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Putin Rips 'Medieval Crusade' in Libya

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VOTKINSK, Udmurtia Republic — Prime Minister Vladimir Putin likened the call for armed intervention in Libya to the medieval crusades on Monday in the first major remarks from Russia since a Western coalition began airstrikes.

In some of his harshest criticism of the United States since President Barack Obama began a campaign to improve ties, Putin also compared the intervention to the George W. Bush-era invasion of Iraq and said it showed Russia is right to boost its military.

Putin, whose country opted not to block the UN resolution last week leading to the strikes, said that Moammar Gadhafi's government was undemocratic but emphasized that did not justify military intervention.

"The resolution is defective and flawed. It allows everything," Putin told workers at a ballistic missile factory in the city of Votkinsk. "It resembles medieval calls for crusades."

President Dmitry Medvedev appeared to criticize Putin, saying hours later that the term "crusades" to refer to the situation in Libya was "unacceptable."

“In no way is it acceptable to use expressions that in essence lead to a clash of civilizations, such as crusades and so forth. This is unacceptable,” Medvedev told reporters at his residence outside Moscow.

“Otherwise everything may end up far worse,” he added.

When asked who Medvedev had in mind, spokeswoman Natalya Timakova said, “He meant Gaddafi and everyone who uses such expressions.”

Gaddafi has called the coalition led by the United States, Britain and France a “crusader alliance.” Putin’s spokesman could not be immediately reached for comment.

Medvedev’s comments were also aired widely on state television, as were those of Putin.

Russia, a veto-wielding permanent UN Security Council member, abstained from the vote on Thursday in which the council authorized a no-fly zone over Libya and “all necessary measures” to protect civilians against Gadhafi’s forces.

Putin said he was not troubled by the military intervention itself but by the ease with which decisions to use force are taken in international affairs.

“This is becoming a persistent tendency in U.S. policy,” he said. “During the Clinton era they bombed Belgrade, Bush sent forces into Afghanistan, then under an invented, false pretext they sent forces into Iraq, liquidated the entire Iraqi leadership — even children in Saddam Hussein’s family died.

“Now it is Libya’s turn, under the pretext of protecting the peaceful population,” Putin said. “But in bomb strikes it is precisely the civilian population that gets killed. Where is the logic and the conscience?”

Putin said “today’s events, including in Libya, confirmed our decisions on strengthening Russia’s defense capabilities were correct.” The government is planning to spend nearly 20 trillion rubles ($700 billion) through 2020 to modernize Russia’s armed forces.

Russia, which faces Western accusations of backsliding on democracy during Putin’s eight-year presidency, has repeatedly opposed international intervention in what it says are nations’ internal affairs.

“The Libyan regime does not meet any of the criteria of a democratic state but that does not mean that someone is allowed to interfere in internal political conflicts to defend one of the sides,” Putin said.

U.S.-Russian relations have improved in the past two years under Obama’s “reset,” capped by the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty that took effect last month. During that period, Putin toned down the anti-Western rhetoric he often employed as president.

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