The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

As Putin Leaves China Empty-Handed, Russian Propaganda Hails 'Triumph Over the West'

By Pyotr Kozlov

October 19, 2023



President Vladimir Putin's press conference during his visit to China. **Sergei Savostyanov, TASS / kremlin.ru**

Russian state media has painted President Vladimir Putin's visit to China this week as a symbolic triumph over the West by the Russian leader who they say enjoys global prestige and respect despite attempts to isolate him.

This coverage was a strategic effort to rally the Russian public behind him, independent experts, a political consultant and a Kremlin official told The Moscow Times.

In reality, the Russian leader — increasingly reliant on Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping — returns from Beijing without the major energy or agriculture deals that he'd hoped for.

"Speaking at the forum and meeting Xi is an important reminder to Russians of Putin's status

as a world-class leader. TV channels have been instructed to air coverage of the chief's trip in this light," the Kremlin official, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press, told The Moscow Times.

Putin wrapped up a two-day visit to China for a major forum on Thursday, his first trip outside the former Soviet Union since being indicted by the International Criminal Court on war crimes charges in March.

He brought more than two dozen journalists from television, radio, agencies and online media to China in an effort to show that he is still in the spotlight. These journalists relished in the Russian president's every move, emphasizing in great detail that the world's attention is on Putin.

Television news reports and patriotic shows mocked the idea that Putin has been isolated by the ICC warrant and his war on Ukraine, said Yevgeny Roshchin, a researcher at Princeton University.

Putin's status was underscored, state media journalists said, by the fact that Xi "invited the Russian president to be the first to enter the welcome banquet," and the red carpet was rolled out upon Putin's arrival to show great respect.

In another broadcast, a state television journalist standing in front of limousines with national flags said he had never seen so many cars of heads of state, adding that they were all listening to Putin's speech.

"Putin's speech was enthusiastically perceived in the hall. That's no exaggeration," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told a Russian reporter as he left the hall.

Embed:

The Rossia 1 broadcaster pointed to the size of the Russian delegation to convey the significance of Putin's trip. Alongside dozens of senior officials in finance, energy, agriculture and military cooperation were the heads of major banks Sberbank, VTB and Vnesheconombank and the heads of gas monopoly Gazprom and oil giant Rosneft.

"We had to put up extra tables" to accommodate the Russian delegation at talks with Chinese counterparts at what was already a huge table, one segment boasted.

For the Kremlin, it is crucial to prove that Russia has not been marginalized under Putin ahead of the 2024 presidential election, as domestic voters are beginning to doubt that it is still among respected world powers, independent political analyst Abbas Gallyamov, a former speechwriter for Putin, told The Moscow Times.

According to Moscow's narrative, Russia maintains friendly and businesslike relations with many European countries — those that are capable of pursuing policies in the national interest rather than "dancing to America's tune." This narrative was trumpeted in state media reports of Putin's meeting with Viktor Orban, the prime minister of EU and NATO member Hungary.

Putin himself complained during his televised conversation with Orban that Moscow's relations with Europe are poor and that it is almost impossible to maintain personal contacts due to soured relations, sanctions and the ICC warrant.

Still, Rossia 1's coverage gloated that Putin had met with the leader of a European country.

"This footage could give many Western politicians a real heart attack. Look — a car with the flag of Hungary. Orban's motorcade is now on the grounds of Putin's residence. Their talks are going on right this second," the anchor shouted into the camera, standing next to a black limousine.

The pathos of reporting on the trip's successes did not appear to translate into tangible results. The Russian delegation reported no significant achievements in Beijing, despite Moscow's interest in expanding cooperation.

Putin, who spent more than three hours over two days meeting with Xi, preferred to dedicate his press conference to the confrontation with the United States, the war in Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Putin also declined to answer a reporter's question about the content of his hours-long talks with Xi, saying only that he had a productive discussion of issues of a confidential nature "over a cup of tea."

Related article: Putin Praises 'Unprecedented' Energy Ties with China

Russia has been hit by massive Western sanctions over its Ukraine offensive, with Europe trying to end its energy links with Moscow. The Kremlin is now seeking deals to export its energy and agricultural resources in order to compensate for this lost revenue source.

Russian grain exports play a significant role in the country's GDP, with export revenues reaching over $41 billion last year. The Kremlin is attempting to reap even more benefits with its pulling out of the Ukraine grain deal and blocking of Ukraine grain exports.

Russian agricultural businesses had expressed hopes that Putin would agree to expand supplies of Russian wheat, which currently accounts for only 1.5% of Chinese imports, during his visit to China.

The state-run TASS news agency reported that Russia and China had signed the "largest grain contract" worth $25 billion, in Beijing.

Andrei Sizov, an independent grain expert, told The Moscow Times that the statement looked more like a PR statement from a private company.

"All the news about this mega agreement is coming from Russia," Sizov said. "The rest of the world is out of the loop. Someone seems to be trying to capitalize the story of Russian-Chinese friendship to the fullest."

Another hot topic was an agreement for the construction of the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline, a huge project to deliver more natural gas to Beijing which has been under

negotiation for years.

The pipeline is of great importance to Moscow now that Russia's supplies to Western Europe, which used to amount to more than 150 billion cubic meters of gas a year, have been cut off.

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Gazprom head Alexei Miller told a Russian television channel on Tuesday night that Russia would soon supply the same volume of gas to China — but experts say this will be virtually impossible.

"Right before the war, Russia exported more than 170 billion m3 (bcm) of gas to Western Europe, according to Gazprom's own reporting. Power of Siberia 2, which is still on paper, was announced as a 50 bcm per annum pipeline. The original Power of Siberia 1 pipeline has a nameplate capacity of 38 bcm, and there is a 10 bcm contract for supplies from Sakhalin offshore gas fields," Sergei Vakulenko, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, told The Moscow Times.

"That adds up to 98 bcm, leaving a difference of 75 bcm or more with the pre-war sales to Europe," Vakulenko said. "It is a mystery to me how this gap could be bridged, except for tripling the size of PS2. Besides, this would be a huge volume for China, coming from a single source, which would contradict with traditional Chinese policy of supply diversification."

Beijing does not need to sign the contract right now, and has the luxury to wait and ask for better terms while it does so, Vakulenko added.

In any case, neither Russia nor China announced a contract for the construction of the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline during Putin's visit.

Mikhail Krutikhin of independent consulting agency RusEnergy told The Moscow Times by messaging app that the contract has not been signed.

The Kremlin will be using the visit both for its domestic propaganda and as an attempt to signal to the world that Russia remains an influential stakeholder in engagement with China, the Israel-Gaza conflict and the UN, researcher Roshchin told The Moscow Times.

"He is the chief guest at the forum in China. And even there, he doesn't stop contacting the leaders of the Arab world, trying to stop the conflict between Israel and Hamas. That's why we're told trying to isolate Russia is ridiculous," Roshchin said, describing the Russian state narrative.

"And that means the invasion of Ukraine was 'legitimate'."

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