

By Alan Cullison

Putin Blames U.S. for Protests

Under Fire, Premier Takes Jab at Clinton in Sharp Escalation in Rhetoric, Gets Tougher on Opposition

MOSCOW—Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin kicked off his presidential campaign by accusing the U.S. of fomenting street protests against his rule, and by calling his opponents tools of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Mr. Putin's unusually personal remarks mark a sharp escalation in Russia's tensions with the West, and highlight Kremlin watchers' worries that Mr. Putin is retreating into a conservative inner circle for advice as he faces his largest political challenge since ascending to power.

With a large opposition rally planned for Saturday, the Kremlin appeared on Thursday to be weighing how far to take a crackdown that, once started, might not be easy to reverse.



Ria Novosti/Reuters

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during a meeting with organizers of the All-Russian People's Front in Moscow Thursday.

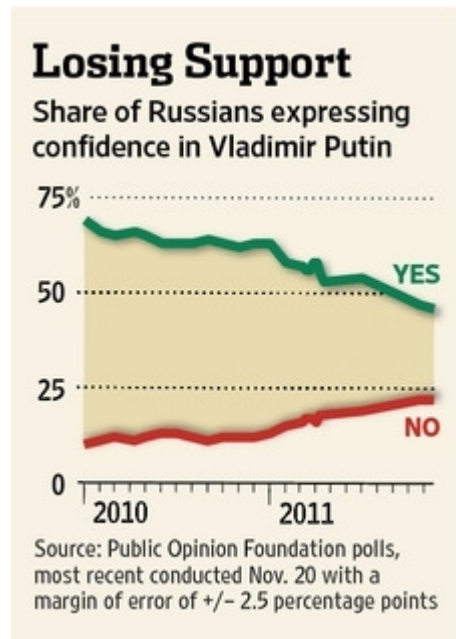
In a televised meeting with supporters, Mr. Putin signaled that he plans to take a harder line against Russia's opposition, which he said is being used by Western governments to punish Russia for its status as a nuclear power.

"They shake us up so we don't forget who is boss on our planet," said Mr. Putin, adding that the West spends "hundreds of millions of dollars" to influence Russia's election system. "We need to end that."

Mr. Putin's critics have called for a mass protest near the Kremlin on Saturday to demand a recount of the Dec. 4 parliamentary vote. Critics say that though the pro-Kremlin party suffered a drubbing, official results were still lopsidedly in favor of it. Organizers say the rally could be

the largest since the fall of the Soviet Union; about 30,000 people have signed up to a Facebook page to say they will join.

"Today is a day of intimidation—they are saying we might be beaten up or arrested, that something bad may happen," said Boris Nemtsov, who was a deputy prime minister in the 1990s and is now a frequent Kremlin critic. "But today is a defeat for the government because this meeting will happen anyway."



Street protests lately have drawn Russians who until recently have tended to avoid such demonstrations. Muscovites have taken to wearing white ribbons to demonstrate their support for clean elections.

The Kremlin has already placed about 50,000 police and 2,000 paramilitary troops on the streets of Moscow to quell protests that have sprung up daily since the election. Protests also have appeared in other major cities. While hundreds of people have been arrested, most have been released within a few hours.

The Kremlin has in the past divided Russia's opposition parties by punishing some and rewarding others with promises of financial help and flattery on state-run television. But as the Internet now competes with television as the main source for news in Russia, the Kremlin has lost a major lever.

Collective outrage over evidence of widespread vote fraud in the voting has also helped to unite opposition groups. Russians have sent their own video and photo evidence of vote fraud to opposition websites and to the website of U.S.-funded election-monitoring group Golos, which created an interactive map where Russians could read about and report irregularities. As of Thursday night, more than 7,300 alleged violations had been reported.

The Kremlin has taken halting steps toward controlling the Internet. Opposition websites and the site of Golos succumbed to hacker attacks earlier this week, but most have recovered.

On Thursday, the country's largest social-networking website, Vkontakte, said that Russia's Federal Security Service asked it to block activities of users calling for more protests. The site said it refused. The Security Service didn't respond to a request to comment.

In his meeting with supporters Thursday, Mr. Putin laid blame on Mrs. Clinton, specifically, for street protests, and called for stronger punishments for Russians working for foreign states. He called foreign funding of election monitors "unacceptable." He said Mrs. Clinton prematurely questioned the fairness of the election before all of the facts were in, setting off a series of protests.

"She set the tone, gave the signal, and the signal was heard by certain activists," he said. "They heard this signal and with the help of the State Department, they started active work."

Mrs. Clinton, in Brussels Thursday on a diplomatic trip, responded that she had expressed "well-founded" concerns about the conduct of Russia's parliamentary election earlier this week, and that other nations had raised concerns too.

"Human rights is part of who we are," she said. "And we expressed concerns that we thought were well-founded about the conduct of the elections."

Mr. Putin has long accused the U.S. of toppling governments in the former Soviet states of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan by funding its agents under the guise of pro-democracy movements in so-called colored revolutions. "But we know that in our country [we] don't want things to develop in Russia as they did in Kyrgyzstan or not long ago in Ukraine," he said. "Nobody wants chaos."

Kremlin worries over the election are heightened by the fact that the parliamentary contest has been seen as a run-up to a presidential poll in which Mr. Putin had planned to win a six-year term in the Kremlin. He officially registered as a candidate on Wednesday.

As his campaign manager Mr. Putin chose a Soviet-era filmmaker, Stanislav Govorukhin, who at Mr. Putin's nomination earlier this year at a party meeting cited various Russian literary figures in saying that Russia needed a strong central government.

In response to the parliamentary setback, the Kremlin has lately suggested that the United Russia party—not Mr. Putin himself—has been sliding in its popularity. On Thursday, Mr. Putin announced that he would be basing his presidential candidacy on the National Front, an umbrella organization of pro-Kremlin groups that Mr. Putin set up to marshal support this past spring.

— Olga Razumovskaya contributed to this article.

Write to Alan Cullison at alan.cullison@wsj.com

[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203501304577086081121083576.html?](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203501304577086081121083576.html?KEYWORDS=Ukraine)

[KEYWORDS=Ukraine](#)

Путін звинувачує США у підбурюванні протестів

Прем'єр-міністр Росії Володимир Путін розпочав свою президентську кампанію, звинувативши США, зокрема, державного секретаря США Гіллари Клінтон в розпалюванні вуличних протестів проти його правління. Пан Путін давно звинуватив США у поваленні урядів у колишніх радянських республіках Грузії, Україні та Киргизстані, та фінансуванні своїх агентів під прикриттям демократичних рухів в так званих кольорових революціях. "Але ми знаємо, що в нашій країні люди не хочуть, щоб події розвивалися як в Киргизії або не так давно в Україні", – сказав він. "Ніхто не хоче хаосу".