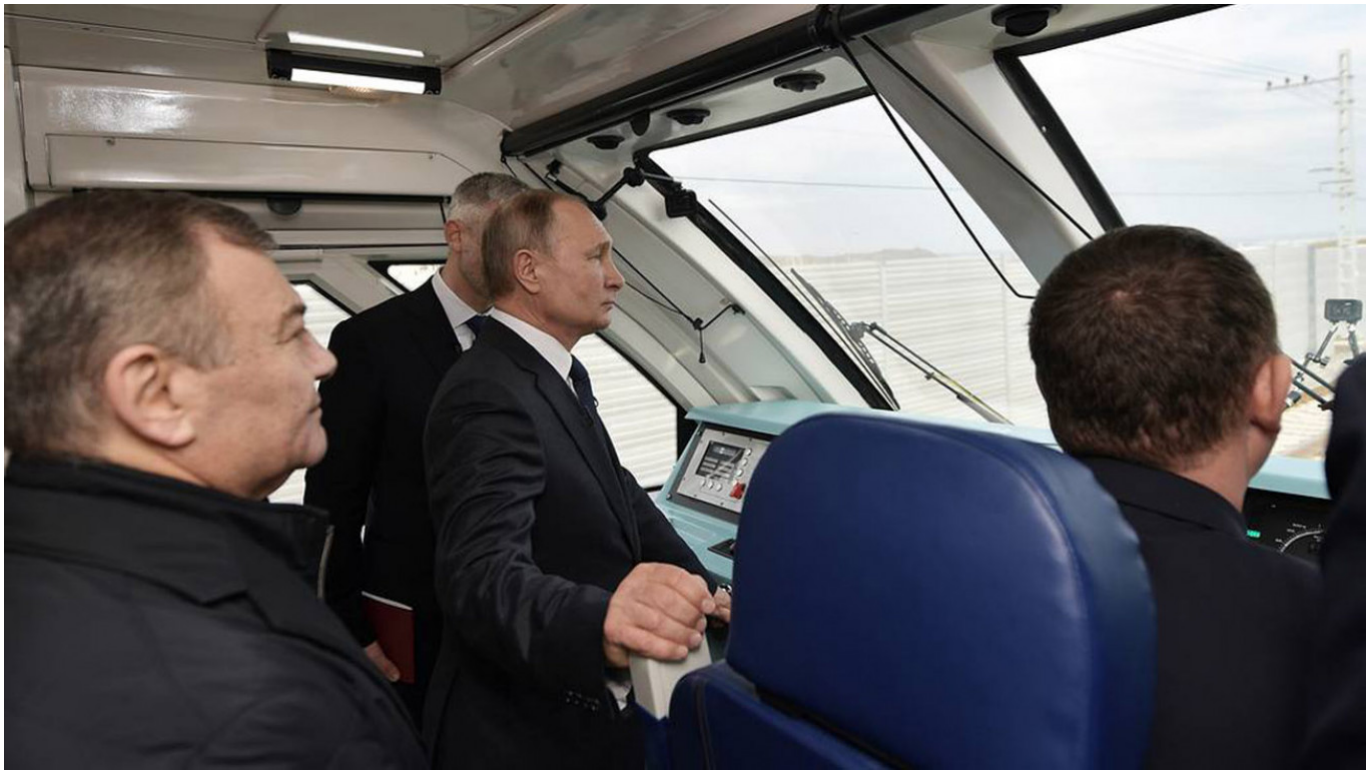
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Putin Launches Direct Train Service to Crimea

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President Vladimir Putin launched Russia's first direct train to Crimea on Monday, opening railway service along a now-completed $4 billion bridge that links continental Russia to the annexed peninsula.

Dozens of Western countries targeted Russia with economic sanctions over its annexation of the Black Sea peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 following an unrecognized referendum. The bridge has sparked new sanctions and is widely seen as an attempt by Moscow to cement economic ties with the peninsula that was previously only accessible by ship or plane.

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Putin shared the front seat of the first train carriage over the bridge with a train conductor on the 19-kilometer journey, reprising his role as a truck driver when he opened the road section of the Crimean Bridge last year.

“It runs much smoother than cars,” the president said in a live video feed, flanked by the sanctioned oligarch Arkady Rotenberg — Putin's childhood friend whose companies built the bridge — and Transport Minister Yevgeny Ditrikh.

“You’ve shown Russia’s ability to complete world-class infrastructure projects,” Putin said from the podium to construction workers in Crimea.

“After all, this isn’t only Russia’s largest bridge but also Europe’s longest.”

Russia's plans to transport 14 million passengers and 13 million metric tons of cargo to the annexed peninsula in 2020 “will impact the entire economy,” he told a cheering crowd.

Putin then gave a start to a Crimea-bound passenger train from St. Petersburg via video linkup.

The first trains from Moscow will depart for Crimea on Tuesday.

Embed:

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> — Президент России (@KremlinRussia) 23 декабря 2019 г.

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