

Consolidating for victory: Putin's address to the Federal Assembly

Miłosz Bartosiewicz

On 29 February Vladimir Putin delivered his annual state-of-the-nation address to the Federal Assembly, which lasted over two hours. The leitmotiv of his speech was the consolidation of Russian society. He claimed that the invasion of Ukraine was a defensive operation, and emphasised that Russian citizens, the army and the government had to make a joint effort, which had to be successful. Put in those terms, the alternative to victory is seen as Russia losing its sovereignty (this notion recurred throughout the entire speech) and consequently, the collapse of the state.

In the section dedicated to foreign policy and security issues, Putin declared his readiness to bring the war to an end and to carry out all the tasks of the so-called special military operation. As a warning to the West, he mentioned in his speech that new weapon systems (primarily hypersonic missiles) had been introduced into service over the past few years, and reminded his audience of the Russian Armed Forces' capability to strike targets within the territory of NATO states. He also emphasised that Russia would not let itself be drawn into an arms race, which had proved disastrous to the USSR.

Putin accused Washington and NATO of hostile actions, hypocrisy, deceit and dismantling the security system in Europe. At the same time, he expressed readiness for talks (especially with the US) on strategic stability and a new security order in Eurasia. However, he warned that any 'dialogue' would only be possible on terms dictated by Moscow, as the implementation of its interests was a *sine qua non* condition. The President of the Russian Federation also referred to the concept of the so-called global majority (meaning the 'non-West'), citing global anti-Western tendencies (such as the increasing importance of the economies of the BRICS countries compared to those of the G7 countries) and declaring Russia's readiness to enhance cooperation with the Arab world, Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The most extensive part of the speech was devoted to domestic policy: it boiled down to listing Moscow's economic successes (for example, Russia was presented as Europe's largest economy and the fifth in the world, in terms of GDP based on purchasing power parity). Putin focused only on macroeconomic indicators, but did not mention the challenges faced by the government, such as labour shortages, inflation, the devaluation of the rouble, etc. He devoted much attention to social and family policies (especially the need to increase the birthrate), education, healthcare, regional and municipal development, the expansion of energy and transport infrastructure, etc. The president summarised the

successes in these areas and announced new programmes and investments. His presentation of ambitious plans for socio-economic development was coupled with an emphasis that Russia had to achieve self-sufficiency and sovereignty, primarily in the sphere of modern technologies.

The concluding fragment of his address devoted to participants and veterans of the war deserves special attention. Putin identified them as a social group who should hold positions in the education system, government, public administration, business, etc.; he also announced that a training programme targeted at them, called 'Time of Heroes', would be launched. At the same time, he criticised the elites, particularly those who came to prominence in the 1990s.

Commentary

- The part of the speech concerning foreign policy had two objectives. The first was to intimidate Western publics & decision-makers and discourage them from continuing or stepping up support for Ukraine. The second was to signal to those advocating for dialogue with Moscow that Russia was ready for talks, with the caveat that they could only take place on the Kremlin's terms. Putin suggested that concessions from the West would be an alternative to a nuclear confrontation with Russia. His offer of 'dialogue', mainly regarding nuclear armaments, was directed primarily at the United States; however, it is contingent upon concessions regarding Ukraine. Moscow intends to leverage its successes on the Ukrainian front as an argument for meeting its demands concerning the reorganisation of security architecture in Europe, which it had presented to Washington and NATO before the invasion began (see ['Russia's blackmail of the West'](#)). The part of his speech in which he mentioned the so-called global majority reflects Russia's efforts to build a friendly (or at least neutral) international environment to compensate for its political and economic isolation from the West.
- The fact that he focused so much in his address on support for families with children and the development of education proves that demographic issues and labour shortages are serious in Russia. Putin did not announce any new programmes that could boost the birthrate; instead he simply restated that the existing ones would be continued (albeit in a reduced form). The initiatives to improve the healthcare and education systems which he presented, however, are not reflected in the budget for 2024 or the following two years (indeed, real expenditures for these purposes are set to fall). The President of the Russian Federation failed to mention the needs of retirees: this is noteworthy because they are his main electorate, and at the same time the social group that has been most affected by the rising cost of living.
- The development plans for Russia which Putin presented seem dubious. The president announced an increase in investments but did not make it clear where the needed financial resources would come from, nor did he specify the sources of the technologies necessary for the digitisation of the economy and boosting production (especially considering Russia's isolation from Western markets). In the case of the planned development of the agricultural market, he even contradicted the latest forecasts from the Russian Ministry of Agriculture (which has forecast a 25% decrease in Russian agri-food exports, while Putin announced a 50% increase).

- It seems that Putin devoted a significant part of his speech to domestic policy as part of his campaign ahead of the upcoming 'presidential elections' (15–17 March). He marked 2030 as a watershed in most of the discussed issues, as that date signifies the end of his next term in office. The speech was widely publicised in the media; it was also screened for free in cinemas in 20 Russian cities and displayed on large screens in city streets and educational institutions. The review of Moscow's economic successes was intended not only as a reassuring message to the Russian public but also as a signal to the West that the sanctions were an ineffective tool of political pressure.
- The fragment in which Putin referred to participants and veterans of the war in Ukraine as the 'true elite' may be interpreted as a warning signal to political and business circles. It signifies both Putin's intention to maintain the course towards the militarisation of the state and public life, and the Kremlin's readiness to replace old elites with new ones that have emerged during the war, in case the former choose to disobey the president.