

# Speaking to the Duma, Putin Stressed Unity, Need to Boost Economy and Defense

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## Russia's long-term economic and military problems are formidable, but Western policymakers should not expect such issues to deter Putin from continuing to undermine the West.

**O**n October 5, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the Russian Duma (parliament) following parliamentary election on September 18. Less than 50 percent of voters participated in what many knew was a rigged election with a predictable outcome: a victory of Putin's United Russia party. Since late 2011, when the largest anti-government protests broke out in Russia since the end of the Cold War, Putin had systematically stifled all legitimate opposition and civil society. As a result of last month's election, United Russia now holds 343 seats out of 450 -- enough to change the Russian constitution.

Putin's speech on October 5 was brief. He called for unity -- a theme Putin stressed consistently and repeatedly since his December 1999 message, "Russia at the turn of the Millennium," shortly before he became president in March 2000. Speaking to the Duma last week Putin quoted Pyotr Stolypin, Russia's prime minister from 1906-1911 when he said, "We all must join, coordinate our efforts, our obligations and rights to support Russia's historical, highest right to be strong." Putin emphasized that Russia's strength is in the unity of its people.

Stolypin is among Putin's favorite historical figures. Stolypin became prime minister shortly after the 1905 revolution in Russia. In response to the protests he launched agrarian reforms and called for unity instead of uprisings. However, Putin's view of Stolypin is distorted -- for one thing, his reforms were unsuccessful. Stolypin also murdered and exiled political opponents by the thousands.

In his speech Putin also stressed the need for boosting investment and increasing Russia's defense capabilities. "Draft legislation to support entrepreneurship and private initiative will be submitted to the State Duma," he said.

Putin then highlighted what he described as "the key issue" -- resolution to problems in such fields as education,

healthcare, and the environment. "That is, in areas that directly influence people's wellbeing and social and demographic development," he said.

It is unclear how exactly Putin plans to do this. He did not present any solutions. Yet it is telling that he chose to address these issues directly, perhaps to create the perception domestically that he is not ignoring these problems. Putin then said, "we need to enhance the country's security and defense capability, and defend its position on the global stage as well."

Russia's economy continues to decline. Yet a recent NATO Defense College report observed that Russia's weakness is not synonymous with fragility. The report highlights Moscow's efforts towards self-sufficiency in order to shield itself from influence of other international actors in a world the Kremlin perceives as increasingly hostile. In order to do this, Moscow is prioritizing defense spending over economic efficiency. Questions remain about the Kremlin's ability to accomplish this task but the report concludes that even with partial success, Russia could enhance its geopolitical power.

Meanwhile, what Putin said is just as interesting as what he did not say. He said nothing about foreign policy, other a statement that Russia "never imposes," nor "plans to impose" anything on anyone and that "every county has the right to be strong." He said nothing, for example, about tensions with the West over Syria and Ukraine. He showed no interest in explaining international problems to his domestic audience.

Russia is increasingly retreating into itself while Putin's rhetoric is growing more hostile. Two days before speaking to the Duma Putin withdrew from the 2000 plutonium disposal agreement with the US until the West removes all sanctions against Russia and reduces military infrastructure and troops in countries that joined NATO after 2000. After his speech the Duma ratified almost unanimously the agreement with Syria to make permanent Russia's Khmeimim air base in Latakia, while some parliamentarians proposed reinstating bases in Cuba and Vietnam.

Russia's long-term economic and military capabilities problems alone are not going to deter Putin. He cares less about Russia's true well-being than projecting an image of greatness and strength, someone who stands up to the West, and especially to the US. Western policymakers should not underestimate Putin's ability and commitment to undermine the West in the coming years.

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