

which President Putin staged for a record \$50 billion to boost his popularity in Russia and in the world, Putin quickly shed the garb of a successful master of ceremonies and sent his troops to reclaim and illegally annex Crimea, then trump up a referendum in an attempt to justify this annexation.

With his immediate mobilization of the Russian military to try to tamp down calls for democracy in Ukraine, Putin planned to send a signal to Russian citizens and the world that he remained popular and strong in the face of growing calls from protesters in Ukraine for pro-Russian President Yanukovich to step down.

But Putin's goal to maintain his popularity through military force failed. Although Putin temporarily conjured up nationalist sentiment in Russia with his annexation of Ukraine, polls show that the majority of Russian citizens oppose sending Russian troops to fight in Ukraine, diminishing his popularity at home.

Meanwhile, Putin continued to ignore, with impunity, calls by the United States and Europe to reverse the illegal annexation of Crimea and remove Russian military forces. Not only did Putin refuse to withdraw forces from those countries or reverse Crimea's annexation, he armed pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine with Russian surface-to-air missiles, which downed a civilian airliner and killed nearly 300 passengers and crew, to the horror of the United States and Western Europe, just after the Sochi Olympics.

Less than 3 months ago on this floor, in early December 2014, I underlined my deep concerns, shared by my constituents, about Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. I appreciate your overwhelming support of H. Res. 758 condemning Russian aggression as a violation of international law and a breach of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

However, as could be expected, Putin did not listen to us or our allies. Just a month later, in January of 2015, Russian troops reengaged with Ukrainian forces in the Donbass region of Ukraine, breaking the cease-fire protocol signed in Minsk in September of 2014.

Although the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany agreed to reinstate a cease-fire on February 12 of this year, Russian forces violated the agreement within days, attacking a railway hub in Ukraine and threatening other strategic cities. Russia's inability to honor a cease-fire underlines the importance of expanding the scope of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine, including the provision of lethal military weapons.

Putin and his advisers have consistently denied that economic sanctions have hurt Russia, adding that the drop in the price of oil has resulted in plunging Russia's GDP and lowering the standard of living in Russia.

In addition to suffering economically, Russians have enjoyed no freedom of expression under Putin's rule. Such denial of basic human freedoms await the citizens of Ukraine should Russian aggression continue.

The latest travesty proving Putin's stifling of dissent to his authoritarian rule is the "unexplained" gunning down of prominent and popular opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in front of the Kremlin just 36 hours before a rally he had planned to lead to protest corruption and direct military involvement in Ukraine. Not only was Nemtsov a threat to Putin, he was fearless. He exposed the truth of Putin's rule, his corrupt practices, and the fraudulent elections he held in 2011 and 2012 that allowed him to return to the presidency. Former Prime Minister Kasyanov stated that there was only one explanation for the murder: "He was shot for telling the truth."

The events over the past year have made clear our path forward. We must convince the administration to change U.S. policy toward Russia. Putin's aggression in Ukraine and violation of the most recent cease-fire are linked to the assassination and are directing people's attention away from Russian corruption and authoritarianism and toward an external threat of democracy.

Mr. Speaker, the United States must work to restore the country's territorial integrity and ensure Russian military forces are removed from sovereign nations. We must convince our President that Putin's continuation of a war in Ukraine is a desperate attempt to divert attention.

I also call on Russia to release Nadiya Savchenko, the Ukrainian Air Force pilot who remains a prisoner in Russia. And I call on the administration and Congress to fund lethal military assistance to the Ukrainian Government.

THE REPUBLICAN BUDGET

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentlewoman from Illinois (Mrs. BUSTOS) for 5 minutes.

Mrs. BUSTOS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in opposition of the anti-middle class budget introduced yesterday by the House Republicans.

I view a budget as a statement of priorities. Where we allocate our resources is a clear demonstration that we value our priorities as a nation. This budget moves the middle class backward, hurts families across my region, the State of Illinois, and in our Nation.

Their budget makes deep cuts to investments in education, such as Pell grants. I view education as a long-term down payment not only for the lives of individual students and families, but for the future of our country.

Last week, I toured the region of our State that I am privileged to represent, and I spoke with community college students about programs that help

make college affordable and accessible to them. I spoke with a young lady named Annalea, who attends Spoon River College in Canton, Illinois.

Annalea is one of eight children in her family. She has been raised by a single mother. Her father was addicted to drugs and left their family in debt. She is a full-time community college student and also works 38 hours a week as a cashier at a local grocery store. Her family relies on her income to help make ends meet. She depends on Pell grants and student loans to finance her education, which she knows is a path for a better life ahead.

Annalea is studying psychology so she can one day work as a school psychologist and help other students with the same kind of problems that she has had to go through herself. She knows that access to education is a key pathway to success for her and other students in our region, throughout our State and throughout our Nation. She wants to give back to the community that has given her an opportunity to move beyond the circumstances in which she was born.

Mr. Speaker, we need to invest in students like Annalea and the future of our communities, not slash spending on our young people's futures. Let's stop pulling the rug from underneath our students and saddling them with a lifetime of debt. We need a budget that invests in working families and in the middle class and creates opportunity for all to succeed in today's economy.

That is why I am leading what I would call a commonsense approach to give more flexibility to Pell grant recipients so students can take advantage of this program year round. Many of those who would benefit most are nontraditional students who want to complete their courses faster so they can get back into the workforce and also with smaller student loan debt.

Mr. Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues, both Democrats and Republicans, to join with me and support our young people, our students, and the economic well-being of our communities by opposing these shortsighted cuts to investments in our young people.

THE LAND ACQUISITION TO CUT NATIONAL DEBT

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. HOLDING). The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Nevada (Mr. HARDY) for 5 minutes.

Mr. HARDY. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak on a bill that I have just introduced, my first as a Member of this body.

The Land Acquisition to cut the National Debt, or LAND Act, is a commonsense piece of legislation that would prohibit the Secretary of the Interior from using Federal dollars to purchase land, resulting in a net increase in acreage under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and the Bureau of

Land Management, unless the Federal budget is balanced for the year in which the land would be purchased. The same would go for the Secretary of Agriculture. Unless the Federal budget for the given year is balanced, no net increase in the land acreage may be included in the National Forest system.

Now, Mr. Speaker, some in this body may wonder why I have chosen to take up this charge in the 114th Congress. For my friends on both sides of the aisle, many of whom may not be too familiar with life out West, let me give you some background.

Just before I arrived in Washington, the national debt was over \$18 trillion. As a former small business owner, the Federal Government's spendthrift habits and utter disregard for the American taxpayer's hard-earned dollars continues to frustrate me today. Like countless Nevadans, it pains me to watch as we saddle our grandchildren with such an unsustainable debt burden, borrowing against the very future we are responsible for providing them.

Now, Mr. Speaker, my father always said: Don't come to me with a problem unless you have a solution to fix it. I don't pretend to have all the answers on the biggest issues facing this government and this country, but I do bring the private sector, Western sensibility to tackling the problem before we get too far out of hand. That is why I am introducing the LAND Act.

Simply put, the bill tells the Federal Government that responsibly and efficiently managing the 640 million acres of land it already controls must be a higher priority than acquiring even more private, State, and tribal lands. Think about that number for a moment, Mr. Speaker: 640 million acres. That is roughly one-third of the United States. And on those acres that the Federal bureaucracy has kept within its iron grip, there is currently existing an estimated deferred maintenance backlog of \$23 billion—that is with a B.

So what does that tell the American people, Mr. Speaker? It tells them that the Federal Government has bitten off more than it can chew, and it cannot be trusted to serve as a responsible steward of even more of our lands and resources.

Mr. Speaker, I am a Nevadan. The Federal Government controls more than 81 percent of my State, and I think I speak for most of my constituents when I say enough is enough. It boggles the mind to think that each of the 640 million acres the Federal Government controls is too valuable to be parted with in order to improve overall management, let alone the fact that the Feds want to acquire even more land on top of an already embarrassing maintenance backlog.

The Departments of the Interior and Agriculture like to tout how important land acquisition is for conserving species, providing spaces for recreation, and preserving culturally significant sites. My bill would allow them to continue to acquire land as a tool for these

purposes, but it would require them to focus their efforts on lands that truly need oversight by turning over unnecessary land to those who are best able to manage it—the States.

Mr. Speaker, let's be clear. The Department would have the opportunity to net more acreage under the aforementioned agencies' jurisdictions under my bill. That is, so long as the Federal budget is balanced for the given year. I do not believe this is too much to ask. Where I come from, in the private sector, if you don't have a successful business plan and you don't budget well, you go out of business.

We all know that the BLM, Fish and Wildlife, and the Park Service aren't going out of business anytime soon, much to my chagrin, but at least we can force them to behave more like one on the land they currently control by ensuring that our tax dollars no longer go towards more land for these agencies.

At a time when our debt continues to soar, we can ill afford irresponsible budgets like the Interior's \$13 billion request. We need to get our fiscal house in order, and we can help that process along by passing my bill. Let's allow State, local, and tribal governments to invest in developing their lands, creating jobs, and growing the economy instead of letting them fall in disrepair on the Federal Government's watch. Let's pass the LAND Act.

PUERTO RICO HOSPITAL MEDICARE REIMBURSEMENT EQUITY ACT AND THE PUERTO RICO MEDICARE PART B EQUITY ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Puerto Rico (Mr. PIERLUISI) for 5 minutes.

Mr. PIERLUISI. Mr. Speaker, today I am refiling two bills to eliminate disparities that Puerto Rico faces under the Federal Medicare program.

At the outset, I want to make clear that the only reason that I have to introduce these bills is because Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory. I look forward to the day when Puerto Rico becomes a U.S. State, when it is automatically treated fairly under Federal programs, and when the island's elected officials no longer need to implore Congress to treat our constituents the same as their fellow American citizens. That is why, 6 weeks ago, I introduced legislation that would provide for Puerto Rico's admission as a State once a majority of island voters affirm their desire for statehood in a federally sponsored vote. The bill already has 80 co-sponsors and strong bipartisan support.

The first bill I am filing today involves Medicare part A, which covers inpatient hospital services. The Federal Government reimburses hospitals who admit Medicare patients under a system known as the inpatient prospective payment system. The payment made to the hospital is intended to cover the operating and capital costs

that a hospital incurs in furnishing care. Each hospital is paid a base rate, which can then be adjusted upwards based on a variety of factors.

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Every hospital in the States, whether in New York City or rural Alaska, is paid the same base rate, about \$5,870. In Puerto Rico, however, hospitals are paid a base rate that is just over \$5,000, about 14 percent lower than the base rate for stateside hospitals.

This adversely affects patient care in Puerto Rico and the financial stability of island hospitals. The American Hospital Association has endorsed my legislation to eliminate this unprincipled disparity, and I urge my colleagues in Congress to enact it into law.

The second bill I am filing today involves Medicare part B, which covers doctors' services and outpatient hospital services. Puerto Rico is the only U.S. jurisdiction where individuals who become eligible for part A are not automatically enrolled in part B, but rather must opt in to receive part B coverage.

Individuals who do not enroll in part B during the 7-month initial enrollment period, which begins several months before they turn 65 and ends several months after they turn 65, are required to pay a late enrollment penalty. The penalty is significant and lasts for as long as that individual receives Medicare.

This system has operated to Puerto Rico's detriment. There are tens of thousands of seniors on the island who enrolled late in part B, and each year, they pay millions of dollars in late penalties to the Federal Government.

There are also over 100,000 seniors in Puerto Rico who are enrolled in part A but not in part B. When those individuals seek to enroll in part B in the future, they, too, will be required to pay lifetime penalties.

I am working to address this issue on both the administrative and the legislative front. I persuaded the Federal Government to improve the written materials they make available to island seniors so that they are better informed about the part B enrollment period and the financial consequences of late enrollment.

In addition, I am refiling legislation today that would convert Puerto Rico from the Nation's only opt-in jurisdiction to an opt-out jurisdiction, just like every other U.S. State and territory.

My bill would also reduce the late penalties now being paid by Puerto Rico seniors who enrolled late and authorize a special enrollment period during which island seniors who do not have part B could enroll on favorable terms.

I urge my colleagues to support the bills I am filing today. Until the day that Puerto Rico becomes a State and is treated equally as a matter of course, I will continue to fight for fair treatment for my constituents under all Federal health programs.