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Putin Promises to Boost Air Force

By The Moscow Times

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President Putin, pictured here at a paratroopers' base near Ulyanovsk earlier this month, is backing a military buildup amid strained relations with Washington. **Vladimir Filonov**

President Vladimir Putin promised Saturday to re-equip the Air Force with hundreds of new aircraft as part of an ambitious military modernization program.

Speaking at an air show at Zhukovsky, just outside Moscow, marking the Air Force's 100th anniversary, Putin said the military will receive more than 600 new combat planes and 1,000 helicopters by 2020. He said boosting the Air Force is a key priority for the government.

"I'm sure each of us will feel pride for the country, for the people who build such aircraft and pilot them," he said.

Government defense spending has fallen sharply since the 1991 Soviet collapse, leaving the Air Force to rely on aging Soviet-built planes and depriving pilots of regular training flights.

"I want to thank those who helped our Air Force survive during a difficult period in the 1990s

and the early 2000s and remained loyal to their jobs and traditions in the years when the planes were grounded," Putin said at a meeting with military pilots and Air Force veterans.

A recent boom in oil revenues has allowed the Kremlin to launch a costly effort to upgrade military arsenals. Air Force chief Viktor Bondarev said on Ekho Moskvy radio that the military will get 180 new aircraft this year alone.

Putin has overseen a military buildup amid a strain in relations with Washington over NATO's U.S.-led missile defense plans, which the Kremlin sees as a threat to the country's security.

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