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2015 to Test Putin's Claim of Moral Superiority

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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President Putin enjoying a concert honoring security personnel Saturday with FSB director Alexander Bortnikov and SVR director Mikhail Fradkov.

Speaking to hundreds of journalists from across Russia and around the globe in Moscow last Thursday, President Vladimir Putin reiterated his stance that as far as the Ukraine conflict is concerned, Russia is in the right.

"I believe Russia behaved the right way in the Ukrainian crisis, and the West was wrong," he said.

In an interview with the state-run TASS news agency in November, Putin laid out an expanded version of this argument, saying that Russia is stronger than "anybody" because "we are right."

"The strength is in the truth. When a Russian feels he is right, he is invincible — I am saying it

with absolute sincerity," he argued, making a reference to popular Russian film "Brother 2," which, according to a review at the time of its release in 2000, "manifested Russia's new snobbery toward the U.S." Next year Putin's bid for moral superiority will undergo a severe test. On Friday, Denmark-based Danske Bank announced its prediction that the Russian economy will shrink 7.9 percent in 2015, and a further 0.8 percent in 2016. Russia's Central Bank has offered a more optimistic prognosis, estimating that the national economy may contract by up to 4.8 percent next year if oil prices don't rise. Meanwhile, the global economy is expected to grow 3.4 percent in 2015, meaning that Russia's share in the global output — and thus the country's strength — will be further diminished. If these predictions prove true, it will mean that Russians' real incomes will be slashed to the extent that ordinary people will be forced to make lifestyle changes.

Unlike the 2008-09 financial meltdown, this crisis is uniquely Russian — not global — and is largely due to Russia's own vulnerabilities, which have been exacerbated in recent months by Western sanctions and plunging oil prices. Also, unlike six years ago, Russian companies have lost the luxury of tapping into Western financial markets to help weather the storm.

Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachyov recently argued that the looming economic hardship is the price all Russians have to pay for the country's absorption of Crimea in March. Putin took the line of thought a step further by arguing at his news conference that "this is actually the price we have to pay for our natural aspiration to preserve ourselves as a nation, as a civilization, as a state."

Putin has repeatedly portrayed himself as a proponent of the Westphalian system of international relations, where countries do not interfere with one another's internal affairs on the basis of humanitarian or ideological concerns. Such a system is based on a balance of power derived from countries' economic and military might.

Even Russia's military activity in Georgia in 2008 and — allegedly — in Ukraine this year have been portrayed as Russia's natural and rightful reactions to Western powers' illicit attempts to knock those countries out of Moscow's orbit.

Speaking about Forbes magazine's decision to name him 2014's most powerful world leader, Putin said in his TASS interview that "global leadership is determined by a state's economic and defense capabilities."

In these terms, Russia will get weaker next year, which will make it more difficult for Putin to hold on in the Ukraine crisis.

In imposing sanctions, the U.S. has striven to inflict enough pain on Russia to compel it to change course in Ukraine, and force it to accept some kind of compromise with Kiev regarding Crimea and the separatist eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk.

If this scenario works out, it could deal a devastating blow to Putin's image that could ultimately cost him his power, some analysts have said. With Russians now having to help pay the price for what they regard as their country's geopolitical achievements in Ukraine, it is unlikely they would forgive Putin if he proves incapable of maintaining those gains.

Therefore, Putin cannot afford to lose in this crisis. At last week's news conference, he was

radiating confidence, vowing that the economy will recover within two years' time without any large-scale reforms.

Putin may be counting on disunity within Europe as the dramatic cut in economic exchanges hits the most vulnerable European Union members and those that have built strong economic ties with Moscow in the past. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Italy and even Germany have signaled that sanctions cannot last forever.

The United States will urge European unity, but just as the Russian economy cannot last forever without access to Western loans, markets and technology, neither can Europe maintain its anti-Russian unity ad infinitum. The question is: What comes first?

The 2014 Ukraine crisis could shift in the next year from the battlefields of east Ukraine to the economic sphere between Europe and Russia.

Because the stakes are so high, the resolution will likely mean a deep-rooted transformation of the international system. If Putin blinks first and is driven from the Kremlin, the whole post-Soviet space will change course, with the Eurasian Union project likely to be abandoned. The fact that both sides have invested so many ideological, economic and propaganda resources into this crisis makes a return to square one impossible.

Russia's defeat would mean Putin losing his grip on power in Moscow, while for Europe a defeat would probably mean the end of the European Union in its present form. The latter outcome would also mean a dramatic transformation of Washington's role in global affairs, as the U.S. would no longer be portrayed as the lone arbiter of the international system.

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