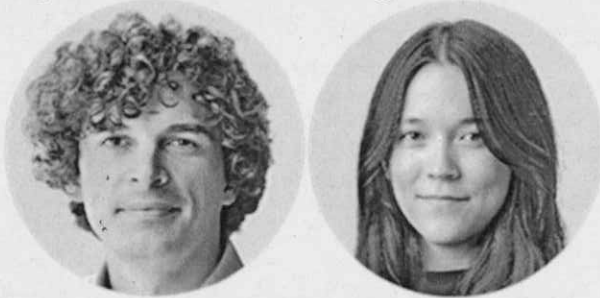


Moscow Claims Explosions Above the Kremlin Were an Attempt to Kill Putin

Russia said Ukraine had launched a drone attack, which Kyiv vehemently denied, accusing Russia of manufacturing a pretext for escalation.

0:18 Video Shows Alleged Drone Attack on the Kremlin

Footage verified by The New York Times shows what appears to be a drone exploding above the Kremlin. About 15 minutes later, what appears to be a second drone explodes. Credit Credit...Evgenia Novozhenina/Reuters



By **Anton Troianovski** and **Haley Willis**

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After a pair of explosions above the Kremlin early Wednesday, Russia accused Ukraine of trying to assassinate President Vladimir V. Putin with a drone attack, but Kyiv denied any involvement in an incident that could raise the already-high stakes in Europe's biggest conflict since World War II.

Video footage verified by The New York Times showed what appeared to be two drones detonating over the Kremlin 15 minutes apart, the first shortly before 2:30 a.m. Russia called it an unsuccessful "attempt on the life of the president" by Ukraine that was foiled by Russian "electronic warfare systems," but did not release any evidence of a Ukrainian link.

The Ukrainian government asserted that Russia had manufactured the incident to distract attention from Ukraine's expected imminent counteroffensive and possibly justify escalation by Moscow. A drone attack at the deeply symbolic heart of Russian power would be an audacious move by Kyiv, with the potential for serious repercussions.

There were no reports of serious damage, and the Russian government said that during the predawn incident, Mr. Putin was not in the Kremlin, where he is not thought to spend many nights.

It is not clear from the videos whether the objects detonated on their own or were destroyed by Russian forces.

On Wednesday, U.S. intelligence agencies were still trying to determine what happened, according to two American officials briefed on the situation. "We simply don't know," Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said at a public event at The Washington Post, adding, "I would take anything coming out of the Kremlin with a very large shaker of salt."

American officials have in the past voiced concern that Ukrainian attacks on Russian soil could provoke Moscow without having a direct effect on the battlefield — one reason Washington has withheld from Ukraine weapons that could be used to strike deep into Russia. But on Wednesday Mr. Blinken said of such attacks, “These are decisions for Ukraine to make about how it’s going to defend itself.”

Whatever the drones’ provenance, it was clear that the Kremlin had made an unusually deliberate choice to publicize the incident — Mr. Putin’s press service issued a rare, five-paragraph statement. The government had far less to say publicly about previous apparent attacks inside Russia, and until the Kremlin’s statement, reports on social media of explosive sounds in central Moscow early Wednesday had attracted little attention.

Editors’ Picks



Image

A photograph released by Russian state media purporting to show President Vladimir V. Putin during a meeting at the Novo-Ogarevo residence, outside Moscow, on Wednesday. Credit...Mikhael Klimentyev/Sputnik

Whoever was responsible, the explosions at the Kremlin could serve as a pretext for Mr. Putin to escalate the war in some way, like striking key government buildings in Kyiv and trying to decapitate the Ukrainian government. He and other Kremlin officials have hinted repeatedly at the possibility of using nuclear weapons, and Russian hawks have called for broader conscription to expand the military ranks.

“We will demand the use of weapons capable of stopping and destroying the Kyiv terrorist regime,” said Vyacheslav Volodin, the chairman of Russia’s lower house of Parliament. The

Kremlin's statement said Russia reserved the right for "retaliatory measures where and when it sees fit."

The State of the War

- **Escalating Attacks:** Signs of an imminent Ukrainian counteroffensive are mounting as both sides step up military strikes and Russian forces move into defensive positions.
- **Anticipating the Counteroffensive:** Wary of strikes by Ukrainian partisans, Russian authorities are imposing strict new measures on civilians in occupied parts of Ukraine, reinforcing counterintelligence units and restricting travel.
- **Russia's Refuseniks:** Hundreds of Russian men have faced criminal charges for refusing to fight in Ukraine. That has not stopped others from going to unusual lengths to avoid battle.

Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, suggested in a statement to The New York Times that Russia would use the incident to justify a "large-scale terrorist provocation" against Ukraine in the coming days.

If the drone incident was indeed a deliberate attack, the ability to penetrate central Moscow would represent the latest embarrassing failure by a Russian military that has struggled throughout the 14-month war.

The explosions in Moscow occurred as Kyiv is readying tens of thousands of soldiers for its counteroffensive to retake territory in eastern and southern Ukraine that was seized by Russia, and stepping up strikes behind the front lines aimed at weakening Russian forces.

Explosions hit targets in and near Russian-occupied Crimea overnight, including a border guard post and a fuel depot. Though Ukraine did not claim responsibility, its military intelligence spokesman, Andriy Chernyak, said in a statement, "Of course, the enemy must be cut off from Crimea." Twice this week, explosions have derailed trains in the Bryansk region neighboring Ukraine.

Russia has stepped up strikes in and around the city of Kherson, retaken by Ukrainian forces last fall, where officials said 21 people were killed. Officials imposed a 58-hour curfew there, beginning on Friday night.

Ukraine has largely maintained a policy of deliberate ambiguity over whether it has played a role in attacks inside Russia, though privately Ukrainian officials have acknowledged carrying out a bombing that badly damaged the Kerch Strait bridge, a vital supply route to Crimea, in October, and attacks on Russian air bases in December using Soviet-era, jet-powered drones.

Image

The Kerch Strait bridge after an attack in October.Credit...Associated Press

Last August, a car bombing outside Moscow killed Daria Dugina, a pro-war commentator and daughter of Aleksandr Dugin, a leading Russian ultranationalist ideologue, who was thought to be the actual target of the attack. U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that parts of the Ukrainian government ordered the assault, which Kyiv denied.

In this case, Mr. Zelensky directly denied responsibility. "We don't attack Putin or Moscow," he told the Nordic broadcaster TV2 during a visit to Finland. "We fight on our

territory. We're defending our villages and cities. We don't have enough weapons for these." Dealing with Mr. Putin, he added, would be left to an international war crimes tribunal.

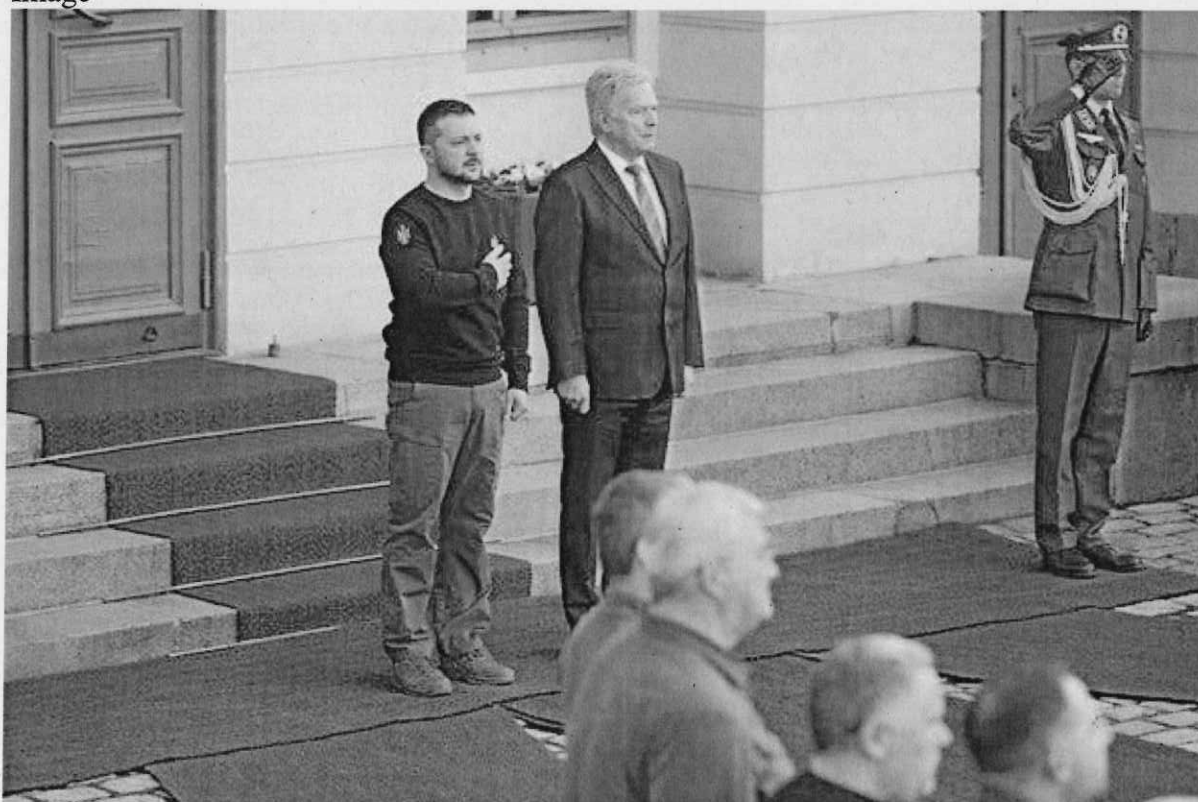
At a news conference with Nordic leaders, Mr. Zelensky said that because Russia "has no victories to report" Mr. Putin needs to "do some unexpected moves like surprise drone attacks" to bolster Russian resolve.

By trumpeting the attack rather than denying it, Russian officials were acknowledging their "lack of air defenses, their vulnerability, weakness and helplessness," Leonid Volkov, an exiled associate of the imprisoned opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny, wrote in a social media post. "That means they found some pluses in this and, evaluating them, decided that the pluses would be able to outweigh the minuses."

Those "pluses" could be to galvanize Russians into more fervently backing the war effort, or to presage a new escalation, Mr. Volkov wrote.

Mr. Putin is scheduled to preside over a major military parade in Red Square near the Kremlin next Tuesday, on Russia's main patriotic holiday, the May 9 celebration of the Soviet Union's World War II victory over Nazi Germany.

Image



President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine and President Sauli Niinistö of Finland in Helsinki on Wednesday. Credit... Vesa Moilanen/Lehtikuva, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The sprawling red fortress of the Kremlin contains several buildings, including the yellow, domed Senate Palace, which was visible in video footage showing what appears to be a drone exploding. Inside that palace are the president's official residence and his main office.

Drones have been banned from flying over the Kremlin and the surrounding area in recent years, and security officers deploy special devices to down any drones in the vicinity and sometimes close off public access to areas adjacent to the complex.

But it is unclear how much time Mr. Putin actually spends in the Kremlin, which he appears to use more for ceremonial occasions than as a practical workplace or residence. In March, he disclosed to reporters in Moscow that “I have an apartment here, where I have been spending a lot of time lately, working, spending nights very often” — a rare instance of his discussing his living arrangements publicly.

The government also goes to considerable lengths to disguise his location.

The Russian president has established identical offices in multiple locations, all furnished and decorated the same in every detail, including matching desks and wall hangings, according to Gleb Karakulov, a former captain in his protective service who defected last year. Official reports have sometimes described him as being in one place when he was actually somewhere else, Mr. Karakulov told a London-based opposition news outlet, the Dossier Center.

Mr. Putin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, told reporters that at the time of the explosions on Wednesday Mr. Putin was at his sprawling compound in the elite suburb of Novo-Ogaryovo, along the Moscow River. Russian news media reports have suggested that, since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, he has spent much of his time there or at another spread northeast of Moscow, near Lake Valdai.

Mr. Peskov declined to say when the president would return to the Kremlin, telling a state-run news agency, “We’ll let you know in due time.”

Reporting was contributed by Neil MacFarquhar, Marc Santora, Riley Mellen, Edward Wong, Johanna Lemola, Courtney Brooks, Ivan Nechepurenko and Matthew Mpoke Bigg.

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