroad, Peter made huge efforts to modernize his vast and under-developed nation during his rule from 1682 to 1725, most famously building St. Petersburg as Russia's "window to Europe."

Celebrations will be held in his namesake city and Moscow to mark the anniversary of Peter's birth on June 9, 1672, with President Vladimir Putin attending a new exhibition in the capital dubbed "Peter the Great: The Birth of the Empire."

With ties between Russia and the West shattered by Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine, authorities are downplaying Peter's affinity for Europe, instead focusing on his role in expanding Russian territories and consolidating state power.

"An outstanding statesman, military leader and patriot, he devoted his whole life to serving the Fatherland," Putin, himself from St. Petersburg, said in a statement this week to mark the anniversary.

Embed:

Wow, Putin basically just stopped pretending: "During the war with Sweden, Peter the Great didn't conquer anything, he took back what had always belonged to us, even though all of Europe recognised it as Sweden's. It seems now it's our turn to get our lands back [smiling]". pic.twitter.com/vgk60hT5ea

— Tadeusz Giczan ?? (@TadeuszGiczan) [June 9, 2022](#)

Peter was inspired by trips to Europe as a young man to transform Russia into a great European power.

Over his reign he implemented sweeping political, military and social reforms aimed at Westernizing Russia, transforming the country into a naval power and vastly expanding its territory.

He also tolerated little dissent, brutally putting down an uprising in 1698 by torturing and publicly executing more than 1,000 rebels.

"Peter I can be an emblematic figure for both supporters of European-style liberalism and for supporters of the 'strong state'," St. Petersburg historian and journalist Daniel Kotsubinsky told AFP.

"The current authorities will put the emphasis on his role as a strongman for the state," he said.

'Close the window'

The conflict in Ukraine, which saw Moscow send troops into the pro-Western country in late February, has left Russia more isolated from the West than at almost any time in its history.

Flights to the European Union have been banned, sanctions have cut off Russians from Western imports and Western retailers, from McDonald's and Starbucks to clothing retailers H&M and Zara, have shuttered their doors.

In the run-up to Thursday's anniversary, Russian social media has been full of commentary wondering what happened to Peter's vision.

Memes making the rounds show photos of the tsar, sometimes in a montage with Putin, and

slogans like "Peter I opened the window to Europe, Putin will close it" or "Close the window to Europe, the view is horrible."

Asked about the anniversary recently, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted the window remained open.

"No one is planning to close anything," he told journalists.

For Russian historian Boris Kipnis, "whatever the historical circumstances, if we abandon the path set by Peter I, we will ruin the country and the people."

"Russia is a European country," he said.

Despite the tensions, 47-year-old St. Petersburg resident Svetlana Stepanova said she was planning to enjoy Thursday's festivities.

"Peter I made Russia into a great power, Putin also wants to see a great Russia," she said.

"That is what's most important."

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