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Putin Assails U.S. and Protesters

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Putin, top, at his call-in show on Thursday. A white ribbon at Saturday's rally that Putin mistook for a condom. **Alexei Nikolsky / Igor Tabakov**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin ridiculed opposition protesters, assailed the United States and hinted at further political reform in a traditional televised call-in show Thursday that bore all the hallmarks of a presidential campaign speech.

In the marathon show, lasting a record four hours and 36 minutes, Putin took some questions that would previously have been taboo on state television and said it was acceptable to disagree with his "regime." But overall he stuck to his narrative that protests were a dangerous source of instability.

The country has been rocked by unprecedented protests after the Dec. 4 State Duma elections, which opposition parties and observers say were rigged, culminating in a demonstration with some 50,000 participants on Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad last Saturday.

Putin, who is standing for a third presidential term next March, made his first public

comments about the weekend protest Thursday, rejecting a core demand for new elections and saying it was "normal" for losing parties to dislike election results.

"That is what the opposition lives for. It fights for power and is looking for any possibility to force out the [ruling] powers," he said.

Appearing to contradict harsh remarks in August 2010 when he denounced opposition protests as a "provocation" and said demonstrators deserved "to get hit on the head" by the police, Putin said the public display of dissent was a good thing. "If that is the outcome of the Putin regime, I am pleased," he replied to a question from Alexei Venediktov, editor-in-chief of Ekho Moskvy radio.

But Putin also derided Saturday's protesters by claiming that student participants were paid and were herded like cattle by their leaders. "To allow yourself to be humiliated like that is unacceptable," he said.

Opposition activists regularly accuse Putin's United Russia party of paying students and ferrying them to pro-Kremlin rallies. Putin's comments immediately triggered scathing criticism by bloggers.

Putin also reiterated a longstanding warning that protesters should not try to force a regime change like in Ukraine in 2004. "Color revolutions are special schemes to destabilize society," he said, adding that Russian opposition activists were trained under former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko.

In a bizarre twist, he also said he had thought that white ribbons worn by Saturday's protesters were condoms as part of an AIDS awareness campaign.

Later in the show, he accused unidentified Russians of working for foreign interests. "There are people who have Russian passports but work for the interests of a foreign state, for foreign money," he said.

Last week, he accused U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of instigating the first rash of protests after the elections. Days before the vote, he said nongovernmental organizations who accept foreign grants were traitors like Judas Iscariot.

But in a sign that he was keen to address his deteriorating public image, Putin took questions unheard of in the previous five editions of the carefully managed show. (Thursday's show lasted 10 minutes longer than last year's, setting a new record in length.)

An unidentified female caller from Murmansk asked why the country had no real opposition and why the Justice Ministry had refused registration to Mikhail Kasyanov's opposition People's Freedom Party, or Parnas.

Putin said the registration of "minor parties" might be liberalized if their access to television would be regulated at the same time.

He then went on to criticize Kasyanov, who served as prime minister during his first presidential term in 2000-04, for being so corrupt that liberal Cabinet members like Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref had asked for his dismissal. "They

said, 'We won't work with this crook — it's either him or us,'" Putin said, adding that he had let Kasyanov work four years because he had had no evidence of wrongdoing.

Before becoming prime minister, Kasyanov was dubbed by the national media as "Misha 2 percent" for the commissions he supposedly took for ignoring bribes and illegal business activities during his seven years at the Finance Ministry.

Kasyanov was fired in February 2004, a month before Putin's re-election as president, after he harshly criticized the state's legal assault on billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Kasyanov told Interfax on Thursday that Putin's remarks could be explained by his disappointment over the outcome of the Duma elections.

Another viewer sent a text message asking who the boos were directed at during Putin's appearance at a mixed martial arts fight last month.

"Maybe my face, which they always see on TV screens, caused a certain displeasure," Putin said.

But he added that this was just one possibility and that the boos, which he said he had not noticed himself, might also have been directed at U.S. fighter Jeff Monson, who lost the match against Russian Fedor Emelianenko, or by a feeling that the fight had been rigged.

Putin dismissed censorship fears after two people were fired in connection with Monday's publication by Kommersant Vlast magazine of a photo of a ballot carrying a handwritten crude insult about him.

He said the ballot was cast in London, and "we know who has gathered in London," he said. The city is home to prominent Putin critics like Boris Berezovsky and Yevgeny Chichvarkin.

Putin also hinted at softening one of his most disputed reforms by suggesting that governors could be elected again — but only from a list put forward by the Kremlin. He staunchly defended the 2004 abolition of gubernatorial elections, saying it had been his own idea. "I personally thought this up. Nobody advised me," he said, adding that the decision was justified because candidates obtained office "through semi-criminal local elites" in the 1990s.

But any notions of a softer Putin were crushed when he turned to foreign policy.

First, he lashed out at U.S. Senator John McCain, who wrote to Putin on Twitter amid the Duma protests that "the Arab Spring is coming to a neighborhood near you."

Putin suggested that McCain was "nuts" after fighting in the Vietnam War. "He has the blood of peaceful civilians on his hands, and he can't live without the kind of disgusting, repulsive scenes like the killing of [Libyan leader Moammar] Gadhafi," he said.

He said McCain had been kept in a pit for several years as a prisoner of war. "Anyone [in his place] would go nuts," he said.

McCain fired back immediately, quipping in a Twitter post: "Dear Vlad, is it something I said?"

In a more forceful jab at Washington, he later said that while Moscow wants to be an ally with the United States, "sometimes I think America does not need allies, it needs vassals."

Putin also reverted to his trademark nationalist tenor when he said that he was "not a fan" of foreigners adopting Russian children, after children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov mentioned the deaths of several Russian-born children in the United States.

Nationalism has been running high in domestic politics, especially since a rally by football fans descended into ethnic rioting last December.

The violence had been propelled by the killing of an ethnic Russian fan in a brawl with Caucasus natives. Putin said that accusations of ethnic Russian chauvinism were wrong because none of the last names of those implicated in the murder were Russian. "Let us not provoke the Russian man," he said.

Putin also dismissed some vigorous calls to fire cabinet ministers but promised a Cabinet reshuffle if he is elected president.

When Putin announced in September that he wanted to return to the Kremlin, he suggested that he would swap jobs with President Dmitry Medvedev. But Medvedev's name was notably absent from most of Thursday's show, with Putin mentioning his protege only once in relation to plans for a Eurasian Union.

He did, however, mention Alexei Kudrin, saying the former finance minister, whom Medvedev ousted this fall, was his friend and could return to the government. "Such people were needed and will be needed in past and future governments," he said.

Kudrin, who has spoken recently of forming a liberal party and suggested he might join the protests, criticized Putin in remarks carried by Interfax.

"I'd like Putin to propose some new approaches because United Russia's platform in the elections is incapable of clearing the challenges that the country is facing," Kudrin said.

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