Address by the President of the Russia

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: Citizens of Russia, friends,

I consider it necessary today to speak again about the tragic events in Donbas and the key aspects of ensuring the security of Russia.

I will begin with what I said in my address on February 21, 2022. I spoke about our biggest concerns and worries, and about the fundamental threats which irresponsible Western politicians created for Russia consistently, rudely and unceremoniously from year to year. I am referring to the eastward expansion of NATO, which is moving its military infrastructure ever closer to the Russian border.

It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to agree with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border.

Why is this happening? Where did this insolent manner of talking down from the height of their exceptionalism, infallibility, and all-permissiveness come from? What is the explanation for this contemptuous and disdainful attitude to our interests and absolutely legitimate demands?

The answer is simple. Everything is clear and obvious. In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union grew weaker and subsequently broke apart. That experience should serve as a good lesson for us, because it has shown us that the paralysis of power and will is the first step towards complete degradation and oblivion. We lost confidence for only one moment, but it was enough to disrupt the balance of forces in the world.

As a result, the old treaties and agreements are no longer effective. Entreaties and requests do not help. Anything that does not suit the dominant state, the powers that be, is denounced as archaic, obsolete, and useless. At the same time, everything it regards as useful is presented as the ultimate truth and forced on others regardless of the cost, abusively and by any means available. Those who refuse to comply are subjected to strong-arm tactics.

What I am saying now does not concern only Russia, and Russia is not the only country that is worried about this. This has to do with the entire system of international relations, and sometimes even US allies. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a redivision of the world, and the norms of international law that developed by that time – and the most important of them, the fundamental norms that were adopted following WWII and largely formalised its outcome – came in the way of those who declared themselves the winners of the Cold War.

Of course, practice, international relations and the rules regulating them had to take into account the changes that took place in the world and in the balance of forces. However, this should have been done professionally, smoothly, patiently, and with due regard and respect for the interests of all states and one's own responsibility. Instead, we saw a state of euphoria created by the feeling of absolute superiority, a kind of modern absolutism, coupled with the low cultural standards and arrogance of those who formulated and pushed through decisions that suited only themselves. The situation took a different turn.

There are many examples of this. First, a bloody military operation was waged against Belgrade, without the UN Security Council's sanction but with combat aircraft and missiles used in the heart of Europe. The bombing of peaceful cities and vital infrastructure went on for several weeks. I have to recall these facts, because some Western colleagues prefer to forget them, and when we mentioned the event, they prefer to avoid speaking about international law, instead emphasising the circumstances which they interpret as they think necessary.

Then came the turn of Iraq, Libya and Syria. The illegal use of military power against Libya and the distortion of all the UN Security Council decisions on Libya ruined the state, created a huge seat of international terrorism, and pushed the country towards a humanitarian catastrophe, into the vortex of a civil war, which has continued there for years. The tragedy, which was created for hundreds of thousands and even millions of people not only in Libya but in the whole region, has led to a large-scale exodus from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe.

A similar fate was also prepared for Syria. The combat operations conducted by the Western coalition in that country without the Syrian government's approval or UN Security Council's sanction can only be defined as aggression and intervention.

But the example that stands apart from the above events is, of course, the invasion of Iraq without any legal grounds. They used the pretext of allegedly reliable information available in the United States about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. To prove that allegation, the US Secretary of State held up a vial with white powder, publicly, for the whole world to see, assuring the international community that it was a chemical warfare agent created in Iraq. It later turned out that all of that was a fake and a sham, and that Iraq did not have any chemical weapons. Incredible and shocking but true. We witnessed lies made at the highest state level and voiced from the high UN rostrum. As a result, we see a tremendous loss in human life, damage, destruction, and a colossal upsurge of terrorism.

Overall, it appears that nearly everywhere, in many regions of the world where the United States brought its law and order, this created bloody, non-healing wounds and the curse of international terrorism and extremism. I have only mentioned the most glaring, but far from the only examples of disregard for international law.

This array includes promises not to expand NATO eastwards even by an inch. To reiterate: they have deceived us, or, to put it simply, they have played us. Sure, one often hears that politics is a dirty business. It could be, but it shouldn't be as dirty as it is now, not to such an extent. This type of con-artist behaviour is contrary not only to the principles of international relations but also and above all, to the generally accepted norms of morality and ethics. Where is justice and truth here? Just lies and hypocrisy all around.

Incidentally, US politicians, political scientists and journalists write and say that a veritable "empire of lies" has been created inside the United States in recent years. It is hard to disagree with this – it is really so. But one should not be modest about it: the United States is still a great country and a system-forming power. All its satellites not only humbly and obediently say yes to and parrot it at the slightest pretext but also imitate its behaviour and enthusiastically accept the rules it is offering them. Therefore, one can say with good reason and confidence that the whole so-called Western bloc formed by the United States in its own image and likeness is, in its entirety, the very same "empire of lies."

As for our country, after the disintegration of the USSR, given the entire unprecedented openness of the new, modern Russia, its readiness to work honestly with the United States and other Western partners, and its practically unilateral disarmament, they immediately tried to put the final squeeze on us, finish us off, and utterly destroy us. This is how it was in the 1990s and the early 2000s, when the so-called collective West was

actively supporting separatism and gangs of mercenaries in southern Russia. What victims, what losses we had to sustain, and what trials we had to go through at that time before we broke the back of international terrorism in the Caucasus! We remember this and will never forget.

Properly speaking, the attempts to use us in their own interests never ceased until quite recently: they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people, from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature. This is not going to happen. No one has ever succeeded in doing this, nor will they succeed now.

Despite all that, in December 2021, we made yet another attempt to reach agreement with the United States and its allies on the principles of European security and NATO's non-expansion. Our efforts were in vain. The United States has not changed its position. It does not believe it necessary to agree with Russia on a matter that is critical for us. The United States is pursuing its own objectives, while neglecting our interests.

Of course, this situation begs a question: what next, what are we to expect? If history is any guide, we know that in 1940 and early 1941 the Soviet Union went to great lengths to prevent war or at least delay its outbreak. To this end, the USSR sought not to provoke the potential aggressor until the very end by refraining or postponing the most urgent and obvious preparations it had to make to defend itself from an imminent attack. When it finally acted, it was too late.

As a result, the country was not prepared to counter the invasion by Nazi Germany, which attacked our Motherland on June 22, 1941, without declaring war. The country stopped the enemy and went on to defeat it, but this came at a tremendous cost. The attempt to appease the aggressor ahead of the Great Patriotic War proved to be a mistake that came at a high cost for our people. In the first months after the hostilities broke out, we lost vast territories of strategic importance, as well as millions of lives. We will not make this mistake the second time. We have no right to do so.

Those who aspire to global dominance have publicly designated Russia as their enemy. They did so with impunity. Make no mistake, they had no reason to act this way. It is true that they have considerable financial, scientific, technological, and military capabilities. We are aware of this and have an objective view of the economic threats we have been

hearing, just as of our ability to counter this brash and never-ending blackmail. Let me reiterate that we have no illusions in this regard and are extremely realistic in our assessments.

As for military affairs, even after the dissolution of the USSR and losing a considerable part of its capabilities, today's Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states. Moreover, it has a certain advantage in several cutting-edge weapons. In this context, there should be no doubt for anyone that any potential aggressor will face defeat and ominous consequences should it directly attack our country.

At the same time, technology, including in the defence sector, is changing rapidly. One day there is one leader, and tomorrow another, but a military presence in territories bordering on Russia, if we permit it to go ahead, will stay for decades to come or maybe forever, creating an ever-mounting and totally unacceptable threat for Russia.

Even now, with NATO's eastward expansion, the situation for Russia has been becoming worse and more dangerous by the year. Moreover, these past days NATO leadership has been blunt in its statements that they need to accelerate and step up efforts to bring the alliance's infrastructure closer to Russia's borders. In other words, they have been toughening their position. We cannot stay idle and passively observe these developments. This would be an absolutely irresponsible thing to do for us.

Any further expansion of the North Atlantic alliance's infrastructure or the ongoing efforts to gain a military foothold on Ukrainian territory are unacceptable to us. Of course, the question is not about NATO itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy. The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note are our historical land, a hostile "anti-Russia" is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons.

For the United States and its allies, it is a policy of containing Russia, with obvious geopolitical dividends. For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation. This is not an exaggeration; this is a fact. It is not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty. It is the red line which we have spoken about on numerous occasions. They have crossed it.

This brings me to the situation in Donbas. We can see that the forces that staged the coup in Ukraine in 2014 have seized power, are keeping it with the help of ornamental election procedures, and have abandoned the path of a peaceful conflict settlement. For eight years, for eight endless years, we have been doing everything possible to settle the situation by peaceful political means. Everything was in vain.

As I said in my previous address, you cannot look without compassion at what is happening there. It became impossible to tolerate it. We had to stop that atrocity, that genocide of the millions of people who live there and who pinned their hopes on Russia, on all of us. It is their aspirations, the feelings and pain of these people, that were the main motivating force behind our decision to recognise the independence of the Donbas people's republics.

I would like to additionally emphasise the following. Focused on their own goals, the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, those who will never forgive the people of Crimea and Sevastopol for freely choosing to reunite with Russia.

They will undoubtedly try to bring war to Crimea just as they have done in Donbas, to kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler's accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War. They have also openly laid claim to several other Russian regions.

If we look at the sequence of events and the incoming reports, the showdown between Russia and these forces cannot be avoided. It is only a matter of time. They are getting ready and waiting for the right moment. Moreover, they have gone so far as to aspire to acquire nuclear weapons. We will not let this happen.

I have already said that Russia accepted the new geopolitical reality after the dissolution of the USSR. We have been treating all new post-Soviet states with respect and will continue to act this way. We respect and will respect their sovereignty, as proven by the assistance we provided to Kazakhstan when it faced tragic events and a challenge in terms of its statehood and integrity. However, Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today's Ukraine.

Let me remind you that in 2000–2005 we used our military to push back against terrorists in the Caucasus and stood up for the integrity of our state. We preserved Russia. In 2014,

we supported the people of Crimea and Sevastopol. In 2015, we used our Armed Forces to create a reliable shield that prevented terrorists from Syria from penetrating Russia. This was a matter of defending ourselves. We had no other choice.

The same is happening today. They did not leave us any other option for defending Russia and our people, other than the one we are forced to use today. In these circumstances, we have to take bold and immediate action. The people's republics of Donbas have asked Russia for help.

In this context, in accordance with Article 51 (Chapter VII) of the UN Charter, with permission of Russia's Federation Council, and in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22, I made a decision to carry out a special military operation.

The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.

It is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force. At the same time, we have been hearing an increasing number of statements coming from the West that there is no need anymore to abide by the documents setting forth the outcomes of World War II, as signed by the totalitarian Soviet regime. How can we respond to that?

The outcomes of World War II and the sacrifices our people had to make to defeat Nazism are sacred. This does not contradict the high values of human rights and freedoms in the reality that emerged over the post-war decades. This does not mean that nations cannot enjoy the right to self-determination, which is enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter.

Let me remind you that the people living in territories which are part of today's Ukraine were not asked how they want to build their lives when the USSR was created or after World War II. Freedom guides our policy: the freedom to choose our future and the future of our children. We believe that all the people living in today's Ukraine, anyone who wants to do this, must be able to enjoy this right to make a free choice.

In this context, I would like to address the citizens of Ukraine. In 2014, Russia was obliged to protect the people of Crimea and Sevastopol from those whom you yourself call “nats.” The people of Crimea and Sevastopol made their choice in favour of being with their historical homeland, Russia, and we supported their choice. As I said, we could not act otherwise.

The current events have nothing to do with a desire to infringe on the interests of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. They are connected with defending Russia from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and our people.

I reiterate: we are acting to defend ourselves from the threats created for us and from a worse peril than what is happening now. I am asking you, however hard this may be, to understand this and to work together with us to turn this tragic page as soon as possible and to move forward together, without allowing anyone to interfere in our affairs and our relations, but developing them independently, to create favourable conditions for overcoming all these problems and to strengthen us from within as a single whole, despite the existence of state borders. I believe in this, in our common future.

I would also like to address the military personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Comrade officers,

Your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine. You swore the oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people and not to the junta, the people’s adversary, which is plundering Ukraine and humiliating the Ukrainian people.

I urge you to refuse to carry out their criminal orders. I urge you to immediately lay down arms and go home. I will explain what this means: the military personnel of the Ukrainian army who do this will be able to freely leave the zone of hostilities and return to their families.

I want to emphasise again that all responsibility for the possible bloodshed will lie fully and wholly with the ruling Ukrainian regime.

I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside. No matter who tries to stand in our way or, all the more so, create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history. No matter how the events unfold, we are ready. All the necessary decisions in this regard have been taken. I hope that my words will be heard.

Citizens of Russia,

The culture and values, experience, and traditions of our ancestors invariably provided a powerful underpinning for the well-being and the very existence of entire states and nations, their success and viability. Of course, this directly depends on the ability to quickly adapt to constant change, maintain social cohesion, and be ready to consolidate and summon all the available forces to move forward.

We always need to be strong, but this strength can take on different forms. The “empire of lies,” which I mentioned in the beginning of my speech, proceeds in its policy primarily from rough, direct force. This is when our saying about being “all brawn and no brains” applies.

We all know that having justice and truth on our side is what makes us truly strong. If this is the case, it would be hard to disagree with the fact that it is our strength and our readiness to fight that are the bedrock of independence and sovereignty and provide the necessary foundation for building a reliable future for your home, your family, and your Motherland.

Dear compatriots,

I am certain that devoted soldiers and officers of Russia’s Armed Forces will perform their duty with professionalism and courage. I do not doubt that the government institutions at all levels and specialists will work effectively to guarantee the stability of our economy, financial system and social well-being, and the same applies to corporate executives and the entire business community. I hope that all parliamentary parties and civil society take a consolidated, patriotic position.

At the end of the day, the future of Russia is in the hands of its multi-ethnic people, as has always been the case in our history. This means that the decisions that I made will

be executed, that we will achieve the goals we have set, and that we will reliably guarantee the security of our Motherland.

I believe in your support and the invincible force rooted in the love for our Fatherland.