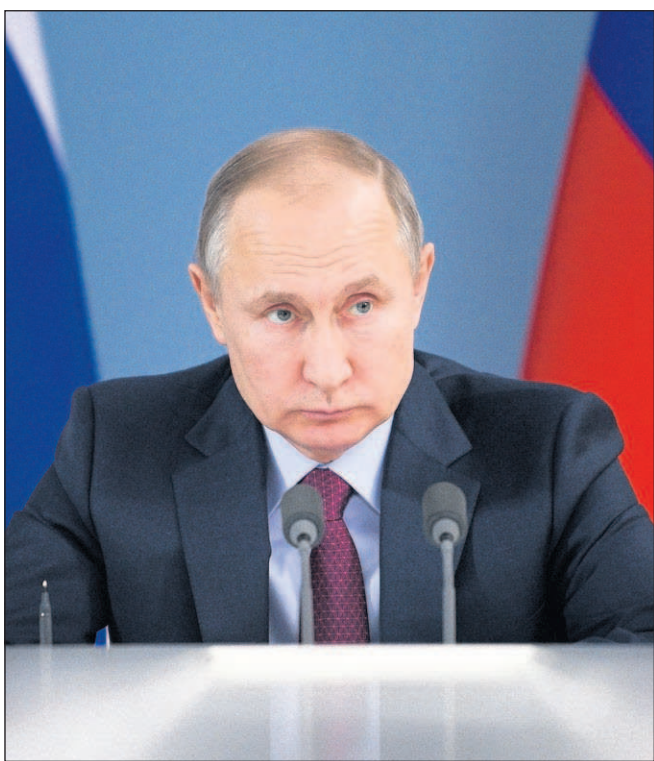


Putin praises Trump, says American political system is eating itself

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV
Associated Press



Alexei Druzhinin, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP
Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a meeting during his visit to Samara, Russia, Wednesday.

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin lavished praise on President Donald Trump, but added that he was sorely disappointed with the U.S. political system, saying that it has been “eating itself up.”

Speaking in a series of interviews with Russian state television which were included in a documentary released Wednesday, Putin described Trump as a great communicator.

“I have no disappointment at all,” Putin said when asked about the U.S. president. “Moreover, on a personal level he made a very good impression on me.”

The two leaders met on the sidelines of international summits last year. Putin praised Trump as a “balanced” man, who easily gets into the gist of various issues and listens to his interlocutor.

“It’s possible to negotiate with him, to search for compromises,” Putin added.

He also noted that he spent some time talking to Melania Trump when he sat next to her during an official dinner at the Group of 20 summit in Hamburg, Germany in July. The Russian leader said he told her and the wife of the Italian premier “about Siberia and Kamchatka, about fishing ... about bears on Kamchatka and tigers in the Far East.”

“I made some exaggerations,” the action-loving Russian leader said with a

grin. “When you talk about fishing, you can’t help exaggerating.”

Asked jokingly by the interviewer if he was trying to recruit the women, the KGB veteran responded by saying: “No, I stopped dealing with that a long time ago.”

He added with a smile: “But I liked doing that, it was my job for many years.”

Venting his frustration with the U.S. political system, Putin said “it has demonstrated its inefficiency and has been eating itself up.”

“It’s quite difficult to interact with such a system,

because it’s unpredictable,” Putin said.

Russia-U.S. ties long have been strained by the Ukrainian crisis, the war in Syria and other issues, and Moscow’s hopes for better ties with the U.S. under Trump haven’t materialized.

Tensions have escalated further amid the ongoing congressional and FBI investigations into allegations of collusion between Trump’s campaign and Russia.

Speaking about the Russia-West rift, Putin said it has been rooted in Western efforts to contain and weaken Russia.

“We are a great power, and no one likes competition,” he said.

He said he was particularly dismayed by what he described as the U.S. role in the ouster of Ukraine’s Russia-friendly president in February 2014 amid massive protests.

Putin charged that the U.S. had asked Russia to help persuade then-President Viktor Yanukovich not to use force against protesters and then “rudely and blatantly” cheated Russia, sponsoring what he called a “coup.”

Russia responded by annexing Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula.

“Few expected us to act so quickly and so resolutely, not to say daringly,” Putin said.

He described the Western sanctions over Crimea and the insurgency in eastern Ukraine as part of “illegitimate and unfair” efforts to contain Russia, adding that “we will win in the long run.”

“Those who serve us with poison will eventually swallow it and poison themselves,” he said.

Putin wasn’t speaking in the context of a former Russian spy who was left in critical condition, along with his daughter, after coming into contact with a mysterious substance in Britain. Some have suggested it was a poisoning in which Russia may have had a hand, even though British authorities haven’t revealed what the substance was and are still investigating. Moscow has denied any involvement.

Mexico, Canada and others may be exempted from U.S. tariffs

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House said Wednesday that Mexico, Canada and other countries may be spared from President Donald Trump’s planned steel and aluminum tariffs under national security “carve-outs,” a move that could soften the blow amid threats of retaliation by trading partners and dire economic warnings from lawmakers and business groups.

Peter Navarro, Trump’s trade and manufacturing adviser, said in an interview on Fox Business that the tariffs would go into effect within about 15 to 30 days and the proclamation the president intends to sign would include a clause that would not immediately impose tariffs on Canada and Mexico.

Press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters the exemptions would be made on a “case by case” and “country by country” basis, a reversal from the policy articulated by the White House just days ago that there would be no exemptions from Trump’s plan.

The update came as congressional Republicans and business groups braced for the impact of expected tariffs of 25 percent on imported steel and 10 percent on aluminum, appearing resigned to additional protectionist trade actions as Trump signaled upcoming economic battles with China. Trump was

expected to announce the tariffs by the end of the week.

The looming departure of White House economic adviser Gary Cohn, a former Goldman Sachs executive who has opposed the promised tariffs, set off anxiety among business leaders and investors worried about a trade war.

“We urge you to reconsider the idea of broad tariffs to avoid unintended negative consequences to the U.S. economy and its workers,” 107 House Republicans wrote in a letter to Trump.

At the White House, officials were working to include language in the tariffs that would give Trump the flexibility to approve exemptions for certain countries.

“He’s already indicated a degree of flexibility, I think a very sensible, very balanced degree of flexibility,” Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross told CNBC. “We’re not trying to blow up the world.”

Trump signaled other trade actions could be in the works. In a tweet, he said the “U.S. is acting swiftly on Intellectual Property theft.” A White House official said Trump was referencing an ongoing investigation of China in which the U.S. trade representative is studying whether Chinese intellectual property rules are “unreasonable or discriminatory” to American business.

BRIEFLY

Gun legislation passes Florida House

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — The Florida House passed a school safety bill Wednesday that includes new restrictions on rifle sales and a program to arm some teachers, sending the measure to the governor for his signature.

The vote of 67-50 reflected a mix of Republicans and Democrats in support and opposition. The measure, a response to the shootings at a Parkland high school that left 17 dead, is supported by the victims’ families.

Andrew Pollack, who lost his 18-year-old daughter Meadow in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, and Ryan Petty, who lost his 14-year-old daughter Alaina, said there was enough good in the bill that it should pass.

“More needs to be done, and it’s important for the country to be united in the same way the 17 families united in support of this bill,” Pollack said after the vote. “My precious daughter Meadow’s life was taken, and there’s nothing I can do to change that, but make no mistake, I’m a father and I’m on a mission. I’m on a mission to make sure I’m the last dad to ever read a statement of this kind.”

Democratic Rep. Jared Moskowitz, a former Parkland city commissioner, ended the eight hours of debate with an emotional account of seeing the high school after the shooting, attending victims’ funerals and working with students and families while the House was forming the legislation. He broke down in tears after talking about how his 4-year-old son’s writing

teacher lost her daughter in the attack.

“You don’t need to stand with me. I don’t need you to stand with me. I need you to stand with the families,” Moskowitz said.

Democrats would reverse some tax cuts to fund infrastructure

WASHINGTON (AP) — For Senate Democrats, voting against the Republican tax cuts that President Donald Trump signed into law wasn’t opposition enough. Now they have a plan to reverse some of the tax breaks for corporations and the wealthiest Americans and put the money instead toward a \$1 trillion infrastructure package.

The proposal, unveiled Wednesday, is more campaign theme than actual legislative agenda, since Republicans hold the majority in Congress. But it stands as an alternative to Trump’s approach to both taxes and spending as his infrastructure blueprint has stalled on Capitol Hill.

“We want to roll back the Republican tax giveaways to big corporations and the very wealthy and invest that money instead in job-creating infrastructure,” Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said on Senate floor. “We say, take some of those tax breaks from the wealthiest Americans and put them into middle class jobs. Plain and simple.”

Republicans are counting on the new tax law to boost their standing with voters ahead of what is expected to be a grueling midterm

election that could threaten their hold on the majority.

Watchdog report: Failed VA leadership put patients at risk

WASHINGTON (AP) — “Failed leadership” at the Department of Veterans Affairs during the Obama years put patients at a major hospital at risk, an internal probe finds — another blow to Secretary David Shulkin, who served at the VA then and is fighting to keep his job.

The 150-page report released Wednesday by the VA internal watchdog offers new details to its preliminary finding last April of patient safety issues at the Washington, D.C., medical center.

Shulkin acknowledged to reporters that the problems were “systemic,” but said he was not aware of the issues at the Washington hospital. He pledged wide-scale change across the VA.

Painting a grim picture of communications breakdowns, chaos and spending waste at the government’s second largest department, the report found that at least three VA program offices directly under Shulkin’s watch knew of “serious, persistent deficiencies” when he was VA undersecretary of health from 2015 to 2016. But it stopped short of saying whether he was told about them.

Shulkin, who was elevated to VA secretary last year by President Donald Trump, told government investigators that he did “not recall” ever being notified of problems.

Among the changes he promised — unannounced audits of its more than 1,700 medical facilities from health experts in the private sector, immediate hiring to fill vacancies at local hospitals and plans in the coming months to streamline bureaucracy and improve communication.

UK police: Russian ex-spy was attacked with nerve agent

LONDON (AP) — A Russian ex-spy and his daughter fighting for their lives in an English hospital were attacked with a nerve agent in a targeted murder attempt, British police said Wednesday.

The case has further strained relations between Russia and Britain, which has said it will respond strongly if the Russian government is linked to the attack. It has overtones of a 2006 fatal attack on a former Russian spy that was blamed on the Kremlin.

In that incident, a radioactive poison was used. The choice of a nerve agent in the latest case follows the use of the banned nerve agent VX to kill the estranged half-brother of North Korea’s leader last year.

Sergei Skripal, 66, and his 33-year-old daughter Yulia were found unconscious on a bench in the southwestern English city of Salisbury on Sunday, triggering a police investigation led by counterterrorism detectives. Baffled police initially said the pair had come into contact with an unknown substance.

“Having established that a nerve agent is the cause of the

symptoms leading us to treat this as attempted murder, I can also confirm that we believe that the two people who became unwell were targeted specifically,” Metropolitan Police counterterrorism chief Mark Rowley said.

Porn actress sues to end silence on alleged Trump affair

LOS ANGELES (AP) — An adult film actress who has said she had sex with Donald Trump filed a lawsuit seeking to invalidate a nondisclosure agreement and “set the record straight,” her lawyer said Wednesday.

Stormy Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford, filed a lawsuit in Los Angeles County Superior Court on Tuesday. She alleges that the agreement she signed days before the 2016 presidential election, which prevented her from discussing the alleged sexual encounters, is “null and void” because Trump didn’t personally sign it.

Her lawyer, Michael Avenatti, said on morning news shows Wednesday that she wants “to set the record straight.” He said on NBC there was “no question” Trump knew about the agreement, though he did not offer any proof.

The lawsuit filed Tuesday refers to her beginning an “intimate relationship” with Trump in 2006 that continued “well into the year 2007.” She said the relationship included encounters in Lake Tahoe, Nevada, and Beverly Hills, California. Trump married his current wife, Melania Trump, in 2005.

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