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Putin to Speak on State of the Nation Amid Foreign Policy, Domestic Crises

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Putin's Federal Assembly speech comes amid high tensions with Ukraine, the U.S. and Europe, economic discontent and Alexei Navalny's failing health. **Sergei Bobylev / TASS**

President Vladimir Putin is due to give his annual state-of-the-nation speech Wednesday as tensions brew both at home and abroad.

The Russian president's address to lawmakers and regional heads comes hours before planned nationwide protests in support of hunger-striking Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, whose failing health in prison has drawn worldwide concern.

Putin's address also comes amid heightened tension with Ukraine, dissatisfaction at home over stagnating incomes and rising inflation, the coronavirus pandemic, new sanctions from the U.S. and growing pressure from the international community over allegations of spying and election interference.

At last year's address, Putin announced his proposal for a sweeping overhaul of the Constitution, enshrining populist and conservative measures in Russia's basic law. The

changes ultimately reset his number of presidential terms served, paving the way for him to rule until 2036.

Here's an overview of topics the Russian president will likely touch on during his speech from the Manezh exhibition hall next to the Kremlin:

Tensions with the West

Russia's already tense relationship with the West has further deteriorated in recent weeks, with new rounds of tit-for-tat sanctions and diplomatic expulsions between Moscow and the U.S. and a slew of European countries.

Last week, U.S. President Joe Biden's administration imposed wide-reaching sanctions and expelled 10 Russian diplomats in response to Russia's alleged interference in the U.S. 2020 presidential elections, far-reaching cyber attacks on U.S. government agencies and Russian occupation of Crimea annexed in 2014.

In response, the Kremlin expelled the same number of U.S. diplomats and summoned the U.S. envoy to the Foreign Ministry for a "difficult conversation." Days later, Sullivan confirmed that he was returning to the U.S. for "consultations" after Putin's top foreign policy aide urged him to do so.

Despite the escalation, the Kremlin said it viewed Biden's offer of a summit between himself and Putin "positively" and Putin has agreed to speak at Biden's online climate summit this Thursday.

Ukraine

Escalating fighting in eastern Ukraine combined with a Russian military buildup near the border and in annexed Crimea has raised alarm in the West. Military experts and the White House have said Russian troop levels are at their highest since the conflict between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russia separatists broke out in 2014.

The U.S. and NATO have called on Russia to ease the tensions on the eastern border with Ukraine. The Russian military says it is conducting exercises along its frontier in response to moves by NATO that "threaten Russia." At the same time, Moscow maintains that it would take any steps necessary to defend the interests of Russian speakers and citizens in eastern Ukraine.

Economy

Putin is likely to address economic issues, especially Russians' stagnating living standards and rising grocery prices that have fomented discontent among his usual support base.

The coronavirus pandemic took its toll on the Russian economy, as it shrank by 3% last year — a contraction still less severe than the global average of 3.5%.

Russia's Central Bank has assessed the country's economic recovery rate to be higher than initially predicted.

Coronavirus vaccines

Putin is likely to address Russia's three homemade coronavirus vaccines during his speech as officials look to breathe new life into a vaccination campaign beset by a skeptical public and delays in production and distribution.

Announcing his second Covid-19 vaccine dose last week, Putin said he hoped that Russians would follow his example and get vaccinated.

Putin did not broadcast his own vaccination, nor did he reveal which vaccine he got. However, Putin assured the public that it was one of the three Russia-developed vaccines — Sputnik V, EpiVacCorona and CoviVac.

On Monday, Sputnik V's developer claimed that the vaccine is 97.6% effective, according to a real-world analysis of 3.8 million vaccinated Russians.

Navalny

It's uncertain whether Putin will address Alexei Navalny, whose poisoning, jailing and currently deteriorating health in prison have sparked worldwide calls for his release and immediate treatment.

Navalny's doctors have warned that the jailed Kremlin critic, who went on hunger strike on March 31 to demand outside medical treatment, could die any day as his health fails.

The opposition figure's team has called on supporters nationwide to take to the streets hours after Putin's address in a bid to save his life, but Russian police have warned that they won't allow the protests to take place.

Putin has famously avoided referring to Navalny by name in his past public speeches, only calling him a "patient" or "prisoner."

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