

Putin Prepares to Field Questions at Annual Call-In

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Russian President Vladimir Putin

President Vladimir Putin took a day off from public meetings Wednesday to prepare for his epic annual live call-in show Thursday, during which he will attempt to answer some of the more than 1.7 million questions that have been submitted, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists Wednesday.

“Judging by the questions, in general Russians want the president to pursue a more hard-line policy course, consistently directed at defending national interests,” Peskov told Interfax.

While preparing for the annual show, Putin usually “spends hours on the phone” and “receives information from ministries and agencies,” Peskov said, TASS news agency reported.

“This year there are significantly more questions about foreign policy: the possibility of a

confrontation with NATO, Western countries, the foreign affairs situation overall, Ukraine, the CIS, the Customs Union,” Peskov said.

According to a website set up to allow people to submit questions for the program, one of the most popular topics related to foreign policy is what it would take for Russia to recognize the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine as independent states.

Russia has supported the breakaway regions in their fight against the Ukrainian government, with many media reports claiming that Russia is supplying them with troops and weapons, although the Kremlin has repeatedly denied these claims.

Popular domestic topics that people want to ask the president about include problems with utility services, inflation, currency exchange rates and the pension system, according to the website. Many people who have loans in foreign currencies have complained to Putin about the difficulty in paying them off due to the recent fall in the value of the ruble.

Real incomes in Russia fell in 2014 for the first time since 1999. Western sanctions imposed on Russia over the Ukraine crisis, combined with a sharp drop in oil prices, contributed to a full-blown economic crisis in the country.

Many questions referred to specific situations involving salaries not being paid on time. Unpaid construction workers at the Vostochny cosmodrome in Russia's Far East have submitted questions about their poor working conditions and wage arrears, the local news website Amur.info reported.

Questions have been submitted from all regions of the country, Peskov said, contradicting earlier reports that said questions had not been submitted from several parts of Siberia.

Most questions for Putin have come in from central Russia, with Moscow residents submitting the most questions, followed by people in St. Petersburg and the Krasnodar region in Russia's south.

Residents of Crimea and Sevastopol, which were annexed from Ukraine by Russia last March, submitted their questions via a separate dedicated phone number.

Callers submitted 2.4 million questions for Putin last year via a hotline set up for that purpose, according to the Kremlin website, down from a record 3 million in 2013.

The Moscow Times will be covering the call-in live [here](#) starting at noon on Thursday.

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