

Putin's Call-In Show To Air Amid Unrest

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin could break his silence on the protests that swept Russia following the State Duma elections on Dec. 4, which were tarnished by widespread fraud allegations, when he hosts his annual call-in show on Thursday.

Judging by the questions currently listed as "most asked" on the show's web site, this year's program will focus on bread-and-butter issues, such as pensions, housing and health care. But at least two visitors to the site asked Putin for his opinion on the protests, the largest of which brought tens of thousands of people to Bolotnaya Ploshchad in central Moscow on Saturday.

The show, which will be broadcast live at noon Thursday on television and radio, comes at a time of sagging approval ratings for Putin — 30 percent in a Levada poll in late November — and the United Russia party, which he heads without being a member.

Putin is nevertheless expected to win the presidential election in March despite the arrival of billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov into the field of candidates, which includes perennial losers

Gennady Zyuganov of the Communist Party (three failed presidential bids), Vladimir Zhirinovsky of the Liberal Democratic Party (four failed bids), and A Just Russia chief Sergei Mironov, who in 2004 urged voters to choose Putin over him.

Last year's show was notable for its length — more than four hours — and for a moment in which Putin signaled that jailed billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was then on trial for a second time on theft and money-laundering charges, would not be released.

"A thief should sit in jail," Putin said, quoting a well-known film. Two weeks later, Khodorkovsky was sentenced to an additional six years in prison. The sentence was later reduced by a year.

It is not clear how much room for spontaneity there will be on the live broadcast. A recent experiment with live television ended in embarrassment for the Kremlin when Putin was booed by mixed martial arts fans after a bout.

Questions can be submitted through the show's [web site](#), as well as by calling 8 800-200-40-40, or sending a text message to 0-40-40. Additional questions will come from the studio audience.

The Public Opinion Fund, a major polling agency, will no longer publish the results of its weekly studies for reasons it did not disclose, news reports said. The fund's most recent poll, conducted on Nov. 27, put Putin's approval rating at 54 percent.

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