

Russia Will Overcome Post-Crimea Challenges, Putin Vows

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March 18, 2015



President Vladimir Putin addresses the audience during a festive concert marking the first anniversary of the Crimean treaty signing in central Moscow, Mar. 18.

With the Kremlin walls glowing crimson in the background Wednesday, President Vladimir Putin praised tens of thousands of adulating fans for their support of Russia's annexation of Crimea one year ago.

He acknowledged that issues have mounted since the annexation, but assured the cheering crowd — the size of which Moscow police estimated at about 110,000 — that Russia would overcome all obstacles in its path.

"We ourselves will continue moving forward. We will strengthen our statehood and our country. We will overcome the difficulties that we have so easily created for ourselves over these recent times," Putin declared.

"We will also overcome, of course, the problems and obstacles that others try to create for us from outside. Such attempts are doomed to fail in general when it comes to Russia," he said.

Striking perhaps a more controversial note, Putin said: "Friends, we in Russia always saw the Russians and Ukrainians as a single people. I still think this way now. Radical nationalism is always harmful and dangerous, of course. I am sure that the Ukrainian people will yet come to an objective and worthy appraisal of those who brought their country to the state in which it is in today."

He then added that Russia would do all it could to help Ukraine through "this difficult period in its development," and to normalize ties with its southwestern neighbor.

In Moscow, the jubilee took the form of a massive, star-studded concert on the edge of Red Square under the domes and spires of St. Basil's Cathedral. Though Putin's speech predictably stole much of the spotlight, some of Russia's most iconic pop and rock acts turned out to entertain the massive crowd as well, including Grigory Leps, Larisa Dolina and Lyube.

Russia's State Duma shortened its Wednesday session to ensure all of the deputies would be able to attend the event, RBC news agency reported. Each of the Duma's parties vowed to turn out for the big celebration.

And to ensure Moscow's general population didn't miss out on the fun, some 300 billboards were posted around the city in the days leading up to the event.

The concert was held just a few hundred meters from where Boris Nemtsov, one of Putin's most vociferous critics, was gunned down in late February. The spot of Nemtsov's death — which has since become a makeshift memorial site — was expected to be fenced off by police for the duration of Wednesday's event, Interfax reported

Some 140 celebrations were set to take place around Russia to honor the anniversary of the annexation, the Interior Ministry said in a statement, adding that some 365,000 people were expected to take part in the festivities.

Building Up Crimea

Shortly before his appearance at the rally, Putin presided over a meeting in the Kremlin on the socioeconomic development of the Crimean Peninsula.

Speaking to representatives of Russia's federal government and top Crimean officials, the president said that young families, pensioners, people with disabilities, military personnel and public sector workers have enjoyed improved living standards thanks to Russia's federal coffers.

But he stressed that a great deal of work still remains to be done.

"Now it is essential to organize the same kind of effective efforts to support business, farmers and specialists in key sectors of Crimea's industry and agriculture," he added. "Our goal is to make Crimea and Sevastopol into self-sufficient and dynamically developing Russian regions."

Wednesday marks one year since President Vladimir Putin delivered a landmark speech in the Kremlin, declaring Crimea's accession to Russia's federal fold and launching a turbulent era of Russian relations with the West that many pundits have described as a new Cold War.

Despite suffering a significant economic downturn, Russians continue to harbor overwhelming support for their leader. Moscow-based pollster the Levada Center revealed in February that Putin's approval rating currently sits at 86 percent. The poll was conducted across Russia among 1,600 respondents, and had a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

But he is not quite so popular abroad, having courted scathing criticism and waves of sanctions from Western leaders who view Russia's annexation of Crimea as destabilizing and detrimental to international security.

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