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Tandem Always Watching, Putin Says

By Nabi Abdullaev

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A custodian washing the floor in a store at the Savyolovsky electronics market during Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's live call-in show on Thursday. **Igor Tabakov**

Russia is never abandoned by the watchful eye of one of its two rulers, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Thursday during a record Q&A marathon in which he lashed out at the opposition, called former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky a criminal, and denounced the intelligence officer who betrayed Russian agents to the United States as a "brute" and a "pig."

"We take turns sleeping," Putin said, answering a question about who runs the country when he and President Dmitry Medvedev are asleep.

Thursday's televised call-in show was Putin's ninth and the third during his stint as prime minister. It lasted a record 4 hours, 24 minutes, and the number of questions sent to the show's hotline exceeded 1,050,000, Putin's press service said.

Curiously, none of the 90 questions Putin picked concerned whether he would run for the presidency in 2012. Also, Medvedev's pet project of modernization never surfaced during the

show.

Answering the first question, on racial unrest in Moscow and other cities over the past week, Putin said the government should nip in the bud any demonstration of extremism.

Police have detained hundreds of nationalist and Caucasus youth to prevent clashes after protesters turned violent last Saturday at an unsanctioned Moscow rally staged in connection with the killing of a Slavic football fan during a brawl with Caucasus natives.

Putin blamed the police for the unrest, saying Moscow investigators should never have released three Caucasus suspects linked to the killing.

"How could this happen, that people implicated in the murder were set free?" Putin said, without naming anyone.

He urged the public not to let their respect for the police drop "below the ground level," and asked Russians living in Muslim provinces and Caucasus natives living in non-Muslim cities to respect the traditional culture of their surroundings.

"Our country is of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and some scholars say it is closer to Islam than to Catholicism," Putin added.

Asked by a caller when order would be re-established, Putin responded curtly: "We will do our best."

He also said he feels no shame for his country, but left the question of when Russia's pervasive corruption would stop unanswered.

Putin grew animated speaking about liberal opposition leaders who formed a coalition recently and linked them Boris Berezovsky, the Kremlin kingmaker of the late 1990s who now lives in self-exile in London.

"They were stealing in the 1990s along with Berezovsky and with those who are serving prison sentences now," he said, apparently hinting at Khodorkovsky. "Now they want to return and refill their pockets."

One of the coalition leaders, Mikhail Kasyanov, served as prime minister for four years during Putin's presidency, and Putin's rapid ascent to power is widely credited to Berezovsky.

"If we allow them to do this, they will not be satisfied by billions. They will sell off all of Russia," Putin said, adding that the opposition's main goal in staging rallies was to clash with the police.

Twice during the show Putin returned to his 2004 decision to abolish popular gubernatorial elections and replace them with de-facto presidential appointments. Putin called this method "optimal for our country" because it "takes into consideration the interests of the federal government," and he defended it as way to block criminals from gaining high office.

The reform is often criticized by civic activists as a trampling of democracy and harmful to residents because they can no longer hold governors accountable.

Putin dodged another sensitive question — about the use of flashing blue lights on the cars of senior government officials. The caller asked about several recent violent accidents involving cars with the flashing lights, and Putin said only that the traffic police should enforce the rules for all drivers.

Repeating disappointment over the disintegration of the Soviet Union that he voiced at the previous call-in show, Putin said no Russian statesman before Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had ever thought of separating Russia from Ukraine and Belarus.

Asked why Russia is waging a war of words against Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, who is running for re-election Sunday, Putin said he had never personally spoken against him, and that Russia supports the Belarussian economy to the tune of several billion dollars every year.

Medvedev lashed out at Lukashenko on his Internet blog recently for his refusal to recognize the independence of the Georgian separatist republics of Abkhazia and North Ossetia.

Putin once again played up the popular notion that he is Russia's good-luck talisman when a caller reminded him that Russia had received the right to hold the football World Cup in 2018.

"Are you really so lucky?" the caller asked.

"Yes," Putin said, to the applause of the studio audience.

Turning to a more serious problem, the recent exposure of police officers in criminal gangs in the towns of Kushchyovskaya and Gus-Khrustalny, Putin said the development showed the "failure of the whole system of law enforcement."

He said he hoped for "substantial changes" after the State Duma approves police reforms. The bill passed a first reading earlier this month.

A former KGB operative, Putin reserved his sharpest and most colorful language for a mole in the Foreign Intelligence Service who turned over information about a network of Russian sleeper agents in the United States to U.S. officials. Ten Russians were arrested there in June and subsequently exchanged for four Russians serving prison terms in Russia on espionage and high treason charges.

"The man betrayed his friends, comrades in arms, and the people who sacrificed their lives for the motherland!" Putin said, indignantly. "And here we have a brute who betrays such people! How can he look into the eyes of his children? Pig."

Putin would not name the man, saying only that the special departments of the intelligence services that used to kill traitors no longer exist.

Earlier media reports identified the mole as Colonel Alexander Poteyev and said he fled to the United States shortly before the spy arrests in June.

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