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Putin Fields Questions in Nationwide Call-In Show (Blog)

By Irina Filatova

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The call-in show, which has been held since 2001, is one of Putin's favorite ways of communicating with the nation.

The Moscow Times ran a live blog of President Vladimir Putin's 11th televised call-in show, the first since he returned to the presidency last year. The show was broadcast on three federal TV channels — Channel One, Rossia 1 and Rossia 24 .

16:48: The call-in show has ended after almost five hours.

16:39: The show is ending on a series of more lighthearted questions. Sittel asked Putin whether he is happy. "That's a philosophical question, but I'm eternally grateful for my fate and that Russian citizens have trusted me to lead the country. That is my life. Whether that's enough, I don't know," Putin said.

16:33: The call-in show has just set a new record length, surpassing the duration of the 2011

show.

16:26: Putin's call-in show is approaching its closing stages, according to the show's hosts. For the final section, Putin is answering quickfire questions.

One such question concerned Putin's successor. “Do you consider [Defense Minister] Sergei Shoigu as your successor?” Maria Sittel asked Putin. “The Russian people will choose my successor,” Putin replied.

16:18: Call-in show moderator Maria Sittel read out a question submitted by text message: "When will all the money for the Skolkovo innovation center be stolen?"

Putin vowed that "any plundering of money will be prevented." Citing investigators, he said State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov, who is suspected of illegally obtaining $750,000 from the Skolkovo Foundation, might have not performed the lectures he was paid to give.

"I don't assert anything though," Putin said. He didn't mention Ponomaryov's name but said that if investigators are wrong and the deputy gave the lectures, he did a good job. "Let him continue performing lectures, although I don't know whether they're worth $750,000."

16:15: Commercial banks fuel risks in the economy by setting excessive interest rates, Putin said, adding that private lenders "are much too fond of their own benefits." He also pointed out that Cyprus is not always a safe place to invest.

16:08: Putin assessed the development of Russia's scientific infrastructure positively. He pointed out that Russia participates in many prominent international projects and provides scientific grants. "We have an intellectual services market, ... but it's difficult to promote it without government support," he said.

16:05: A call center representative interrupts the call-in show to inform viewers and listeners that over 2 million people have submitted questions for today's event. "An absolute record," she says.

15:49: Putin defended the fact that French actor Gerard Depardieu received fast-tracked Russian citizenship, while other foreigners wait years to become Russian citizens. The president described Depardieu as a special case owing to his career as an actor who has contributed to Russian culture, describing Depardieu as an “impulsive man.”

Putin then invited other foreigners from CIS countries and further afield to become Russian citizens. “If they are of a reproductive age, are well-educated and can adapt well to our culture, we are waiting for such people,” he said.

15:39: Russia has the potential to develop shale gas exploration, Putin said. "I don't think that we have slept through something here," he said. He pointed out that shale gas exploration is extremely costly and requires strict environmental protection measures.

15:19: Editor-in-chief of Nezavisimaya Gazeta Konstantin Remchukov asked the president about Russian-U.S. Relations and suggested finding a strategy to restore trust between the two sides, since the current situation recalls the Cold War.

Putin agreed with Remchukov that there is a coolness in Russia's relationship with Western countries, especially the United States. But he laid the blame on the U.S. side for escalating the tension.

"Did we approve this Magnitsky List? Why on earth did they do that?" he said. Canceling the Jackson-Vanik amendment after Russia's accession to the WTO was a good chance for the U.S. government to "forget everything from the Cold War era," Putin claimed. He called the Magnitsky List the U.S. government's effort to demonstrate that they are "the coolest," accusing the U.S. of an "imperialist" attitude to foreign policy. He said Russian-U.S. relations deteriorated from the invasion of Iraq.

15:00: Fending off claims that authorities are clamping down on free speech on the Russian Internet, Putin said: "What restrictions on the Internet? It's a free space, but society should be protected from pedophilia, child pornography, from sites promoting drug use and suicide. Such restrictions have been in developed countries for a long time."

14:55: Editor-in-chief of radio station Ekho Moskvy Alexei Venediktov asked Putin to comment on the Stalinist overtones of recent Kremlin policies, including harsh new NGO legislation and the show trials of Pussy Riot rockers.

"Both the Pussy Riot girls and those lads who desecrate soldiers' graves should answer before the law. We don't convict people for their political views but for breaking the law. The same is true of rallies, I think that people can and should organize them, but within the confines of the law," Putin said.

14:54: Answering a question about the embezzlement trial of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Putin said: "People fighting against corruption must be crystal clear, otherwise it's self-PR. But if a person has views different from those of the government, this doesn't mean that this person should be automatically brought to the courts or to prison. Incidentally, I told the General Prosecutor's Office and other agencies that everything should be objective [in the trial]."

14:35: The idea of introducing a luxury tax is a fair measure to boost social equality, Putin said. Work is in progress on a luxury car tax, but developing a tax on luxury property is more complicated, he said, calling cadastral evaluation of land a "hitch."

14:14: Responding to a complaint from a member of the audience that children at schools in Chelyabinsk have started attending school in hijabs, Putin said the head coverings were never traditional in Russia's Muslim republics and that they are "a display." "I think that we should consider returning to school uniforms," Putin concluded.

14:00: A Belgorod farmer complained that her region is facing losses as a result of Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization. The government subsidies help little, she said.

Joining the WTO doesn't mean that agriculture will stop developing, Putin replied. To diminish possible threats, a system of protective measures has been introduced. The government will provide 260 billion rubles in federal and regional funds this year to support agriculture. This is still below the limit of $9.5 billion Russia agreed with its WTO partners, Putin said.

13:48: But Putin was more critical of Chubais' political views. “Chubais says that he doesn't get involved in politics, but I know that he does, and in many ways he is my political opponent,” he said.

13:44: One of Putin's campaign representatives from the Perm region asked the head of state about the “excesses” in state technology corporation Rusnano and about when Anatoly Chubais, former deputy prime minister and current head of Rusnano, will be jailed. Putin replied that it's “always easy to take decisions with hindsight. It's obvious that these people had courage,” referring to Chubais' handling of privatization during Boris Yeltsin's presidency. The president did allege, however, that CIA agents served as consultants to Chubais in the wake of the Soviet collapse.

13:39: "You didn't switch to the new time, did you? Do you know on your collective farm that Lenin is dead?" Putin joked, when the farmer told him that he has stuck to winter time to milk his cows.

13:37: Answering a question from a farmer on the possible return to winter time, Putin said that the issue is within the Cabinet's competence. The move to permanent summer time was a controversial policy move overseen on former President Dmitry Medvedev's watch. "I don't think it's a case when the president should intervene," Putin said.

13:20: Commenting on the poor quality of roads in Russia, Putin said that the budget has sufficient funds for road construction. The size of the federal road fund, which is filled with funds from gasoline excise duties and transportation taxes, stands at over 400 billion rubles, while regional funds contain 455 billion rubles. Problems with roads are rather due to technical difficulties and a lack of proper public control, Putin said.

13:14: A call center representative announces on air that citizens have submitted over 2 million questions by phone, text message and on the call-in show's website.

12:58: “Russia is itself a victim of international terrorism,” Putin said, in response to a question about the Boston bombing suspects, both of whom are ethnic Chechens. The president said that world powers must unite forces to combat terrorism.

12:55: Putin said Berezovsky's family didn't need his permission for his burial in Russia, and he would have allowed it. “It's a family matter,” he said.

12:52: Putin confirmed he received two letters from self-exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky, who died in Britain in May, asking to return to Russia. Putin said Berezovsky admitted that he had made mistakes in his life, but Putin did not reply. “I never had a close relationship with Berezovsky,” he said.

12:50: Putin reiterated that state officials should deposit their funds in domestic bank accounts so as to not be dependent on foreign governments. Otherwise they should give up their positions, he said. "If they don't trust their own economy, what are they doing here?" he said.

12:47: On corruption, Putin said that “there is corruption everywhere. The question is how much corruption.” He said corruption harms Russia, and he will fight it just as resolutely as

inflation. More than 800 officials, including high-ranking ones, were sued over corruption last year, and this work will continue, Putin said.

12:40: Putin defended the investigation into corruption at the Defense Ministry, saying the inquiry is going ahead “objectively” and “will be carried through to the end.” But the head of state said authorities don't want to return to 1937, the year of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's Great Terror, adding that suspects in the Oboronservis case won't be sentenced just to please the public.

12:31: Putin reminded the audience that he regularly meets and consults with former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin in private. Asked whether he had offered government positions to Kudrin, Putin said “yes, but he refused.”

12:25: Putin said there is nothing surprising in Russia's economic slowdown, since the country was affected by the Eurozone debt crisis.

12:21: Putin made it clear that he has no intention of dismissing Education Minister Dmitry Livanov, who has been under pressure of a series of unpopular education reforms. The president defended government ministers, saying that the existing Cabinet has been working for less than a year. "People should be given a chance to realize their potential," Putin said.

12:19: Putin said that the "fundamental basis of Russia's economic policy will stay the same" moving forward and will focus on the needs of its citizens.

12:10: The business climate is improving in Russia, Putin said, citing international rankings, although he acknowledged that he "doesn't trust them very much."

12:07: Putin said he is satisfied with how his government is fulfilling the first orders he signed after being sworn in almost a year ago.

12:02: The show has started.

11:58: The call-in shows are typically notable for their length. Putin has set a new record for the show's length every year, surpassing the four-hour mark in 2009. The 2011 show lasted 4 ½ hours.

11:55: More than 1.5 million people have submitted questions for Putin's call-in show this year, according to the event's call center. The call center received more than 1 million phone calls and 300,000 text messages, while more than 100,000 questions were registered on the show's official website.

Call center staff told RIA-Novosti that the bulk of questions that Russians want to ask the president relate to utilities, corruption, public welfare, health care and rights issues.

Call center employees said: "economic, construction and transportation questions are much more frequent than political and social ones."

11:50: The call-in show, which has been held since 2001, is one of Putin's favorite ways of communicating with the nation. Last year, however, it was substituted by a large news conference.

The last show took place in December 2011 after disputed elections to the State Duma that kicked off the anti-Kremlin protest movement. During that show, Putin criticized the opposition movement and said he'd mistaken the opposition symbol — a white ribbon — for a condom.

A year earlier, Putin used the call-in platform to signal that jailed billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, 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. His sentence has since been cut.

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