

Decoding Putin's annexation speech

Framed as a clash of civilisations in which the West is accused of sins from slavery to sexual deviancy and satanism, the Russian leader's speech signals to his enemies that there will be no room for strategic accommodation.

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"Behind us is the truth; behind us is Russia!" This was how Russian President Vladimir Putin finished his recent speech to his nation, [announcing the annexation of four regions of Ukraine](#).

Many of the claims Mr Putin made - [that Ukraine had started the current war](#), that Ukraine's borders have never been fixed and are therefore not to be taken seriously - were aired before.

Yet there was something both new and deeply menacing in the 40-minute-long annexation speech that he delivered to Russia's political and economic elite, assembled in the gilded halls of the Kremlin palace in Moscow.

President Putin said nothing about Ukraine; instead, he directed all his criticism towards the West. It was a curious, almost surreal speech in which the West was blamed for every conceivable crime, from seeking to destroy Russia back in the 17th century to promoting gay rights and sexual reassignment operations.

It was a speech in which the Russian President changed his narrative, turning the conflict he triggered by invading Ukraine into a war of civilisations against a West designated as the implacable and eternal "enemy".

And it deserves to be studied closely because it was designed to shut all the doors to dialogue and diplomacy.

Barring a few exceptions, most of us rely on media reports about important statements from foreign leaders; nobody has the time to read lengthy speeches. And such media reports are, by necessity, brief.

But that is a big mistake in the case of President Putin's speeches because they tend to signal the actual frame of mind of the man who has ruled Russia unchallenged for almost a quarter of a century and who has managed to surprise the West repeatedly by launching no fewer than three wars against Russia's neighbours.

The perfect example of a previous Putin speech which should have been taken seriously is the one he delivered at the Munich Security Conference - an annual gathering of Western leaders - on Feb 10, 2007.

That was the speech in which he claimed that the West had violated alleged previous promises not to move military units towards Russia's borders. It was also the occasion when he spelt out Russia's demand that Europe should be divided into new spheres of influence.

That speech is now required reading for any international relations student because everything that Mr Putin warned did come about. The cardinal principles of Russia's policy over the subsequent decade were included in that document.

Yet when it was delivered, few Western leaders or security specialists took the speech seriously, and fewer still understood that it marked a critical inflexion point for global security.

So, while it may be both easy and tempting to dismiss the latest anti-Western tirade from Mr Putin as just noise, the record of past events indicates that this may be a grave error.

Nor should one assume that Mr Putin's latest speech is deliberately couched in somewhat shrill terms just because the Russian leader is seeking to deflect attention from his conduct of the war in Ukraine,

where Russian troops have recently suffered some pretty stinging defeats.

Of course, Mr Putin wishes to talk about anything apart from his military's reverses. And, yes, he needs to exaggerate the threats Russia supposedly faces, if only because this justifies [the unpopular military draft](#) and the other sacrifices he may be demanding from his nation.

Time of troubles

Yet none of this negates the suspicion that Mr Putin passionately believes in what he says or that such beliefs will guide his actions.

The words "they" and "them" predominate in Mr Putin's latest speech and are the real object of his anger. "Them" - the Westerners - stand accused of engaging in "multi-secular Russophobia", a relentless and prolonged hatred of Russia stretching back centuries, allegedly designed to make Russia a "colony".

And why would Western governments do that? "They cannot accept the idea that there is such a big country, with such natural wealth and resources, a people who do not know how to submit to orders from others," Mr Putin explained. "Our development and our prosperity threaten them... They refuse to accept us as a free society and want to see us as a host of soulless slaves." In making this broadside, Mr Putin threw in a reference to the so-called "Time of Troubles", a period of mayhem lasting approximately 15 years during the early 17th century, when local Russian warlords fought each other and foreign powers invaded Russia.

At first glance, the accusations that Western governments are seeking to incite another Time of Troubles inside Russia today seem far-fetched. But Russia is not the only country to evoke past humiliations in order to justify current assertive policies.

And Mr Putin's historical references do strike a chord with ordinary Russians. An old monument to two warriors who expelled foreign invaders and ended the Time of Troubles stands in Moscow's Red Square in the very heart of the Russian capital to this day.

Even the Soviet Union's communist leaders, who were otherwise dismissive of any symbols of Russia's past, did not destroy this monument; they just moved it to one side to make space for the grand military parades they often staged in that square. Historic props do have their uses.

Sins of the West

Still, in his latest speech, the Russian leader ventured beyond his old denunciations of a West ever-hostile to his country.

According to Mr Putin, the West is also responsible for "the global slave trade, the genocide of Indian tribes in America, the plunder of India, Africa, the wars of England and France against China, as a result of which it was forced to open its ports for trade of opium", but also for newer "perversions which lead to degradation and extinction", such as promoting the idea of "choosing one's gender".

"Do we want to have, here, in our country, in Russia, instead of mom and dad a 'parent number one', 'number two', 'number three'?"

"Do we really want perversions that lead to degradation and extinction to be imposed on children in our schools from the primary grades? To have hammered into their ideas that there are supposedly other genders besides women and men, and to be offered a sex change operation?" a visibly angry Mr Putin thundered.

The same Western governments now criticising Russia for what it does in Ukraine were responsible for the carpet bombing of German cities in World War II, "without any military necessity", he went on. And those who criticise Russia's threats to use nuclear weapons should remember that only the US dropped atomic bombs on Japan in 1945.

The West, concluded Mr Putin with quotes from Jesus and the Bible, is guilty of "such a reversal of faith and traditional values, such a suppression of freedom that it takes on the characteristics of an inverted religion, of pure and simple Satanism".

To put it mildly, this is a very selective view of history. While nothing should excuse or absolve the horrible crimes committed worldwide by governments now regarded as part of the "West", Russia also had its fair share of all these crimes.

Russia was and arguably remained an empire. Russia's serfdom system, which bound peasants for life to a landowner, was not that different from slavery and lasted well past slavery into the late 19th century.

The Russians did not sell opium to China, but they invaded and plundered China, and often at the same time as many Western powers. The Soviet armies were not exactly known for sparing German cities or other acts of kindness in World War II. And Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin was responsible for killing tens of millions of people, including the wholesale murder of nations.

The global south

But historical accuracy is hardly Mr Putin's objective. For his mixture of selective truths, half-truths or just fiction more suitable for the banter of an angry taxi driver rather than a world leader is designed to engage not merely ordinary Russians but also the nations in the Global South.

References to a "multipolar world", to the defence of sovereignty, to the plunders of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are efforts to resuscitate a non-aligned axis of countries to which Moscow could serve as a leader.

Mr Putin's anti-Western message is at least partly successful. The people of the Global South are paying a heavy price for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the form of food shortages and higher energy costs. But few people in the Global South blame Russia for their predicament.

And although nobody is proposing to recognise Russia's new annexation of Ukrainian territory, Brazil, China and India [chose to abstain from a United Nations Security Council draft resolution](#) condemning Russia's actions. The anti-Western narrative remains a valuable safety valve, even if it is sometimes just a trope.

But beyond the attempt to galvanise global support, Mr Putin's objective is to convey to Western governments a stark message: that his goal is not negotiation but the capitulation of Russia's enemies.

Mr Putin's view of the world is governed by historical determinism, the idea that there are forces beyond humans that inevitably pit nations against each other. According to this view, the West and Russia are irreconcilable; they are fated to confrontation, and Russia's only duty is to prevail.

Dangerous vision

How frightened should we feel about such a vision?

A great deal.

Mr Putin is engaged in a unique experiment: unlike the other imperial powers he decries, unlike the British and the French who - however reluctantly - reconciled themselves to the loss of their empires, Mr Putin wants to reverse the collapse of his empire.

He will surely fail in that enterprise, just as the Soviet leaders - who also believed in their historical determinism - failed.

But until he departs from the political scene, there can be no question of any strategic accommodation between Russia and the West.

And plenty of opportunities for more significant clashes.