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Putin Belittles Political Opposition

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin disparaged Russian dissidents in crude street language in an interview Monday and said they would keep getting beaten if they kept holding unauthorized rallies.

"What's good about the contemporary world?" Putin told Kommersant. "You can say something around the corner from a public toilet and the whole world will hear because all the television cameras will be there."

Opposition leaders depend on international television exposure because they are blacklisted from Russian television and their protests are rarely aired.

Putin predicted that police would keep breaking up opposition protests unless the dissidents obtain official permission to rally — permission they are routinely denied in central Moscow.

"You will be beaten upside the head with a truncheon. And that's it," Putin declared.

Moscow city authorities this month abruptly fenced off Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, a popular rallying point for opposition protesters, saying they planned to build an underground car

park. Opposition groups said the previously unannounced car park plan was a ruse to stop protests.

Putin said he was unaware of the square's closure and reinforced this by using a popular Soviet Communist Party expression: "Believe me, I don't know about that. ... I give you my honest word as a party member."

Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov said the interview showed Putin to be "dishonest, ignorant and evil."

"It's clear that the call to beat your own people, moreover those who are unarmed and not showing any resistance, is a crime," Nemtsov wrote in his blog.

Putin has never shown much tolerance for dissent. For much of the past decade, when he was president, the government cracked down on opposition leaders and increased government control of the media. Now as prime minister, Putin still wields tremendous influence over policy, despite the presence of President Dmitry Medvedev. Putin has also been coy over whether he will run in the 2012 presidential election.

In the Kommersant interview, Putin hinted that he would return to the presidency in 2012 for six more years.

Asked whether the 2012 presidential election did not worry him because he had already decided it, Putin replied: "No, it interests me like ... I wanted to say like everyone, but in fact more than everyone else. But I don't want to make a fetish out of it."

Putin's remarks to journalist Andrei Kolesnikov — who conducted the interview during a 180-kilometer drive in Putin's bright yellow Lada Kalina car between Khabarovsk and Chita in the Far East — were immediately seized upon by some Moscow commentators as further evidence that he would return to the Kremlin.

Ekho Moskvy radio began polling listeners on whether they backed another Putin presidency.

Some 86 percent said "no," a result that reflected the station's Moscow middle-class audience.

Putin also said U.S. President Barack Obama seemed sincere in his desire to improve Moscow-Washington relations, despite U.S. policies that appeared more hostile.

In separate remarks on Monday to Russian reporters, Putin praised Medvedev's conduct of Russia's foreign policy, which he said was just as strong as its domestic policy.

"I am tired of dealing with foreign policy," Putin said. "Dmitry Anatolyevich [Medvedev] is doing this work well. Why butt in? It's not a hobby."

Putin said he and Medvedev frequently discussed foreign policy but claimed that the decisions were always left to Medvedev and dismissed as "blabber" the notion that he was still running the country.

Putin also said the two men were discussing possible Cabinet changes.

"There are things that probably need to change" he remarked, before cautioning that a major shakeup could damage the government's effectiveness ahead of the elections.

In the Kommersant interview, Putin said imprisoned oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky deserved his punishment. Khodorkovsky, serving an eight-year sentence after being convicted of fraud and tax evasion, is now on trial on new charges that carry a sentence of up to 22 years.

Putin said he was surprised to learn of the second case against Khodorkovsky. That claim caused some wry amusement among Khodorkovsky's supporters, who say the legal assault against him was punishment for challenging Putin.

(Reuters, AP)

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