

Vladimir Putin tells our correspondent that he is Gandhi's true heir and warns against hypocrisy on human rights

In four hours at his country residence, Vladimir Putin talked at length about his desire for cooperation with other countries but blamed them for provoking conflict, attacked them for abuses of human rights and democratic freedoms, and gave not an inch on the clashes between Russia and the West.

"I am not President of the Russian Federation to bring our country to the brink of catastrophe, on the contrary," he said at the start of an interview on Friday night that continued until nearly midnight.

"Of course, I am a pure and absolute democrat," he said. "But you know what the problem is – not a problem, a real tragedy – that I am alone. There are no such pure democrats in the world. Since Mahatma Gandhi, there has been no one."

The Kremlin had summoned a newspaper from each of the G8 countries – Britain, the US, Russia, Japan, Canada, Italy, France and Germany – and employed an international public relations company to "put Russia's message across" before the annual summit, which begins on Wednesday in Heiligendamm, Germany. The Novo Ogarevo residence is where Mr Putin retreats most evenings; his cavalcade, with four outriders, can cover the eight miles in minutes, along a highway lined with new Ralph Lauren and Prada boutiques, but for ordinary commuters in Moscow's immobile traffic it would take two hours.

The two-storey lemon-and-white villa is in a claustrophobic setting, behind steel gates embossed with Russian eagles, in a tiny clearing among 90ft birch and fir trees. Inside, the newly refurbished rooms are of immaculate blandness – grey-green rugs, reproduction walnut furniture, peach-coloured drapes and picture lights illuminating empty walls, like a John Lewis showroom of unwanted items after the winter sale.

A Russian television crew knocked balls around the pool table under a screen showing a gangster film of unremitting mutilation as the delay for the scheduled interview stretched to two hours. The Kremlin press squad declared that everyone should prepare for a surprise dinner that the President would host to show his friendliness – and by the way, his remarks would be under embargo and not publishable until Monday.

It is not often, these days, that media management is so poor that it warrants comment, but the Kremlin, having gone to such lengths to stage the audience with the President, then threw away, in that reflex of control, the pages of newsprint cleared by editors in seven countries to receive his words. The man from Nikkei let out a long exhalation of disbelief; the Globe and Mail slumped into a leatherette swivel chair to break the news to Toronto; Le Figaro fixedly studied a crystallised fruit pinched between thumb and forefinger.

"You can't phone the White House on Sunday," said a Kremlin press apparatchik, incredulous that any other leader might overtake Mr Putin in the competition for the airwaves, apparently ignorant of the Bush Administration's round-the-clock advocacy or the sour tenacity of the Blair press machine even in its fading hours.

For all the trappings of hospitality, Mr Putin's message, when finally delivered, was uncompromising on all the fronts that threaten to scupper the G8 meeting: not just the US plans for missile defence, but Iran, Kosovo, human rights, protection for foreign investors and Nato expansion.

Mr Putin listened to questions intently, scratching the thin hair on the back of his head, then gave five-minute answers, citing figures for oil contracts, weapons systems and fish exports without hesitation, with all President Clinton's command of detail but without the Clinton smile or mantra that the world is a hopeful place. He is short – about 5ft 7in – but disproportionately broad-shouldered, more tanned than the pallor of the usual photographs and favours direct eye-contact. When President Bush remarked that he had looked into Mr Putin's eyes and seen his soul, he may not have been given the choice.

Mr Putin argued that "an arms race is unfolding", but blamed the US for starting it by quitting the 1972 AntiBallistic Missile Treaty in 2002, planning to deploy missiles in outer space and developing smaller nuclear weapons. He cautioned that "we do not want to use our resources" for an arms race and that "we will find an asymmetric answer", pointing missiles at Europe or declining to cut conventional forces near Europe. "Of course, we are returning to that time" when Russian missiles were aimed directly at Europe, he said. Nor did he offer hopes of gentler treatment for Russia's neighbours with whom he has picked recent fights.

"For 15 years we have been subsidising the former Soviet Republic with cheap energy," he said. "What is the logic?" He had no objections to eventual European Union membership for Ukraine – where Russia cut off gas supplies in January last year in a row about pricing – but he attacked the notion of Ukraine joining Nato. He recalled an old joke about Erich Honecker, the last East German leader – you could tell which phone on his desk had the direct line to Moscow because it was the one with only an earpiece. "This is the way that Nato functions," he said, "except that the phone is connected to Washington."

He dismissed as "another piece of nonsense" suggestions that Russia should be thrown out of the G8 for failing to improve democracy as it promised when it was made a member in 1998. "Let us not be hypocritical on human rights and democratic freedoms," he said in a swipe at other countries, which is his favourite rebuttal technique. "Let us look what is happening in North America. It is horrible – torture, the homeless, Guantanamo, detention without normal court proceedings." In Europe, he said, "we can see violence against demonstrators, the use of gas to disperse rallies".

He has regularly acknowledged “certain miscalculations”, and the indisputable point that corruption “is one of the sore spots troubling everything”. But he baldly denied that he had curtailed the freedom of expression, despite recent crackdowns on the media and demonstrations. “If people want to express disagreement, they should have that right. But they should not impede people going to work, normal urban life – then the Government must take measures to restore order.” Given the rise of digital television and the internet, he argued, “even if we wanted to control all of that, it would be impossible”.

He thanked Tony Blair for a “cordial welcome” to Britain; in March 2000, in a visit criticised at the time as prematurely friendly, the Prime Minister was one of the first leaders to call on Mr Putin, when he was still acting-president. But that does not, it seems, translate into concessions on the Litvinenko case, and Mr Putin also said, in effect, that he had been looking for a reason to revoke the exploration licence originally granted to Shell.

“Did you see the initial agreement?” he asked. “It was a colonial agreement that had nothing in the interests of the Russian Federation. A real zero.” He added that “if our partners [Shell] had honoured their commitments then we would have had no chance of remedying the situation but it was their fault that they violated our environmental legislation.”

In the case of TNK-BP, the British energy company’s 50 per cent owned Russian joint venture, which is waiting to hear the fate of a \$20 billion (£10 billion) licence, he said: “They have not met their commitments. They knew about the possible difficulties and they decided to buy the licence anyway.”

Calling Gordon Brown “a high-class specialist” – a compliment from one technocrat to another – he said: “I hope that if he is the head of the British Government, then all the positive achievements [in Russian-British relations] will be recognised and extended.”

In Russia, unlike the Labour Party, he said, the next president would be chosen “by the people”. He insisted that “my term is over”, repeating his commitment to step down next March. He retains effective power, many analysts believe, to tip the scales in favour of a chosen successor from the current field of half a dozen contenders; he remarked, in one of the few jokes of the evening, that Gordon Brown was not eligible.

Many have speculated that after one term out of the Kremlin, as obliged by the Constitution, he might want to return. He said that after March “I know that I will be working. But where, I cannot say”; many have surmised that he will return to his power base in St Petersburg.

He added that, at 54, “I have not reached my retirement age and it would be silly to sit at home without doing anything”. His wife is contemplating the end of his presidency “without any regret”, as are his children, he said. The presidency “is a burden on the family which does not give them the compensations” of the office itself. “My wife is a philologist” – well occupied studying languages and the humanities, he said. “I do not expect any problems to appear there,” he added, with the air of a man used to keeping an eye on every front.

Throughout the dinner, he had ignored the plates put in front of him: carpaccio of sea bass with black caviar, crab gazpacho, turbot with asparagus. His aides waited 20 minutes for him to start before nervously lifting their own forks. He ignored the wine, taking only three sips of water; Western officials say he never takes the “bathroom breaks” that punctuate the world’s diplomatic marathons. Only when the final course of “strawberry soup” arrived did he show awareness of the food’s existence, dunking the ball of ice-cream in the liqueur for emphasis as he spoke, and then ferrying the tiny wild strawberries to his mouth as if they were the only sustenance he had been offered all evening.

As his aides told him delicately that it was approaching midnight, he joked to the table: “Is it I who is torturing you?” The Japanese correspondent asked why Russia had banned the export of crabs to his country and Mr Putin, reluctant to relinquish the chance of a final, technical answer, acknowledged “with deep regret” Russian smuggling but chided Japan for fishing so intensively so that “in parts of the ocean, there is nothing left”.

He concluded: “I love sushi myself so I have a stake in this.” That gesture towards common tastes might win a smile in Japan, but it would not be a wise line to try in London. Seven years after Mr Blair’s enthusiastic first visit, murder by sushi is only one of the enduring causes of suspicion between Britain and Mr Putin’s Russia.

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