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Putin Threatens to Arm Countries That Could Hit Western Targets

By Karim Talbi for AFP

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President Vladimir Putin during a meeting with top executives of the world's leading foreign media groups on the sidelines of the 2024 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum at the Lakhta Center. **Alexander Demianchuk / TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday criticized the West's delivery of long-range weapons to Ukraine, arguing Moscow could arm other countries with similar weapons to attack Western targets.

The comment — which Putin made at a rare press conference with foreign news outlets — came after several Western countries including the United States gave Ukraine the green light to strike targets inside Russia, a move Moscow has called a grave miscalculation.

"If someone thinks it is possible to supply such weapons to a warzone to attack our territory and create problems for us, why don't we have the right to supply weapons of the same class to regions of the world where there will be strikes on sensitive facilities of those [Western]

countries," Putin said.

"That is, the response can be asymmetric. We will think about it," he told reporters.

"Delivering arms to a warzone is always bad. Even more so if those who are delivering are not just delivering weapons but also controlling them. This is a very serious and very dangerous step," Putin said.

The Russian leader singled out Germany, saying that when the first German-supplied tanks "appeared on Ukrainian soil, it provoked a moral and ethical shock in Russia" because of the legacy of World War II.

Referring to German authorities, he said: "When they say that there will be more missiles which will hit targets on Russian territory, this definitively destroys Russian-German relations."

'Irrecoverable losses'

Sitting opposite representatives from news outlets including AFP, Putin repeated that his country "did not start the war against Ukraine," instead blaming a pro-Western revolution in 2014.

"Everyone thinks that Russia started the war in Ukraine. I would like to emphasize that nobody in the West, in Europe, wants to remember how this tragedy started," Putin said.

He declined to give the number of Russia's battlefield losses in the more than two-year conflict, saying only that Ukraine's were five times higher.

"I can tell you that as a rule, no one talks about it," Putin said, when asked why Russia had not yet disclosed a figure.

"If we talk about irrecoverable losses, the ratio is one to five," he said.

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The issue of military casualties is extremely sensitive in Russia, where all criticism of the conflict is banned and "spreading false information" about the army carries a maximum 15-year jail sentence.

When asked about the killing of AFP video journalist Arman Soldin in Ukraine last year, likely as a result of Russian rocket fire, Putin indicated Moscow was ready to help investigate.

"We will do everything in our power," he said.

"We are ready to do this work. I do not know how it could be done in practice since this person died in a warzone."

'Burned to the ground'

Putin was also probed about what a victory for former U.S. President Donald Trump or incumbent Joe Biden would mean for U.S.-Russia relations — an issue the Russian leader shrugged off.

"By and large there's no difference," he said.

However he called Trump's recent criminal charges for business fraud politically motivated, arguing his conviction "burned" the idea that Washington was a leading democracy.

"It is obvious all over the world that the prosecution of Trump... is simply the utilization of the judicial system during an internal political struggle," Putin said.

"Their supposed leadership in the sphere of democracy is being burned to the ground," the Russian leader added.

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Trump became the first former U.S. head of state ever convicted of a crime last week after a New York jury found him guilty of 34 felony charges in a hush-money case.

Trump, who faces an election in November that could see him return to the White House, has praised Putin as a "smart guy."

Putin also said Russia and the United States were in "constant contact" over a possible prisoner exchange that would free jailed U.S. journalist Evan Gershkovich who was arrested on espionage charges last year.

"The relevant services in the U.S. and Russia are in constant contact with one another and of course they will decide only on the basis of reciprocity," Putin said.

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