

Putin threatens to target West with new missiles



*The Kremlin is reportedly deeply concerned by the fall in Putin's personal approval ratings in - **Alexander NEMENOV (AFP)***

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Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened to deploy new missiles against Western capitals as he delivered a state of the nation address Wednesday aimed at boosting falling approval ratings.

But while he took a combative tone with the West, he reached out to Russians with promises of improved living conditions.

The longtime Russian leader warned Washington against deploying any new missiles in Europe following the collapse of a key Cold War-era treaty, saying Moscow would consider it a "serious threat".

"I'm saying this clearly and openly, Russia will be forced to deploy weapons that can be used... against the decision-making centers that are behind the missile systems which threaten us," Putin said.

The United States and Russia raised fears of a new arms race when they announced earlier this year they were pulling out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, a 1987 deal that limited medium-range missiles.

Washington was the first to announce its withdrawal, accusing Moscow of developing new weapons that violated the treaty, but Putin on Wednesday dismissed the US claims as "far-fetched".

Putin also reeled off a list of weapons programs that he said would give Russia a military edge over the United States.



*Last year, President Vladimir Putin used his state of the nation address to unveil a new arsenal of weapons in a nearly two-hour speech that stunned the West and many in Russia - **OLGA MALTSEVA (AFP/File)***

This included the development of the Zircon missile with a range of more than 1,000 kilometers (600 miles), testing of the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile, the deployment this spring of the Poseidon underwater drone system, and the recent start of production of Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles.

NATO reacted to the speech by denouncing what it said were “unacceptable” threats. It called on Moscow to “focus on returning to compliance” with the INF treaty.

- ‘We cannot wait’ -

The tough military talk seemed aimed at stirring up patriotic support for Putin, who won re-election last year with more than 76 percent of the vote but has been recently struggling with dropping opinion poll numbers.

A survey by Russia’s independent Levada Center released in January found his approval rating at 64 percent — a figure many Western leaders could only dream of, but Putin’s lowest in five years.

Most of Wednesday’s speech focused on promises to address poor living standards, a key source of frustration for many Russians nearly 20 years after Putin came to power.

“We cannot wait, the situation must change for the better now,” Putin told assembled lawmakers from Russia’s lower house State Duma and upper house Federation Council.

“Within this year (Russians) should feel changes,” he said.

Putin lamented that some 19 million Russians were living below the poverty line, saying: “This is too much... the state should help.”



Putin accused Washington of using “far-fetched accusations” to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces agreement - **Alexander NEMENOV (AFP)**

Putin focused in particular on help for Russian families, pointing to a demographic crisis that has seen birth rates fall drastically since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Last year the government’s statistics agency said the country’s birth rate had fallen by 11 percent in 2017 to the lowest level in a decade.

“The incomes of Russian families should of course rise,” he said, promising new child benefits and lower taxes for larger families.

- Unpopular reforms -

Putin, 66, appeared calm and confident as usual during the speech, but the Kremlin is reportedly deeply concerned by the fall in his personal approval ratings in recent months.

Russians appear increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of economic growth

and the concentration of the country's wealth in a few hands in Moscow.

Moves by the government to implement economic reforms, including an increase in the retirement age and a rise in the value-added tax from January 1, have prompted widespread opposition including rare street protests.

Another Levada poll in October found only 40 percent of Russians would vote for Putin if an election were held.



Putin was elected to a fourth term last year with more than 76 percent of the vote - **Yekaterina SHTUKINA (SPUTNIK/AFP)**

In his 90-minute speech, Putin also promised new investments in health care and a major anti-cancer program, financial aid for homebuyers and further investments in education.

He spent a significant amount of time criticizing officials for their handling of a waste-management crisis that has seen Russians outside Moscow protesting at plans to send the capital's rubbish to provincial landfills.

"We must form a civilized and safe waste-management system," Putin said, promising efforts to close dumps and boost recycling, which is nearly non-existent

in Russia.

Amid signs of easing embargo, Qatar joins Saudi military exercises This follows a similar exercise in 2018, but easing regulations in the UAE might mean reconciliation is on way

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