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Putin's State-of-the-Union Address 2021: Old Wine in a New Bottle?

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

Putin's latest State-of-the-Union address was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like his last three addresses, it revolved mainly around domestic issues; this is a clear reflection of his attention on the September 2021 Duma elections and his expected running for re-election in 2024.

COMMENTARY

PRESIDENT VLADIMIR Putin's State-of-the-Union address to the Federal Assembly lasted an hour and 23 minutes; only 11 minutes were devoted to foreign policy matters while the rest dwelt upon Russia's socio-economic challenges and issues, in the light of the pandemic.

Against the current background of tension with Ukraine and the West, the fact that his tour d'horizon of foreign policy issues was very short and made towards the end of his long speech, indicates that his focus remains on domestic issues. The forthcoming Duma and 2024 presidential elections remain uppermost in his mind.

Domestic Challenges

From the outset, he paid tribute to the government's handling of the socio-economic challenges posed by the pandemic, and the role played by medical workers and researchers who developed "three reliable coronavirus vaccines".

He urged his people to comply with all the recommended health measures and to get vaccinated, while calling on the government to ensure that vaccination was made available everywhere to "achieve the so-called herd immunity by the autumn".

A major consequence of the pandemic was the deterioration of the demographic situation which Putin labelled “an emergency”. Russia has laboured under a demographic problem since the fall of the Soviet Union.

President Putin also pointed out the need to speed up the introduction of telemedicine, artificial intelligence and new approaches in diagnostics, surgery, rehabilitation and the production of medicines. Social support measures were also outlined by him, noting that direct payments had been made to families bringing up almost 28 million children.

He called on the government to “provide direct support to families with children who are experiencing hardships” and to develop by 1 July 2021, “a comprehensive system of support for families with children. Our goal is to minimise the risk of poverty for such families”.

In 2022, what he labelled ‘social treasury’ principles, would be introduced. In short, all federal benefits, pensions and other social payments and services would be paid in a one-stop mode. His goal was that in three years, “the vast majority of public and municipal services should be provided to Russian citizens remotely, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, that is, on an ongoing basis”.

Education, Science and Technology

Some 1,300 new schools for more than a million children would be built, by the end of 2024, in addition to the provision of 16,000 school buses. Classroom teachers had been receiving a monthly addition to their salaries since 2020; an additional 10 billion rubles in the next two years for major repairs and technical equipment of Russia’s pedagogical universities, would also be made.

Another “crucial area” was the planned allocation of 24 billion rubles within the next three years to renovate cultural centres, libraries and museums in rural areas and small historical towns.

Other moves include at least 100 universities receiving grants of 100 million rubles or more for opening student technoparks and business incubators, upgrading academic and laboratory facilities, and running training programmes. Until 2024, Russia would allocate 1.63 trillion rubles for civil, including fundamental, research – to build and maintain the country’s scientific talent.

Putin stressed Russia’s need to “ensure independence in the production of the entire range of vaccines and pharmaceutical substances with the maximum engagement of Russian-made equipment and domestic components.” In the event of another pandemic, it also had to develop its own test systems within four days, and to create an efficacious domestic vaccine and start its mass production. The timeframe for achieving these goals was 2030.

Russia also needed new comprehensive approaches to the development of its energy sector, including new solutions for nuclear generation in the promising areas of hydrogen energy and energy storage.

To address climate change, Russia must adjust its agriculture, industry, housing and utilities sector and the entire infrastructure; and create a carbon utilisation sector, bring down emissions and introduce strict control and monitoring measures.

Economy and Infrastructure

President Putin noted that in 2020, over five million jobs were preserved through subsidised loans for wage payments. The government would ensure the recovery of the labour market by the end of 2021 through encouraging entrepreneurial initiatives and stimulating private investments that create new jobs. The government was to present by May 2021, additional proposals to support small and medium-sized businesses.

Infrastructure projects in the regions would benefit their inhabitants. To drive home his point, he cited a number of major regional infrastructure projects – the construction of a northern railway line that would spur the development of the richest resources of the Arctic – to name just one.

The construction industry built over 80 million square metres of housing in 2020, which he called “a good result”; every year, 120 million square metres of housing were being planned. Housing is a major issue in Russia.

To boost domestic and foreign tourism, a programme of “easy loans” would be launched soon to finance the construction and renovation of hotels and other tourist infrastructure. Also e-visas for travel to Russia “would be available remotely and without undue formalities within a matter of four days in the majority of countries”.

In this regard, Putin criticised the tardiness of the federal and regional officials, stressing that “things must be done on time and projects must be prepared, not just pictures shown to the government”. That was clearly a reflection of not only his frustration with the pace of the projects but also his concern about the possible negative political impact that would have on his standing.

Foreign Policy

In his short address on foreign policy, and against the background of current tensions with the West, Putin said that “unfriendly moves towards Russia have also continued unabated. “Russia to date had behaved in an extremely restrained and modest manner”, and would prefer not to respond to “unfriendly moves”.

It wanted to maintain “good relations with all those engaged in international communication,” and did “not want to burn bridges”. However, he warned that if this approach was mistaken for “indifference or weakness”, “they must know that Russia's response will be asymmetrical, swift and tough”. He added that whoever threatened “the core interests of our security will regret what they have done in a way they have not regretted anything for a long time”.

Seeking to strike a moderate and reasonable tone despite current tensions with the West, he urged Russia’s “partners once again to discuss the issues related to strategic armaments and to ensuring global stability”. In this regard, since “the five nuclear

countries bear special responsibility”, Putin recalled his proposal in 2020 for “a personal meeting” of the Five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council to be held as soon as possible.

Putin’s speech reveals his current preoccupations with domestic challenges. With his political future on his mind, tensions with the West, while dangerous, would not be allowed to interfere with his ambitious goals to develop Russia further and in the process, secure his possible re-election in 2024. His stress on the need for national resilience would help him act tough on foreign policy and the external front.

On Victory Day on 9 May, Putin reiterated long-standing charges of perceived rising Russophobia and attempts to rewrite history of the Second World War in the West. That was meant to warn the West of Russia’s determination to defend its national interests.

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