

'No more illusions'... Putin's nuclear option

Written by John Hallam

Tuesday, 24 February 2015 16:26 -

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<http://www.independent.ie/life/no-more-illusions-putins-nuclear-option-30999741.html>

T-shirts bigging up Armageddon are hugely popular in Russia as the Kremlin pumps up rabid nationalist feeling. Should we be scared?

Marc Bennetts

Published 22/02/2015 | 02:30

Earlier this month, as fighting raged in eastern Ukraine between pro-Russian rebels and forces loyal to the Western-backed government in Kiev, Dmitry Kiselyov, the pugnacious, middle-aged journalist who heads Russia's main state news agency, gazed defiantly into a TV studio camera. "What is Russia preparing for?" he asked. As if in reply, the director cut to an ominous backdrop image of an intercontinental ballistic missile emerging from an underground launch silo.

"During the era of political romanticism, the Soviet Union pledged never to use nuclear weapons first," Kiselyov told the audience of Vesti Nedeli, his current affairs show, one of the country's most widely watched programmes. "But Russia's current military doctrine does not." He paused briefly for effect. "No more illusions."

There was nothing out of the ordinary about this reminder that Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to a "threat" to its statehood. Since the start of the crisis in Ukraine, which has massive geostrategic importance for Russia, state-controlled TV has engineered an upsurge in aggressive anti-Western sentiment, with Kiselyov as the Kremlin's top attack dog.

Last spring, as Washington warned of sanctions over Russia's seizure of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, Kiselyov boasted about his country's fearsome nuclear arsenal. "Russia is the only country in the world realistically capable of turning the US into radioactive ash," he declared.

Kiselyov's blood-curdling comments will have had the Kremlin's implicit backing, analysts say. "This threat of nuclear war should be taken seriously," said Sergey Markov, a political strategist. "In Russia, we believe that Ukraine has been occupied by the US. And that this occupation is not about democracy, or even money, but that it is the first step in a war against Russia. The US is seeking to undermine

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our sovereignty, neutralise our nuclear potential, and steal our oil and gas. Under these circumstances, the danger of nuclear confrontation is very real."

Some 5,500 lives have been lost in the almost year-long conflict in Ukraine, where pro-Russian rebels in the east have carved out two self-declared "people's republics". The crisis was sparked by the February 2014 overthrow of Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, in what Kremlin officials say was a coup orchestrated by the US. In addition, President Vladimir Putin has spoken of what he called a "Nato legion" fighting alongside the Ukrainian army.

While there is no proof that Nato forces are in action in Ukraine, US officials have suggested that Washington could supply weapons to Kiev to assist its battered army. The proposal sparked a furious response: Viktor Zavarzin, of Russia's defence committee, warned of the "irrevocable consequences" of such a move.

In turn, the West has accused Russia of providing both troops and weaponry to the rebels, a charge Putin has consistently denied.

A ceasefire thrashed out by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany - the second attempt to bring peace to the devastated region - was set to come into effect this week at one minute past midnight.

Amid these tensions, Kiselyov is not the only one pushing the possibility of nuclear confrontation with the West. Russia's Zvezda TV channel, owned by the defence ministry, has also been preparing its audience for the worst.

"Russia and the US are on the verge of nuclear war," read a headline on its website last week. The article cited an analyst from the Moscow-based Politika think tank, Vyacheslav Nikonov, which said a nuclear exchange between the two former Cold War-era foes was increasingly likely because the US wanted Russia to "disappear" as an independent country. "This is not in our plans," he said.

Russia has the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weapons, with 8,400 warheads compared with a US total of 7,500. A day after last week's peace talks in Belarus, Russia's nuclear forces staged large-scale exercises, soon after navy nuclear combat drills in the Arctic. All of which causes concern in the West. Michael Fallon, the UK Defence Secretary, said earlier this month that he was worried Russia had "lowered its threshold" for the use of nuclear weapons, while "integrating nuclear with conventional forces in a rather threatening way."

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The prospect of nuclear war is also being talked up by pro-Kremlin movements. In a clip posted online last month, a Kalashnikov-wielding member of the Moscow-based, pro-Kremlin National Liberation Movement (NOD) vows global nuclear devastation in the event of the defeat of Russia's interests in Ukraine.

"If we lose, we will destroy the whole world," intones a young NOD activist named Maria Katasonova. She sweeps a circle with her arm, and the screen is filled with a virtual image of an explosion as the planet is consumed in an atomic inferno.

"Russians will not sit by and watch as their country's sovereignty is threatened by the US," Katasonova told The Sunday Telegraph last week. "If our country is in genuine danger, we really will use nuclear weapons."

Katasonova is a follower of Alexander Dugin, a hardline nationalist thinker who has called for the destruction of the US. Dugin - described as "Putin's brain" by the respected US-based Foreign Affairs journal - is something of a fanatic. He combines political activities with occultism, and often speaks of his belief that the world must be "brought to an end".

So what's going on? Is Moscow really preparing its people for the unthinkable - nuclear confrontation? Or is all this simply North Korean-style bluff and bluster? How many minutes are left until the Kremlin's doomsday clock strikes midnight?

"It is, of course, a disgrace and an embarrassment to my country that such things are being said on national television," said Lev Ponomaryov, a veteran human rights activist and Soviet-era dissident. "But statements about nuclear war are mainly for domestic consumption."

While Putin denies that regular Russian troops are fighting in Ukraine, he has hailed the hundreds, if not thousands, of apparent volunteers who have travelled to what the rebels call "Novorossiya" - "New Russia". A number of these fighters have become folk heroes back home; in particular, Igor Strelkov, the ultra-conservative enthusiast who spent much of last year commanding rebel forces in Ukraine's Donbass region.

"I think these people frighten the Kremlin even more than they scare me," said Ponomaryov. "The authorities are afraid that they could one day turn their weapons against them, and the government will do

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anything to keep them on side."

State television's war rhetoric is not confined to the nuclear. In recent days, one Kremlin-run channel has discussed how long it would take for Russian tanks to "reach Berlin", while in east Ukraine, bloody and bruised government soldiers were abused by a notorious rebel commander in front of Russian television cameras.

But state-run media's fever-pitch, anti-Western TV programming is not only pandering to the radicals, it is also creating them. "Nationally televised broadcasts, such as those presented by Dmitry Kiselyov, have scared people, and led to increased hostility in society," said Lev Gudkov, who heads the independent, Moscow-based Levada-Center polling agency.

"We have seen a drastic change in the collective consciousness of the Russian people over the last year or so."

The figures are startling. The number of Russians who believe their country and the US are now mutual enemies has increased tenfold in a year to 42pc, according to an opinion poll. The total professing a negative attitude to the US has almost doubled.

The statistics are backed by everyday incidents, from the racist image of a banana-munching President Barack Obama laser-beamed on to the wall of the US embassy in Moscow, to the t-shirts with slogans hailing Russia's nuclear missiles, on sale across the country.

Although state media broadcasts have clearly had a pernicious influence on society, putting the country on a war-footing and boosting Putin's approval ratings, Peter Pomerantsev, a UK journalist who worked in Russian TV in the 2000s, believes they are mainly intended for a Western audience.

But the Kremlin's masters of reality have uncorked the atomic genie. It is to be hoped they show the same aptitude when it comes to putting it back in the bottle.

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Indo Review