

WORLD

Putin swaps desk for wilderness

Russians treated to images of leader enjoying rugged countryside for his 67th birthday

By REN QI in Moscow
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Vladimir Putin marked his 67th birthday this week with a hike in the Siberian wilderness — an annual treat for the outdoors-loving Russian president.

In photos and video footage released by the Kremlin, Putin is seen taking in the rugged countryside with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. In the images, Russians see Putin picking wild mushrooms near a spot overlooking the banks of the Yenisei River and the forested mountains of southern Siberia. The setting is the Tuva region near the border with Mongolia.

Putin is seen climbing over the hills with a large stick in hand, and cruising around in an off-road vehicle with some other top officials for a spell of rest and relaxation.

Russian television also broadcast parts of Putin's trip, showing the adventure-loving leader hiking to a cliff edge and then pausing to take in the view of the Yenisei River below.

During one pit stop, Shoigu uncovers a berry bush. "Plant it in the Moscow region. You can plant it at your dacha there," Putin tells his minister, referring to the country retreats enjoyed by many Russians.

At another resting place, the pair make a camp fire and eat while looking over the vast expanse and the Yenisei River.

They ascend to nearly 6,500 feet (1,981 meters), according to the TASS news agency, and Putin says: "High above the clouds — much higher than the clouds."

The video and photos of Putin's birthday hike have been reposted



Russian President Vladimir Putin is seen with a mushroom he picked during his holiday in the Siberian countryside in Russia on Monday. ALEXEI DRUZHININ / KREMLIN VIA REUTERS

by many Russians on Vk, a popular social network in the country.

"Putin is a wise man. Being in nature is the best therapy for a stressful life as the leader of a great nation like Russia," a Russian man with the user name LVPN posted.

Alina Poskina, who works in a supermarket in Moscow, notes that Putin is keeping himself in good shape.

"Love to see him spending time in beautiful surroundings. He has time for nature and all its inhabitants. Never seen any other president connecting with nature's wilderness like him, ever," she posts.

The president's "macho jaunts" are renowned for displays of vigor, including his riding shirtless on horseback in 2009 and showing off his butterfly stroke in a frigid lake in 2017.

This year is no different for the interest shown by US and British

media, such as CNN, The Week UK magazine and The Telegraph. It was noted that in 2019 the president "chose to keep his chest under his clothes on this occasion" in the "macho images".

Natalia Muravieva, director of Moscow's Academy of Communications and Information, said Putin knows how to cultivate his image on the domestic and international stages.

A strong image

Gregory Feifer, the director of the Institute of Current World Affairs at the David Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, shares this view. He adds that the Kremlin has been trying to build a strong image of Putin, while also being sensitive about possible negative portrayals in Western media.

Putin didn't always manage to have some private time for his birth-

day. When asked in an earlier interview about his most memorable birthday, Putin recalled his 61st birthday that took place in 2013 at the APEC meeting in Bali, Indonesia.

Putin said he was surprised at the sight of Chinese President Xi Jinping coming to present him with a birthday cake, before sharing a toast with vodka.

Xi also joined the Asia-Pacific leaders in singing "happy birthday" to Putin while the then-president of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, strummed along on a guitar.

"I had never established such close relations or made such arrangements with any foreign colleague in the way I did with President Xi at that time," Putin said.

Putin called Xi a "reliable partner and good friend" in the interview.

"Perhaps President Xi is the only national leader who has celebrated my birthday with me," Putin said.

Kurds mobilize in Syria as Turkey poised for attack

By LIU XUAN
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Syrian Kurds on Wednesday called on civilians to help defend their territory against Turkey, after the Turkish forces said they were poised to cross into Syria "shortly".

The Kurdish administration in northeastern Syria asked the residents to defend the region against a Turkish assault believed to be imminent, according to the Agence France-Presse.

"We announce three days of general mobilization in northern and eastern Syria," the administration said in a statement, urging all civilians to "head to the border with Turkey to fulfill their duty".

The local authority, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, called on the international community to live up to its responsibilities as "a humanitarian catastrophe might befall our people" in northeastern Syria.

US President Donald Trump abruptly announced on Sunday that the US military "will not support or be involved in" an expected military operation by Turkey in northern Syria, and US forces "would no longer be in the immediate area".

Fahrettin Altun, communication director for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said on Wednesday that fighters from the Kurds' People's Protection Units, or YPG, could either defect to Turkey or Ankara would have to "stop them from disrupting" Turkey's struggle against the Islamic State militants, Reuters reported.

"Turkey has no ambition in northeastern Syria except to neutralize a long-standing threat against Turkish citizens and to liberate the local population from the yoke of armed thugs," Altun wrote in a Tuesday column for The Washington Post.

Turkey's Demiroren news agency said the Free Syrian Army, a Syrian rebel group, traveled from northwestern Syria to Turkey in preparation for the incursion in Syria's northeast.

The Turks will definitely seize the opportunity to cut the tie between the two groups of Kurds, because the US withdrawal from Syria left the issue to Turkey."

Li Weijian, researcher at Shanghai Institutes for International Studies

Meanwhile, the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, led by the YPG, said Turkish forces were already attacking near the border.

The Syrian Kurdish fighters are viewed as terrorists by Turkey as they are affiliated with Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has waged a 35-year-long battle for autonomy within Turkey.

The SDF forces control the east of the Euphrates River in northern Syria, and have been a key partner of the United States in the fight against the Islamic State group.

Li Weijian, a researcher at Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, said: "Ankara is afraid that the Kurds in Turkey will connect with the Syrian Kurds."

"The Turks will definitely seize the opportunity to cut the tie between the two groups of Kurds, because the US withdrawal from Syria left the issue to Turkey."

On Monday, Erdogan said US troops had started to withdraw after a phone call he had with Trump, adding that talks between Turkish and US officials on the matter would continue.

In Moscow, Russia Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Wednesday that Syria's territorial integrity must be preserved, Reuters reported.

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