Putin backs Harris for US president, with wry smile

AFP – Russian President Vladimir Putin said Thursday he supported Kamala Harris in November's US presidential election, an apparent wry remark a day after the United States issued indictments accusing Moscow of vote interference.
Putin often comments on political and social issues in the United States, often in a mocking way.

He said last year that the US political system was "rotten" and that Washington could not lecture other countries about democracy.

US officials have repeatedly warned of efforts by foreign powers to meddle in the upcoming US election, accusing Moscow of seeking to influence US ballots dating back to the 2016 contest between Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton.

"Firstly, (US President Joe) Biden recommended all his supporters support Mrs Harris," Putin said during a question and answer session at Russia's Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok.

Biden withdrew from the race in July amid concerns about his age and health, endorsing Vice President Harris to top the Democratic Party's ticket.

"Here, we are going to do that too, we're going to support her," Putin told the audience, with a wry smile.

"She laughs so contagiously that it shows that everything is fine with her," the Russian leader said.

"(Former US President Donald) Trump has imposed as many sanctions on Russia as any president has ever imposed before, and if Harris is doing well, perhaps she will refrain from such actions."

In February, Putin backed Biden over Trump, calling the current president more “predictable”. The White House called on Putin to “stay out” of US elections in response.

– ‘Information campaign’ –

Trump has said he will end the Ukraine conflict within “24 hours” if he is re-elected and has praised Putin as a “very smart cookie” who had repeatedly outsmarted the United States.

Putin said in July that he took Trump’s comments about bringing a quick end to the fighting “quite seriously”, and denounced the former real-estate magnate’s convictions in the US as “persecution”.

Both leaders’ comments have sparked suspicion Putin would be more sympathetic to a Trump presidency, but the Kremlin has insisted whoever wins will make no difference to the Ukraine conflict.

Putin’s comments came a day after the United States indicted two employees of state-run Russian news network RT and slapped sanctions on its top editors.

The 10 individuals and two entities sanctioned by the US Treasury Department included RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan and her deputy Elizaveta Brodskaia.

Washington accused them of trying to influence the upcoming US ballot, an accusation that the Russian foreign ministry denounced as false.

“It is an obvious operation, an information campaign… that was long prepared and that is needed ahead of the last stage of the electoral cycle,” foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told state news agency RIA Novosti.

She added that “of course, (a response) is being prepared”, warning that it will be harsh and that it will make “everyone shudder.”

Most US media have downsized or pulled their staff from Russia since Moscow launched its Ukraine offensive amid laws targeting independent reporting on the conflict.

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