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## Putin's Christmas present for West... a threat to Europe's gas supply, missiles for Iran and law to let him be president again

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Vladimir Putin has unveiled a triple whammy in his Christmas hamper for Britain and the West.

The Kremlin's seasonal greetings include:

- The threat of winter gas shortages for British consumers as supplies from Russia face disruption because of Putin's bitter dispute with Ukraine.
- Supplying surface-to-air missiles to Iran's fanatical Islamic regime amid Western concern at Tehran's nuclear ambitions.
- The approval by Moscow's rubber stamp parliament of constitutional changes which would allow Putin to make a comeback as president and serve for 12 years.

The moves from the Russian hardman came as protesters complaining about rises in car import tariffs were clubbed and kicked by riot police, in a move to discourage internal dissent against Kremlin policies as the worsening economic crisis begins to bite.

Putin made clear that he is ready to hit British and European gas consumers during the winter as part of his feud over unpaid debts and price hikes with pro-Western neighbours Ukraine.

Russia's gas pipeline - on which many EU countries including have become dependent - crosses Ukraine.

Western countries will react with dismay to any further breach another breach of Russia's previous pledge to be a reliable energy supplier to its old Cold War foes.

The Kremlin has previously ordered supplies to Ukraine to be switched off, which has a knock-on impact by hitting gas flowing to Western Europe.

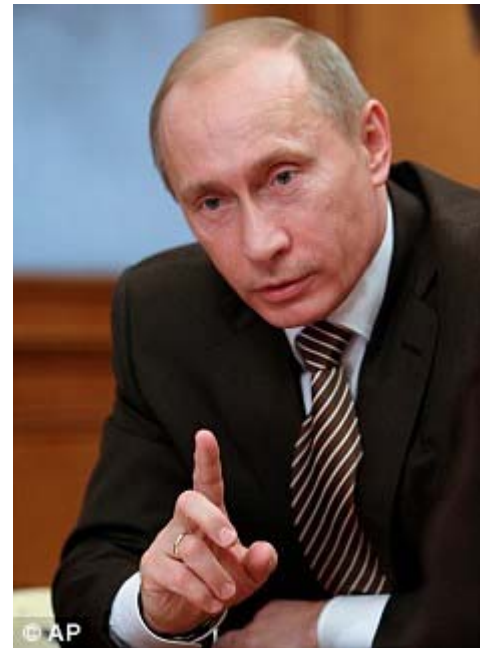
Deputy premier Viktor Zubkov, a close ally of Putin's, warned starkly he cannot rule out 'disruption of supply stability to Europe' during the rest of the winter.

'So far no solution has been found because of the non-constructive position of the Ukrainian side,' he said.

He claimed Ukraine had been handed loans by the International Monetary Fund which should have been used to pay off its debts to Russia for gas supplies, so guaranteeing supplies to the West.

Ukraine has claimed Moscow was playing politics with the issue, and said it would do nothing to disrupt supplies to Britain and the rest of the EU.

**In another move of deep concern to the West, Russia admitted it was supplying surface to air missiles to Tehran.**



**Christmas greeting: Vladimir Putin unveiled a triple whammy of uncertainty for the West**

Russia's state arms export agency confirmed the supply, but did not say whether they include the sophisticated long-range S-300 missiles.

Iranian media reported on Sunday that Russia had begun supplying the S-300s - a course of action Israel and the United States have aggressively opposed.



Closed taps: The EU depends on Russian gas that travels though Ukraine, above

Supplying the advanced missile systems to Iran would markedly change the military balance in the Middle East and the issue has been the subject of intense speculation and diplomatic wrangling for months.

Israel and the United States fear that, were Iran to possess S-300 missiles, it would use them to protect its nuclear facilities, including the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz or the country's first atomic power plant now under construction at Bushehr by Russian contractors.

That would make any potential military strike on the Iranian facilities much more difficult.

Meanwhile, the prospect of a return to the Kremlin by Putin - who this year stood down after completing the previous maximum presidential spell of two four-year terms - increased with the passing of a law to allow future presidents to serve longer.

The change means Putin could stage a comeback at the end of his handpicked loyal successor Dmitry Medvedev's current term in 2012, or sooner if Medvedev were to quit the post.

Future presidents will be allowed a maximum of two consecutive six year terms in office.

The move comes amid the first signs of the pain of economic turmoil hitting Russia.

Police in Vladivostok smashed up a protest about higher tariffs on car imports, beating them with truncheons and behaving like 'beasts', according to onlookers. TV crews had their footage destroyed.

The police action suggests Russians who protest about pain from the financial turmoil can expect harsh treatment from the authorities.