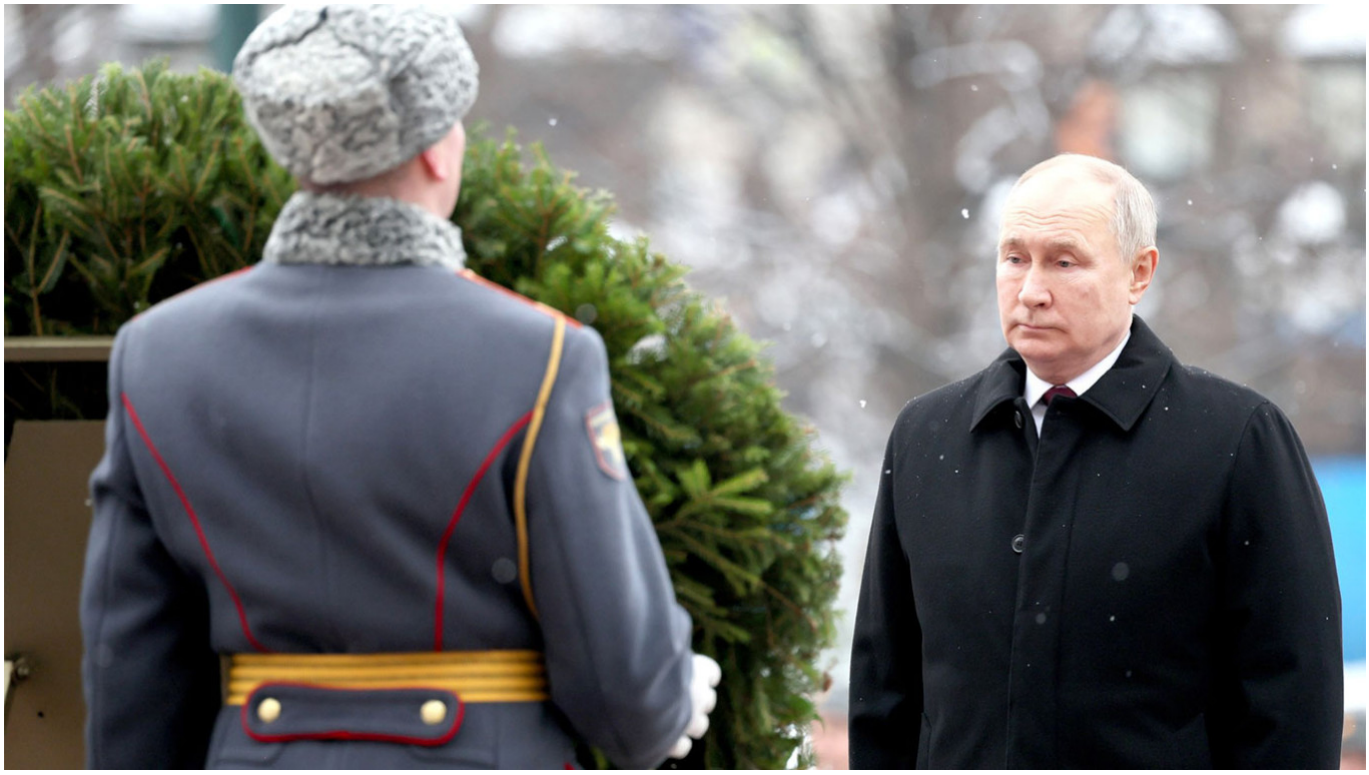
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Emboldened in Ukraine, Russia Marks Patriotic Holiday

By AFP

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Sergei Savostyanov, TASS / kremlin.ru

President Vladimir Putin on Friday hailed Russia's "heroes" fighting in Ukraine on the eve of the second anniversary of the Kremlin's offensive, with Moscow bolstered by gains against ammunition-starved Ukrainian troops.

Putin's message came on Russia's Defender of the Fatherland Day patriotic holiday, which has always been an occasion for military pomp and Kremlin-sponsored patriotism.

This year the holiday comes with Putin inspired by the capture of the Ukrainian city of Avdiivka and reveling in the U.S. Congress blocking vital military aid to Kyiv.

"You are our true national heroes," Putin said in a video message addressed to troops and veterans.

"We know that it is hard for you, and we will do everything possible for you to fulfill the tasks ahead of you," Putin said, adding that Moscow's weapons production has "multiplied."

Putin has spent recent days flying in bomber planes, handing out medals to troops and touting a "turning point" in Ukraine.

He has mocked Ukraine's "chaotic flight" from Avdiivka, which fell to Moscow last week after months of bloody battles.

Embed:

Putin has also been bolstered at home, ahead of an election certain to extend his long rule: a massive crackdown has all but crushed dissent and the Russian leader's main opponent — Alexei Navalny — is dead.

Ukraine, meanwhile, has been weakened by the blocking of U.S. aid, its failed counter-offensive and worsening ammunition shortages.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has acknowledged an "extremely difficult" situation on the front.

Two years of fighting a bigger and richer army has taken its toll on Ukraine's stretched forces.

"It's extremely hard," Ukrainian infantryman Oleksiy told AFP in eastern Ukraine, caked in mud after returning from the trenches.

"We don't have weapons like they have. You know, they have factories for production, and us? We beg for weapons. That's the way it is," the 32-year-old said.

Church sanctifies offensive

In Moscow, Putin laid flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier outside the Kremlin walls in a ceremony attended by veterans and Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu.

The head of Russia's Orthodox Church, a key Putin ally and supporter of the offensive, yet again sanctified it.

In a letter to Putin, Patriarch Kirill said: "We glorify today the feat of soldiers who are heroically fighting on the borders of Russia, defending its sovereignty and independence."

Russia has banned all criticism of its campaign, punishing thousands for denouncing the offensive, with repression comparable to late Soviet levels.

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The United States is on Friday to announce new sanctions on Moscow over the death last week of Putin's opponent Navalny in an Arctic prison. His body has not yet been returned to his family.

The UN Security Council will also convene Friday, marking two years of the conflict that has cost tens of thousands of lives.

'Upset' but not 'discouraged'

In Ukraine, foreign dignitaries began to arrive to mark the anniversary of Moscow's assault, which has killed thousands of civilians, on top of a huge number of military deaths.

Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen arrived in the western city of Lviv on Friday, Zelensky said.

U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer also arrived in the city, close to the Polish border.

The Democrat said on social media that he wanted to "show the Ukrainian people that America stands with them" and to "learn about the arms Ukraine vitally needs."

Despite recent setbacks, Zelensky has remained defiant.

Kyiv has taken confidence from continued successes on the Black Sea, where it says it has destroyed a third — 25 vessels — of Russia's Black Sea fleet.

But its land campaign has stalled, and it is there that Moscow is seeking to press its advantage and drive further into Ukraine following the capture of Avdiivka.

Kyiv warned Friday that Russia is intensifying attacks around the new "hot spot" of Maryinka, a town to the west of the Moscow-controlled stronghold of Donetsk city.

Ukrainian troops, however, remained determined.

Ukrainian soldier Oleksiy who was holding the fallback lines outside Avdiivka, said that while the fall of the industrial hub affected morale, troops were ready to fight on.

"Absolutely, of course we were upset. But nevertheless, nobody's discouraged," he said, with an AK-47 assault rifle tattooed on his neck.

"If we retreat, they will move all along the front line."

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