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Putin: Russia Was Ready for Nuclear Confrontation Over Crimea

By The Moscow Times

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Russia annexed Crimea on March 19, 2014.

Moscow was ready to put its nuclear forces on alert to ensure Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine last year, President Vladimir Putin said in a pre-recorded documentary aired on Sunday.

Putin also said that Russia had saved the life of Ukraine's former pro-Moscow president, Viktor Yanukovych, who he said had been in danger after 'revolutionaries' seized power following weeks of violent street protests in Kiev last year.

"For us it became clear and we received information that there were plans not only for his capture, but, preferably for those who carried out the coup, but also for his physical elimination. As one famous historical figure said: 'No person, no problem,'" Putin said.

Protests over Yanukovych's decision to back away from a trade agreement with the European

Union in favour of closer ties with Moscow forced him from power in February last year. Yanukovych's overthrow ultimately prompted Russia to seize and annex the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea.

"Of course it wasn't immediately understandable (what the reaction would be to Crimea's annexation). Therefore, in the first stages, I had to orient our Armed Forces. Not just orient, but give direct orders," he said.

When asked if he had been ready to put Russia's nuclear forces on alert, he said: "We were ready to do it."

The film, shown across Russia ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea, documented the seizure of the peninsula and provided details of Yanukovych's last hours in Ukraine before he fled to Rostov-on-Don, in southern Russia.

Putin said Yanukovych had called on Feb. 21 last year to lay out plans to leave the capital, where violent street protests had been raging for weeks.

"I told him my point of view that, in such a situation, it's best not to leave the capital," said Putin.

From Kiev, Yanukovych travelled to Kharkiv, then on to Donetsk, where he called Putin to ask for help.

Putin suggested meeting him personally in Rostov-on-Don, but Yanukovych's plane was not given permission to leave. He then travelled to Crimea, from where he was spirited to Russia.

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