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The Putins Announce They're Getting Divorced

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Putin with his wife, Lyudmila, giving a short interview to state TV on Thursday evening.

President Vladimir Putin appeared with his rarely seen wife Lyudmila in a TV interview on Thursday night to announce that after almost 30 years of marriage, they had decided to get divorced.

"It was a mutual decision," the president said on state-run Russia 24 television.

The surprise announcement came after years of speculation over the first couple's obscure relationship. Unlike many other world leaders and their wives, the pair barely ever traveled or even appeared in public together.

In the apparently planned but unscripted interview Thursday evening, Putin and his wife stood by themselves in the lobby of a Kremlin performance hall after watching the first act of a ballet together—a performance of "La Esmeralda," based on Victor Hugo's novel "The

Hunchback of Notre Dame"— and spoke to an off-camera interviewer for a total of about three minutes.

After the interviewer asked them their opinion of the ballet, she asked them about "rumors that they didn't live together."

"Is that true?" the interviewer asked.

After inhaling, Putin said: "It is."

"All my work is connected to being public. To being absolutely public. Some people like that, others don't. But there are some people for whom that is completely incompatible," Putin said, gesturing to Lyudmila.

"It truly was a mutual decision," Lyudmila Putina said. "Our marriage is over, since we practically never see each other."

"Our kids are grown up and each lives her own life. Things worked out such that each of us has his own life. I truly don't like being public, and flights are difficult for me. We practically never see each other."

Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, was terse with reporters on the news after the interview aired, saying the president's personal life "affects him only."

"He never made it public property," Peskov said, according to Komsomolskaya Pravda. "That's his principle, he has earned that right, and let's treat it with respect."

"It's no secret and everyone knows that he long ago devoted himself to the country, as pretentious as that may sound," Peskov told LifeNews.

Peskov also said that the Putins had still not formalized the divorce.

Vladimir Putin and Lyudmila Shkrebneva were married in 1983. From the very beginning of Putin's first presidency, his wife stayed out of the public eye, much to the frustration of a public used to the charismatic wives of former leaders Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev. In May 2000, five months after former President Boris Yeltsin named Putin his successor, Lyudmila had appeared in public less than half-a-dozen times and did not speak once.

He even quipped about her absence on a trip to Britain in April 2000, joking about U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair having brought his wife to St. Petersburg.

"[Blair] brought his spouse over here, whereas I am taking key ministers to London," Putin said.

Rumors regarding their marriage and Lyudmila Putina's place of residence have swirled ever since.

In Thursday's brief interview, Putin made a point of saying that the couple's two daughters, Yekaterina and Maria, who are also barely ever glimpsed in public, live in Russia, contrary to

occasional news reports and speculation that they live abroad with foreign boyfriends or husbands.

“Speaking about our children, we really love them, are very proud of them,” Putin said. “By the way, they got their education in Russia and live in Russia full-time. And Lyudmila Alexandrovna and I will remain close.”

Putin rarely answers questions about his relationship with his wife or about his children, telling reporters to leave them alone. The president has typically appeared in public with Lyudmila Putina a few times a year. They voted together last year when Putin was elected to a third term as president, and they answered census questions as a couple in 2010, sitting on a couch in matching beige outfits with Putin’s black Labrador, Koni.

Lyudmila Putina’s name also has appeared annually on the president’s income declaration, as is required by law. In 2011, she said she earned 443,000 rubles ($15,000), or about one-tenth her husband’s declared earnings. In Thursday’s interview, she said she was grateful that Putin continued to “support” her. It was unclear whether she meant financially or otherwise.

Tabloids have for years assumed that the couple was de facto split up and have linked Putin romantically to former gymnast and current State Duma Deputy from United Russia Alina Kabayeva.

In May 2009, newspapers reported that she had had a baby and suggested that Putin could be the father. Kabayeva denied the story, saying she wasn’t even pregnant. A few days after the reports, which Putin responded to by criticizing the reporters for having “snotty noses and erotic fantasies,” Putin was photographed with Lyudmila in a highly publicized appearance with Russian Orthodox Church head Patriarch Kirill.

Putina grew up in Kaliningrad. She was 21 and working as a stewardess when she met Putin on a blind date during a three-day trip to Leningrad. They dated for about three years before marrying. During that time, Lyudmila gave up her job and enrolled in Leningrad State University, eventually earning a graduate degree in modern languages.

After the couple married in 1983, they moved to Dresden in 1985, in what was then East Germany. Their first daughter, Maria, was born the same year, and Yekaterina was born a year later.

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