

White House Takes Exception to Putin's Syria Op-Ed

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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WASHINGTON — The White House has responded sharply to President Vladimir Putin's op-ed in The New York Times that criticized a U.S. push for military action in Syria, but it reiterated Washington's commitment to working with Moscow to secure and destroy Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

"We're not surprised by President Putin's words. But the fact is that Russia offers a stark contrast that demonstrates why America is exceptional. Unlike Russia, the United States stands up for democratic values and human rights in our own country and around the world," White House spokesman Jay Carney said Thursday.

The response was a clear reference to Putin's criticism of U.S. President Barack Obama's use of the word "exceptional" to describe the American people this week, which the Russian leader called "extremely dangerous" in his op-ed published on the Times' website Wednesday evening.

Putin used the piece to assail U.S. unilateralism and recite a laundry list of Russian objections to the Obama administration's push for a military strike against Syria in response to an apparent Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack outside Damascus that Washington blames on the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The op-ed came ahead of talks between the two countries in Geneva on Thursday to discuss Russia's plan to have Syria transfer control of its chemical weapons arsenal to international monitors for eventual destruction.

Carney on Thursday used Putin's choice to publish his critique in America's leading newspaper to take a dig at Russia's record on civil liberties since Putin's ascent 13 years ago, a record officials in Moscow defend but which is routinely censured by Western governments.

"It reflects the truly exceptional tradition in this country of freedom of expression, and that is not a tradition shared in Russia, by Russia, and in fact freedom of expression has been on the decrease over the past dozen or so years in Russia," Carney said.

Carney added, however, that the key takeaway from Putin's op-ed is that Russia has "put its prestige and credibility on the line" in backing its plan to rid Assad's government of its chemical weapons and that Washington remains committed to the diplomatic gambit.

"We are going to work with the Russians to see if this diplomatic avenue to resolving this problem can bear fruit," he said. "And that is absolutely worthwhile and the right thing to do."

There was little new in Putin's op-ed with regard to Russia's core public positions on the Syria conflict.

These include Moscow's view that outside military intervention is unacceptable without approval from the UN Security Council and that such an incursion could embolden dangerous extremist elements currently fighting Assad's forces and "unleash a new wave of terrorism" that could spread outside the region.

Putin also outlined more controversial Russian positions, namely that the Aug. 21 attack could have been carried out by the Syrian opposition to "provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons," an assertion that flies in the face of Washington's claim that Assad's government was almost certainly responsible for the attack.

Carney singled out this assertion during Thursday's briefing at the White House, calling Russia "isolated and alone in blaming the opposition" for the Aug. 21 attack.

"We have seen no credible reporting that the opposition has used chemical weapons in Syria, and we have been joined now by 34 countries in declaring that the Assad regime is responsible for the use of chemical weapons on that night," Carney said.

Putin also invoked the preeminence of international law and the concept of equality, prompting accusations of hypocrisy from a range of U.S. lawmakers and influential political players in Washington.

"I almost wanted to vomit," Senator Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign

Relations Committee, told CNN on Wednesday after Putin's piece was published on the Times' website.

Menendez cited the Russian leader's KGB service as a cause for concern in assessing the op-ed.

"I worry when someone who came up through the KGB tells us what is in our national interests, and what is not," Menendez said. "It really raises the question of how serious the Russian proposal is."

Leon Panetta, the former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, told NBC on Thursday morning that the op-ed was an attempt by Putin to weaken Washington's positions in this week's negotiations in Geneva led by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

"It's pretty clear the whole purpose of that was to try to weaken our resolve and to try to make sure that we would not fulfill our pledge to conduct military action if we have to," Panetta said.

Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona and a vociferous Kremlin critic, was more blunt on his Twitter feed Thursday, calling Putin's op-ed "an insult to the intelligence of every American."

Putin's reference to "equality" also triggered swipes from U.S. politicians and media outlets aimed at a controversial Russian law passed earlier this year banning the "promotion of non-traditional relationships to minors."

The Kremlin maintains that the law does not prevent adults from making their own sexual choices, but it has been sharply criticized by world leaders, and opponents who say it amounts to a state-supported crackdown on gay people.

"Hopefully, when Pres. Putin says 'we must not forget that God created us equal' he includes gays and lesbians in Russia," Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic minority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives, wrote on her Twitter feed Thursday.

Putin's op-ed had garnered more than 3,000 comments on the Times' website as of late Thursday afternoon, many of which echoed the criticism leveled by U.S. officials. Many of the readers, however, said that while they question Putin's motives and own record on international law and human rights, they found his arguments against the Obama administration's position on Syria compelling.

"I am shocked that, after reading President Putin's opinion, I feel that he is correct," one person wrote. "The Russian president, an ex-KGB agent, a man who has led his country on some of their own missions of destruction, suddenly delivers a message which strikes a chord in me."

Another, identified as Dmitry Mikheyev, said he is a Russian-American who spent six years as a Soviet political prisoner before receiving U.S. political asylum and "has no reason to love the KGB and has all the reasons to love America."

"But to me, this stance on Syria makes more sense than anything else I heard from American political-military-industrial-media elite," Mikheyev wrote. " ... America has to learn to live with complexities of the real world. The black-and-white thinking leads to endless wars with others. Such policy will inevitably result in self-destruction."

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