

Putin's Desperate Hours
Tom Nichols - The Atlantic Daily



Vladimir Putin gave his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly today, and it was a farrago of paranoia and lies; meanwhile President Joe Biden humiliated the Kremlin by walking the streets of Kyiv in broad daylight. The Russian president knows he is losing.

Out of Options

Every December, Russian President Vladimir Putin gives an address to the Russian Federal Assembly—a Russian version of the State of the Union. Today, after [a delay](#) likely related to Russia's serial battlefield losses in Ukraine, Putin [spent some two hours unloading](#) a barrage of lies, grievances, and bizarre historical revisions in his attempt to justify the bloodletting he began a year ago.

He also said Russia would suspend participation in a crucial nuclear-arms-control treaty with the United States. What does this all mean?

It means, more than anything, that Putin is desperate. He's losing in Ukraine, where, according to a [British estimate](#) last week, roughly 200,000 Russian soldiers have been killed or wounded.

Even Russia's tough-guy [Wagner mercenaries](#) are getting cut to pieces: The National Security Council official John Kirby [said in a briefing Friday](#) that the Wagner Group—many of them convicted criminals—has taken 30,000 casualties, which is about half the entire group's strength and a huge number even for a contractor force. (Note to Russian jailbirds: Your odds of staying alive are better in prison.)

Putin may be a dictator, but even dictators have to justify losses. The Russian president started his speech by going full Orwell, claiming that the West started the

war and that Russia was obliged to take up arms to put a stop to it all. (He might as well have said, “Eurasia has always been at war with Oceania,” and he came close.)

He also repeated his accusation that the U.S. and NATO “rapidly deployed their army bases and secret biological laboratories near the borders of our country,” but this section was omitted from the English text published on the official Kremlin website, perhaps because it’s a bonkers charge that has [long been debunked](#). The line, however, doesn’t seem to have been ad-libbed; it’s [in the Russian text](#) posted on the Russian president’s official website.

Putin went on to claim that the plot to turn Ukraine into “anti-Russia” goes all the way back to the dark plans hatched by ... the Austro-Hungarian empire.

Apparently, the conspiracy theorists are right: If you look deeply enough into any international problem, there’s a Habsburg lurking around somewhere. The Russian president then assured his audience that his war was against the regime in Kyiv, not the people of Ukraine, even as his forces continue to butcher Ukrainian civilians and [commit crimes against humanity](#).

Putin included his usual tirade against sexual perversion in the West, a standard bit of boilerplate aimed not only at his own citizens but also at the European (and American) right-wingers who adore his supposed stance against Western moral decadence.

Much of the rest of Putin’s speech was a similar rehearsal of Moscow’s classic, old-school Cold War charges against “the West” in general and the United States in particular.

It was, [as I wrote](#) about a similar speech Putin gave a year ago when he began the war, shot after shot straight from a bottle of Soviet-era moonshine—the 180-proof good stuff about global confrontations, Nazis, and Washington’s many aggression’s. He went on; as they would say in Russian, *i tak dalee*, “and so on and so forth,” but as we might say more colloquially in English, *yada yada yada*.

On a more substantive note, [Putin announced Russia would](#) suspend further cooperation under the [New START Treaty](#), the nuclear-arms-control agreement signed by the U.S. and Russia in 2011 and extended in 2021, which is in effect until 2026.

Under New START, the United States and Russia agreed to a limit of 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads, along with on-site verification—the right of each side to visit the other’s military bases—and other means of exchanging information.

The Russians have already suspended on-site verification, and the U.S. State Department [nearly a month ago said that](#) Russia was failing to comply with the treaty.

This is unfortunate, as on-site inspections help build trust and transparency, but it’s not a crisis. I worked on these issues for years, but I also asked Amy Woolf—a specialist in U.S. and Russian arms control, a former adviser to Congress, and one of

the most judicious experts on nuclear affairs in the country—for her take on Putin's speech.

She told me that Putin's recalcitrance could continue to erode U.S. confidence in Russian compliance with START, but "it does not mean that Putin plans, at this time or in the near future, to increase its forces beyond the bounds of the treaty limits." I agree.

Likewise, Putin said that Russia would resume nuclear testing—but only if the United States conducted new tests. Again I agree with Woolf: This was likely a "throwaway line," she told me. I would even say it came across as meaningless; the United States has no immediate plans to resume nuclear testing, and so Putin was answering a question no one was asking.

Putin has put himself and his country in a desperate situation, and he has run out of options, including nuclear threats. This is not to say that the risk of nuclear conflict has evaporated; as I noted on the most recent episode of the [Radio Atlantic podcast](#), there is still plenty of room for Putin to do something foolish and set a terrible chain of events in motion.

But after a year, it seems that the Russian president's plan—if it can even be called that—is to consign more of his young men to the Ukrainian abattoir while hoping that the West somehow tires of the whole business.

As the Atlantic contributing writer Eliot Cohen [pointed out](#) yesterday, however, Biden's visit to Kyiv and his pledge of "unwavering and unflagging commitment" had to be a "gut punch" to Putin, dashing any hopes that the Free World will give up on Ukraine.

The Russian president is still counting on Kyiv and its armies to collapse, or perhaps on an election to remove Biden, or for Europe to lose its nerve, or for [China, perhaps](#), to come to Moscow's rescue (which would be both a balm and a deep humiliation).

But he also knows that time may be running out at home: After a year of war, there are only so many young men left to kill and only so many generals left to blame.