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Putin's UN Speech Fails to Surprise

By Howard Amos

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President Vladimir Putin making a speech during the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly at UN headquarters in New York on Monday.

A much-anticipated speech by President Vladimir Putin to the United Nations General Assembly on Monday saw the Russian leader criticize Western policy in the Middle East and Ukraine, but did not deliver any surprises or dramatic new policy initiatives.

The build-up to Putin's address was given blanket coverage by state-controlled media in Russia with newscasters and pundits promising a "historic" moment.

See the photo gallery: President Putin Attends UN General Assembly in New York

Much of the substance of the speech, which touched on climate change as well as the crisis in Syria, was ground that had been covered by Putin in previous interviews and hinted at in briefings by Russian diplomats.

In a widely expected center point to the speech, Putin appealed to the international

community over the Islamic State, calling for the creation of a global coalition to fight the terrorist organization in Syria and Iraq that would resemble the anti-Hitler alliance that battled Nazi Germany in World War II.

On Syria

Russia has built up its military presence in Syria around the Mediterranean port of Tartus in recent weeks, with U.S. officials claiming Moscow has moved fighter jets, tanks and anti-aircraft missiles to the area.

Putin brushed off suggestions Monday that a military build-up — which Russian officials have painted as nothing out of the ordinary — was designed to boost Russia's standing on the world stage.

"Our direct approach is used as an excuse for accusations against us of growing ambitions. But the essence is not our ambitions. It's impossible to stand by in the current situation," Putin told the delegates.

Clad in a black suit, Putin referred often to the notes in front of him, unlike some of the other leaders who spoke to the hall. His speech lasted just over 20 minutes.

Putin's other points on Syria were largely in line with previous criticisms of Western policy. He called for respect for the sovereignty of Middle Eastern states and noted the huge threat posed by the Islamic State.

The only forces offering any serious resistance to Islamic State are the army of Syrian President Bashar Assad and Kurdish militias, Putin said.

Ukraine, Climate Change

Despite speculation Putin would not touch on Ukraine in favor of concentrating on Syria, the Russian leader repeated accusations he has made about the crisis in the former Soviet country having been caused by the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization after the fall of the Soviet Union.

"At first NATO continued to expand ... then they put a choice before the post-Soviet space: Do you want to be in the East or West? Sooner or later this confrontational logic was bound to end up in a serious geopolitical crisis. And this happened in Ukraine," Putin said.

Putin added that the interests of people in eastern Ukraine under the control of Russia-backed rebels must be taken into account.

The delegation from Ukraine, which accuses Russia of sending thousands of regular troops to fight alongside rebels, walked out of the hall during Putin's speech.

Other topics touched on by Putin included climate change, criticism of Western sanctions on Russia as a contravention of World Trade Organization rules and words in support of possible reform of the UN.

Obama Against 'Isolated Russia'

Putin was the eighth speaker to address the General Assembly, following speakers including UN leader Ban Ki-moon, U.S. President Barack Obama, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

In his address, Obama said that the U.S. was obliged to impose sanctions on Russia because of its actions in Ukraine.

"We cannot stand by when the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a nation is violated, he said.

But Obama also appeared to sound a conciliatory note and said that his aim was not to isolate Russia. "We want a strong Russia that is invested with us in strengthening the international system," Obama told the UN, adding that the U.S. was ready to work with Moscow over Syria.

Moscow and Washington have deep divisions over Assad, whom Moscow backs while Washington maintains he must step aside for any peace process to work. Obama said Monday that Assad was a "tyrant" who "slaughters tens of thousands of his own citizens."

Obama was due to meet Putin for their first face-to-face meeting in over a year later Monday.

Media Hype

Putin's speech was given blanket coverage by Russian media through Monday, which was almost universally gushing in its assessment of the importance of the event.

"Without exaggeration, an unprecedented event will take place today in New York. At the 70th anniversary session of the United Nations General Assembly, Vladimir Putin will give his first speech for 10 years," the state-controlled NTV news channel said in a broadcast.

State-owned Rossiya 24 carried a countdown clock to the opening of the General Assembly at the bottom of its screen for much of Monday and devoted hours of prime time footage to a live stream from New York.

Kremlin-friendly tabloid LifeNews ran a piece on caricatures of Putin's upcoming speech and meeting with Obama. One cartoon showed Putin and Obama dressed as boxers, with Putin delivering a knockout blow, while another compared Obama and European leaders to children with special needs.

A newscaster from pro-Kremlin Ren-TV did not spare the hyperbole, telling Monday morning viewers that "Vladimir Putin is preparing a speech that will change the world."

Talk Show

Putin's speech to the UN was preceded by the airing of an interview to CBS' Charlie Rose broadcast Sunday evening in the United States, although it was recorded last week outside Moscow.

State-controlled television channels led their morning bulletins with excerpts from the

interview, which featured almost no questions about internal Russian politics.

"We will be happy if we can find a united platform for joint action against terrorists," Putin told Rose. "There is no other way of resolving the Syrian problem other than by strengthening existing, legal state structures, giving them help in the fight against terrorism and, of course, driving at the same time a positive dialogue with the moderate parts of the opposition."

Putin told Rose that Russia did not have any plans to commit ground troops to fighting against the Islamic State in Syria alongside Assad's army.

Challenged by Rose over his style of governance, Putin batted away suggestions that he ruled Russia like a tsar, denied that the Russian people were afraid of him and admitted that his work for the Soviet security services, the KGB, had left a mark on him.

"How can I be a gangster if I worked for the KGB?" Putin asked Rose.

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