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Putin Says Anti-Corruption Efforts Must Be Consistent

By Alexander Bratersky

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Putin listening to a question during his meeting with his official campaign representatives in Moscow on Monday. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

President Vladimir Putin spoke to supporters Monday about the recent wave of high-profile official corruption cases, saying they are not a "show-off campaign" but part of a systemic fight against government fraud.

Addressing a group of more than 500 of his official representatives who campaigned for him ahead of the presidential race in March, Putin also endorsed "gradual change" for the country instead of revolution and encouraged his audience to join his People's Front political group.

In a question-and-answer session, the audience of prominent cultural figures and civil servants from various regions asked Putin about both national issues and pet projects. For instance, former State Duma deputy and pilot Magomed Tolboyev asked about the development of civil aviation, and postal service trade union head Anatoly Nazeikin

inquired about support measures for postal workers.

Near the beginning of the session, writer Eduard Bagirov asked about the string of corruption cases announced by authorities in recent months, which included an inquiry that caused the firing of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov.

Putin corrected Bagirov when he called it a "campaign," saying it was not a campaign but "our policy of fighting corruption.

Bagirov then followed up using a question Putin himself made famous: "Where are the arrests, Vladimir Vladimirovich?"

The phrase echoed one Putin used in 2009 when publicly grilling law enforcement officials over an unsuccessful fight against smuggling.

Putin said that arrests "will be made" but that harsh punishment was not the point.

"The issue is not one of how tough the punishment is. The issue is its inevitability. That is most important. Any lawyer will tell you that," he said.

Bagirov's hint of skepticism was echoed by pro-Kremlin political expert Sergei Markov, who, after expressing his loyalty to the president, said "ordinary people" were not always satisfied with the results of the anti-corruption fight.

"House arrest in a 13-room apartment is not seen by people as an adequate reaction," Markov said, referring to the case of Serdyukov aide Yelena Vasilyeva, who was put under house arrest in her posh apartment in downtown Moscow.

Vasilyeva is a prime suspect in the embezzlement of millions of dollars at ministry supply agency Oboronservis, the case Putin cited in firing Serdyukov in early November.

While not mentioning Serdyukov by name, Putin said the corruption fight will continue.

"It is impossible to convict someone just because we believe the man has committed a crime if we were not able to collect evidence," Putin said, referring to the infamous purges by dictator Josef Stalin in 1937, an example Putin said must not be repeated.

Speaking about opposition sentiments in the country, Putin said he thought that a majority of Russians were not in favor of revolutions, which he said lead to "the killing of people and the destruction of the economic and social spheres."

"We've had enough of revolutions," he said.

He added that this feeling is shared by members of the protest movement, whom he described as "smart people in general."

His respectful comments about the political opposition were a sharp contrast to his prior remarks about protesters.

In December 2011, he humiliated members of the large-scale protest movement by saying on a live call-in show on national television that he thought their symbol, a white ribbon, was

a condom.

Putin also called on the meeting's participants to join the People's Front, a group of various civic organizations and small political parties created in 2011 to support his presidential election bid.

In October, Putin proposed that the front hold a congress in spring 2013 to transform it into a national public organization. But he said the front should not become a political party to allow for broader discussions with people holding a range of political views.

The People's Front is seen as an attempt to create a structure to support Putin that is different from the ruling United Russia party, which lost public support after an aggressive campaign against it by the opposition.

Responding to a question from Tolboyev, the former Duma deputy, Putin spoke favorably about the possibility of reinstating the Soviet-era Hero of Labor award.

The award's legacy is controversial, since it was given to both prominent inventors and scientists like Andrei Sakharov and aircraft designer Sergei Ilyushin and to some with less celebrated achievements.

Putin has said the meetings with his supporters should become regular. The crowd included a wide range of personalities, among them film director Nikita Mikhalkov, a staunch Putin ally, and television quiz show host Leonid Yakubovich.

Ahead of Monday's meeting, Putin's former campaign representatives met with senior members of the presidential administration, including Kremlin Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov and Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov.

Peskov urged them not to be afraid of being critical of the president.

"Who can give Putin better constructive criticism than you?" he said. "Not just nitpicking, but criticism."

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