

Putin Opens Up to Larry King

By [Nabi Abdullaev](#)

December 02, 2010



Prime Minister Vladimir Putin recording the recent interview with CNN's Larry King on Tuesday. It aired on Wednesday in the United States. **Alexei Nikolsky**

Russia is ready to begin a new arms race if NATO fails to come to terms with Moscow over a joint missile shield in Europe, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said on CNN's "Larry King Live."

"Russia will be simply obliged to protect its own safety by different means," including new offensive weapons and nuclear missile systems, [Putin said](#), echoing President Dmitry Medvedev's warning to the United States in his state-of-the-nation address Tuesday.

Putin also downplayed tensions with Washington, habitually dodged the question of whether he would run for the presidency in 2012 and spoke about gay rights, tigers and his daughters. The hourlong interview was recorded Tuesday and broadcasted at 5 a.m. Moscow time Thursday.

"We [with Medvedev] have long ago decided between ourselves that we will make a coordinated decision about the 2012 election in the interests of the Russian people," said

Putin, who was making his second appearance on Larry King's show. He spoke to the U.S. television journalist in 2000, in his first year as president.

The prime minister dismissed claims about a lack of democracy and of Russia being ruled by the security services, comments attributed to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates in a recent WikiLeaks report.

Mocking Gates' past job as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, [Putin said](#): "If this is the best expert on democracy in the United States, then my congratulations."

Putin praised U.S. President Barack Obama for softening rhetoric about Russia and effectively postponing White House plans to build a missile shield in Europe.

"We won certain time to try implementing the plan proposed by President Medvedev in Lisbon," Putin said, referring to a proposal to create a joint missile shield with NATO. Medvedev made the proposal at the alliance's summit last month.

Putin also defended 10 Russian sleeper agents who were busted in the United States in June and later swapped for four Russians imprisoned on spy charges, saying the agents "deserve unconditional respect."

He maintained that "their activities had not done harm to U.S. interests" and that they were only to become operational "in crisis periods, say, in case of a breakup of the diplomatic relations."

"Thank God neither these people nor our other intelligence and special services officials were detected organizing secret prisons, abductions and using torture," Putin, a former Soviet spy, said in a dig aimed at recent U.S. intelligence scandals.

King did not bring up numerous allegations that Russian special services resort to those very tactics in the North Caucasus. Dozens of residents in the restive region have successfully sued Russia in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg for abduction and torture carried out by officials.

King also ignored the plight of former Yukos owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who awaits a new verdict this month in a politically charged case, as well as matters corruption or violation of civil liberties. The one exception was gay rights.

Putin said the Russian state was tolerant toward sexual minorities, but supports "processes that lead to childbearing" because of the dire demographical situation.

He also fielded several personal questions, admitting that he has warm personal feelings for former U.S. President George W. Bush. During the second presidential terms of Putin and Bush, relations between the countries sank to nearly Cold War lows.

Putin, [who spoke in Russian](#), said he was learning English by singing songs with his tutor and is already capable of grasping the meaning of "half-business" conversations.

Talking about his two daughters, about whom almost nothing is known, the prime minister said he keeps them out of the spotlight to avoid exposing them to terrorists.

Putin also spoke about his feelings of embarrassment at reliance on foreign assistance, which prompted him to join the global effort to protect tigers. The project culminated in a \$330 million campaign laid out in St. Petersburg last month.

"I once saw a television report about how American and Russian specialists' work in the Far East to protect tigers," Putin said. "I will not hide it, I felt shame that American partners have been helping our specialists in solving these problems."

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