

Putin Visits Mariupol in First Trip to Occupied Territory

By [AFP](#)

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Sevastopol port city Governor Mikhail Razvozhayev (L), President Vladimir Putin (C), Father Tikhon Shevkunov (R) on Saturday. **Sevastopol governor's press service/TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin made a surprise trip to Mariupol, the Kremlin said Sunday, his first visit to territory captured from Ukraine since the start of Moscow's invasion.

The visit triggered an angry reaction from Ukraine, with a presidential aide blasting its "cynicism" and "lack of remorse."

Just hours after Putin visited Crimea to mark the ninth anniversary of the peninsula's annexation, video distributed by the Kremlin showed him landing by helicopter in Mariupol, the port city that Moscow captured after a long siege last spring.

The Russian leader took a tour of the city and was seen driving a car. The Kremlin said he visited a rebuilt musical theatre and followed the presentation of a report on reconstruction

work.

"We're praying for you," a resident told Putin, referring to the city as "a little piece of paradise," according to images broadcast by Russian state television which showed that the visit took place at night.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters the visit took place "very late" on Saturday and into the early hours of Sunday.

It was Putin's first trip to the eastern Donbas region since he launched the invasion in February 2022, and comes almost a year after Moscow announced the capture of Mariupol.

Located on the shores of the Sea of Azov, the city was left devastated after Moscow's relentless bombardment and brutal siege.

"The criminal always returns to the crime scene... the murderer of thousands of Mariupol families came to admire the ruins of the city and (its) graves. Cynicism and lack of remorse," Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhaylo Podolyak said on Twitter.

Ukraine's defense ministry said on Twitter that Putin visited the city at night "as befits a thief."

Putin hails China's Ukraine role

Putin also met army chiefs in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don near the border with Ukraine, the Kremlin said.

Russian state television showed him visiting the Black Sea port city of Sevastopol, during his unannounced visit to Crimea on Saturday, accompanied by the local Moscow-appointed Governor Mikhail Razvozhayev.

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 following a referendum that was not recognized by Kyiv or the international community.

Putin's weekend visits came ahead of a trip to Moscow this week by Chinese President Xi Jinping, widely seen as a diplomatic coup for the Russian leader.

On Sunday, Putin welcomed China's willingness to play a "constructive role" in ending the conflict in Ukraine.

The quality of ties between Moscow and Beijing is "higher than the political and military unions of the Cold War era," Putin said in an article written for a Chinese newspaper and published by the Kremlin on the eve of Xi's visit.

Beijing, a strategic ally of Moscow, has touted the trip as a "visit for peace" as it seeks to play mediator in the Ukraine conflict. China has sought to position itself as a neutral party, urging Moscow and Kyiv to open negotiations.

But Western leaders have repeatedly criticized Beijing for failing to condemn Russia's offensive, accusing it of providing Moscow with diplomatic cover for its campaign.

'Void' ICC warrant

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made no direct reference to Putin's Mariupol visit in his evening address Sunday.

But he vowed: "The evil state (Russia) will be held accountable for every act of terror against Ukrainians."

Zelensky referred again to the warrant issued last week for Putin by the International Criminal Court, describing it as "a turning point."

The Hague-based ICC had issued the warrant for Putin over Russia's alleged deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children during the conflict.

Kyiv says more than 16,000 Ukrainian children have been deported to Russia since the start of the conflict, many of them placed in institutions and foster homes.

Justice ministers from 40 countries will meet in London on Monday to discuss boosting international support for the ICC as it investigates possible war crimes in the conflict.

"We are gathering... to hold war criminals to account for the atrocities committed in Ukraine during this unjust, unprovoked and unlawful invasion," U.K. Deputy Prime Minister, Dominic Raab said in a statement.

The Kremlin has dismissed the warrant's validity as "void" since Russia does not recognize the ICC's jurisdiction.

Fighting on the ground is concentrated in the eastern Donetsk region of Ukraine, particularly the city of Bakhmut.

Russian shelling on Sunday killed three people and injured two others in the village of Kamianske in the southern Zaporizhzhia region, the regional administration said.

Embed:

Путин (как утверждается) ездит за рулём по Мариуполю, дороги не перекрыты, приходится пропускать трактора и фуры. Верите?
pic.twitter.com/Y2QjItRljZ

— Dmitry Kolezev (@kolezev) [March 19, 2023](#)

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