

At Valdai, Putin Didn't Announce His Presidential Bid. This Is What He Did Say

October 20, 2017



Vladimir Purin / Kremlin Press Service

Viewers who diligently waited through the speeches at the annual Valdai Club conference for a much-anticipated announcement by Vladimir Putin that he will see re-election as president were disappointed.

Political commentator Fyodor Lukyanov, who chaired the annual meeting of global political figures, thinkers, and business people, gave Putin a cue.

But Putin refused to take the bait, telling an old joke instead, in which an oligarch goes broke and tells his wife they'll have to sell their Mercedes and buy a Lada and move out of the prestigious Rublyovka area to an ordinary apartment.

"Will you still love me?" asks the oligarch. "I will love you and miss you," says his wife, implying she would be leaving him.

As the audience laughed at the joke, Putin commented: "I don't think you'll miss me much."

Asked if a woman could become president of Russia — a nod to Ksenia Sobchak's recent announcement she will run for president — Putin smiled and said, "in our country, anything is possible."

It is still widely assumed Putin will run again for president — and win.

United States

When Toby Gati, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research, and currently a consultant at an international law firm, asked Putin if he could find something positive to say about the U.S., Putin retorted that starting with President Barack Obama, the U.S. had unleashed an "unprecedented anti-Russian campaign".

Russia had "not provoked anyone," said Putin, but the Democrats "lost the elections and blame it on Russia and now indulge in "naked, anti-Russian hysteria" with "every fault laid at Russia's door [...] They look for the Russian trail in everything, and they find it."

"Our biggest mistake with the West is to have trusted you," continued Putin. "And your mistake is that you perceived that trust as weakness and exploited it."

Arms Treaties

Putin saw the 2000s as a time when there was "equal partnership" with the U.S., but in 2014 he now says the U.S. "ceased to keep agreements."

While Russia has destroyed all its chemical weapons as their part of the U.S.-Russia plutonium agreement, the U.S. has said "it has no money" to do the same and unilaterally backed out of the nuclear security deal.

Putin complained that "only somebody in Canada" wrote about Russia's achievement in annihilating chemical weapons, although bloggers cited numerous U.S. press mentions.

As for the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, "we could not restrain our American friends within the framework of that treaty," said Putin.

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Terrorism

With rapid technological changes worldwide, "many previous recipes for global rule...often don't work," Putin said. Yet he championed the centuries-old respect for national sovereignty and harkened to "commonly accepted rules of behavior", blaming other countries for pursuing their interests "at any cost".

"Instead of the advance of progress and democracy, radical elements gain a free hand,

extremist groups negate civilization itself and try to overturn it to archaism and chaos and barbarism," said Putin.

Syria

For Putin, Russia's September 2015 bombing campaign in Syria is a "positive example."

"Russia is opposing terrorists, together with the lawful government of Syria and other states in the region, and acts on the basis of international law," explained Putin. He scorned Western doubts and criticism of Russian action in Syria, saying his methods have worked.

North Korea

Putin said Russia "unquestionably condemns" North Korea's nuclear tests but emphasized that Moscow was "complying with all UN Security Council decisions."

North Korea "should not be driven into a corner [and] force should not be threatened," he said, adding that countries "should not lower themselves to outright rudeness and cursing."

"Whether you like the North Korean regime or not, you cannot forget that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a sovereign state," he concluded.

Catalonia, Kurdistan, Crimea

Putin castigated the West for what he called its double standard in supporting the independence of Kosovo – which Russia opposed – yet at the same time wanting to suppress independence movements in Catalonia, Kurdistan, and Crimea.

"It seems [...] there are 'correct' fighters for independence and freedom and there are 'separatists' who cannot defend their rights, even with the help of democratic mechanisms," Putin said.

Magnitsky

Putin expressed his condolences for the death of whistleblower and lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in 2009, "regardless of the charges against him," but then added that "political games began" around this tragedy.

Canada's recent passing of a Magnitsky-style act to punish human rights violators was "unconstructive" in Putin's estimation.

Putin asserted that behind all these "political games" was "a well-known gentleman, I believe Browder is his name, who lived for 10 years in Russia as a tourist and was involved in illegal activity."

A one-time backer of President Vladimir Putin and CEO of what was once Russia's largest investor, William Browder was banned from Russia in 2005 after being branded a national security threat, despite Hermitage being the largest portfolio investor in Russia in the mid-2000s with more than \$4 billion in investments.

His lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, famously died in police custody in 2009 after blowing the whistle on high-level corruption by tax officials. His death led to the United States introducing the so-called Magnitsky list, which prevents officials connected to the case from traveling to the United States.

At Valdai, Putin recited Moscow's official version of the story, which denies the Western charge that corrupt officials colluded to kill Magnitsky.

RT and Sputnik

RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan gave an impassioned account of what she characterized as persecution by U.S. authorities in requesting Kremlin-controlled media outlets to register as foreign agents.

Putin said that Russia has less worldwide media penetration than the U.S., but called RT's work "brilliant" and its journalists, which included American and British reporters, "talented". In the event of legal persecution of the media outlet by U.S. officials, Moscow will retaliate, Putin said.

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