

# PUTIN THREATENS WEST WITH NEW MISSILES

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Standing firm: Russian President Vladimir Putin delivering his annual state of the nation address in Moscow. AFP/ALEXANDER NEMENOV

Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened to deploy new missiles against Western capitals as he delivered a state of the nation address on Wednesday aimed at boosting falling approval ratings.

But while he took a combative tone with the West, he reached out to Russians with promises of improved living conditions.

The long-time Russian leader warned Washington against deploying any new missiles in Europe following the collapse of a key Cold War-era treaty, saying Moscow would consider it a "serious threat".

"I'm saying this clearly and openly, Russia will be forced to deploy weapons that can be used... against the decision-making centres that are behind the missile systems which threaten us," Mr. Putin said. The U.S. and Russia raised fears of a new arms race when they announced earlier this year that they were pulling out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, a 1987 deal that limited medium-range missiles.

Washington was the first to announce its withdrawal, accusing Moscow of developing new weapons that violated the treaty, but Mr. Putin on Wednesday dismissed the U.S. claims as "far-fetched".

## 'We cannot wait'

The tough talk on missiles seemed aimed at stirring up patriotic support for Mr. Putin, who won re-election last year with more than 76% of the vote but has been recently struggling with dropping poll numbers.

A survey by Russia's independent Levada Centre released in January found his approval rating at 64% — a figure many Western leaders could only dream of, but Mr. Putin's lowest in five years.

Most of Wednesday's speech focussed on promises to address poor living standards, a key source of frustration for many Russians nearly 20 years after Mr. Putin came to power.

"We cannot wait, the situation must change for the better now," Mr. Putin told assembled lawmakers from Russia's lower house State Duma and upper house Federation Council. "Within this year (Russians) should feel changes," he said.

Mr. Putin lamented that some 19 million Russians were living below the poverty line, saying: "This is too much... the state should help." He focussed in particular on help for Russian families, pointing to a demographic crisis that has seen birth rates fall drastically since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Last year, the government's statistics agency said the country's birth rate had fallen by 11% in

2017 to the lowest level in a decade. "The incomes of Russian families should of course rise," he said, promising new child benefits and lower taxes for larger families.

Mr. Putin touched on several other issues of national concern during his 90-minute speech, including a waste-management crisis that has seen Russians outside Moscow protesting at plans to send rubbish to provincial landfills.

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