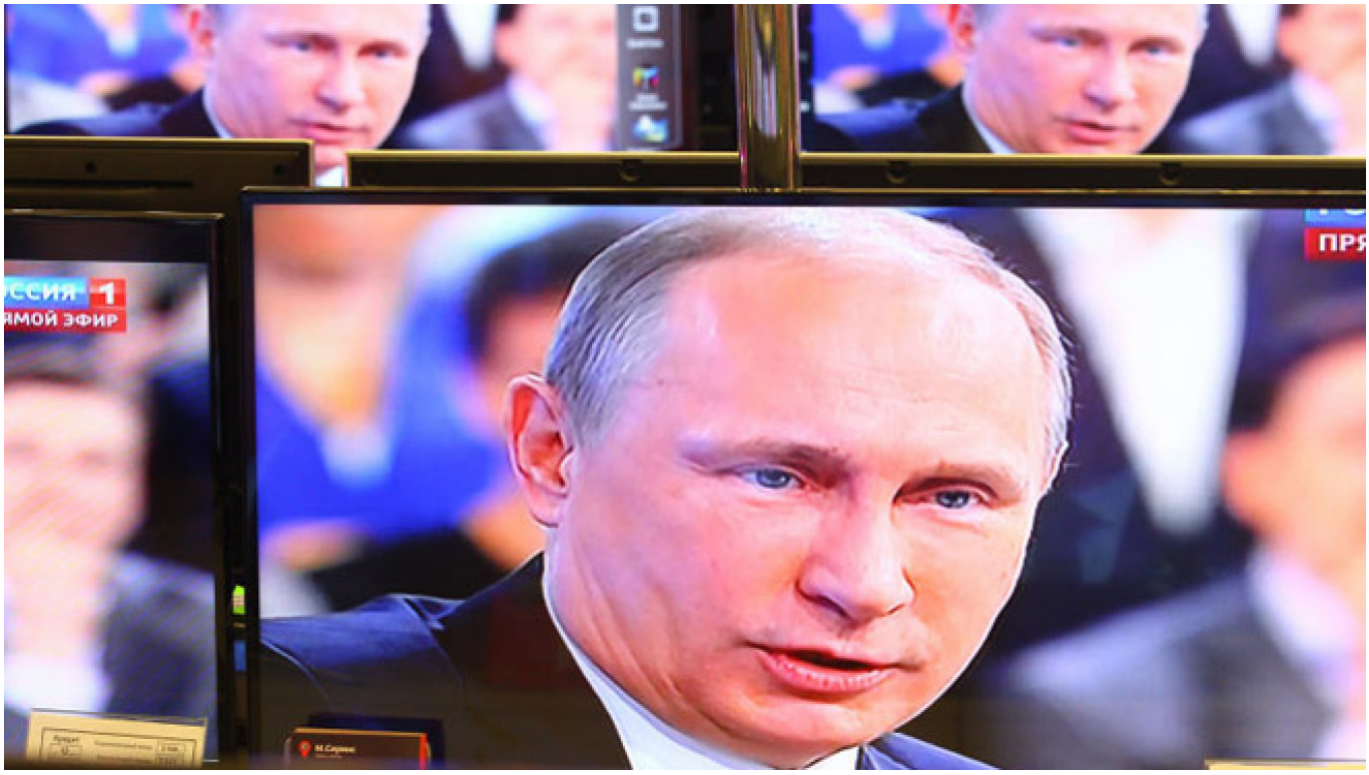
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Putin Wants Peaceful Coexistence With the West

By Fyodor Lukyanov

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The latest live call-in show in which President Vladimir Putin answered questions from ordinary Russians did not have any sensational high points, but it was an important indicator of the leader's mood.

Putin repeated all of his standard phrases and ideas, but without the passion and tension seen in many of his public appearances in recent years. His comments revealed no desire for an escalation of the current conflict. If anything, they conveyed a certain calm fatalism, though not hopelessness.

Putin conceded that, yes, a certain situation had arisen due to sanctions and worsening relations with the West, but that Russia must look for new opportunities and use the current circumstances to its advantage.

Putin almost completely refrained from his usual accusations and recriminations against the United States, not because he had a change of heart, but because his position is so clear

that it requires no further explanation or repetition. And judging from the comments from viewers that appeared in a continuous rolling text on the screen, nobody needed any convincing with regard to the United States.

A typical exchange concerned the fate of the Mistral warships. Putin said that the failed deal was not a problem, that Russia did not really need the ships anyway and had only ordered them to strengthen relations with France. He added that Russia does not need France to pay a penalty for breach of contract, that Paris should simply return the money Moscow has already paid for the ships.

A more interesting moment came with a question about recent attempts to equate Stalinism with Nazism. Putin initially gave a traditional explanation of why "the ugly nature of the Stalin regime" was incomparable to the crimes of the Nazis.

And then he made this unexpected remark: "In truth, we, or rather our predecessors, gave cause for this. Why? Because after World War II, we tried to impose our own development model on many Eastern European countries, and we did so by force. This has to be admitted. There is nothing good about this and we are feeling the consequences now. Incidentally, this is more or less what the Americans are doing today, as they try to impose their model on practically the entire world, and they will fail as well."

That put an interesting twist on the government's massive campaign to forbid any denigration of the past — in other words, to prohibit casting doubt on the actions of the Soviet Union. It would normally be unacceptable to compare the past actions of the Soviet Union with what the United States is doing today, but that is exactly what Putin did.

And it sends a wake-up call to those who had been hoping to build Russia's future out of its Soviet past.

And although the show lacked any remarkable highlights, it offered plenty of food for thought and marked a conclusion of a period packed with emotions and events. For the authorities to maintain the strong anti-Western sentiment they have manufactured, they must now take the conflict to the next level, and that is dangerous and extremely expensive.

Turning back is impossible. The Crimean decision is irreversible, without putting the entire political model at risk. Any backtracking on support for eastern Ukraine would lead to serious political repercussions at home and would generally be perceived as a clear defeat for the Kremlin.

Moscow cannot restore its former relations with the West. Regardless of whether sanctions are lifted, the basis for cooperation that was rooted in the balance of powers of the 1990s has been lost. And Russia has no analogous relations left with other partners. Its only choice now is to look for such opportunities elsewhere, with no guarantee it will find them.

That is why Moscow prefers the status quo that developed between Russia and the West following the acute phase of the war in Ukraine. To use a term that is once again in vogue, Russia is entering into a "frozen conflict" with Europe and the United States that none of the parties like, but that they all prefer to open conflict.

It is no coincidence that Putin devoted a great many of his comments to macroeconomic indicators in Russia. He seemed to be pleasantly surprised that the situation is under control, and that things are actually improving in some areas — especially because the economic outlook at the end of last year was bleak, to say the least. The president mentioned several times that Russia's economy had withstood the heavy blow it received, and he apparently concluded that it could therefore continue on in its current condition for quite some time.

The Kremlin does not want to provoke the West into applying greater pressure, but it will refrain from doing anything to reduce the current pressure. That is a fatalistic approach that essentially says: "Whatever will happen, will happen, but the worst is behind us."

In the Cold War terminology that is again gaining currency, the confrontation is moving into a phase of "peaceful coexistence." That is not a rapprochement, but recognition of the fact that neither side can fully gain the upper hand. And that means both must cooperate wherever possible to minimize the risks, even if that interaction is limited to certain, specific areas.

Ratcheting down the conflict does not necessarily mean that the two sides want to end it, but rather that it they want to contain it within a manageable framework. This is especially important now because the number of provocative incidents involving warships and military aircraft flying with their transponders off has increased markedly in recent months, indicating that both sides have largely forgotten and must quickly relearn the "safety measures" that were in place during the first Cold War.

The history of the second half of the 20th century suggests that, inevitably, relations alternately "warm" and "cool" in a global "frozen conflict." "Peaceful coexistence" always follows heated confrontation whenever one or both sides feels it has gathered enough strength to gain a little ground.

On the other hand, during that Cold War, a balance of powers existed that guaranteed neither side could achieve complete victory over the other. That mechanism is missing now, but there is a "larger world," an international community pursuing its own ambitions and coping with its own problems quite independently of Russia's confrontation with the West.

That fact exerts a moderating influence on the contending sides because the interests of that "larger world" might or might not coincide with theirs. That counterbalance did not exist during the first Cold War because global politics were completely tied up in the U.S.-Soviet confrontation.

The downside of the current phase of "peaceful coexistence" is its lack of inner reflection and debate. During the call-in show, Putin categorically rejected the very idea that Russia's policy toward Ukraine had failed. His message was essentially: "Russia is not to blame. It did what it had to do."

Western leaders take a similar approach, heaping all of the blame on Russia and claiming that they only wanted the best for Ukraine. Apparently the two sides will begin formulating a new policy only when the situation in the world becomes so bad that they finally understand that old Cold War-era approaches are inadequate to the current situation.

China's rising influence, the widening havoc that the Islamic State is wreaking and the greater

potential for both progress and destruction that new technologies have unleashed — along with numerous other factors — are hastening the advent of that terrible day.

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