

Putin Takes Russians' Questions at Annual Marathon Call-In

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Russian President Vladimir Putin took questions from the public Wednesday in his annual marathon call-in.

This year's Direct Line event, the first since the start of the pandemic and Putin's 18th overall, focused heavily on domestic issues, particularly Covid-19 vaccination efforts and urging skeptical Russians to get vaccinated.

Russia has been grappling with a record-setting third wave since late May fueled by the highly contagious Delta variant and sluggish vaccine uptake. While several regions have ordered mandatory jabs for public-facing service workers, many Russians remain skeptical toward vaccines.

Putin also discussed topics like rising food prices, schools, social support for families and inflation in hopes of rallying voters behind the ruling United Russia party in this September's key parliamentary elections.

Russians submitted over 1.9 million questions ahead of time, according to state media.

Here's a look at his key quotes from the question-and-answer session:

On vaccination

- "I do not support compulsory vaccination and continue to adhere to that point of view."
- "The only way to prevent the further spread of the pandemic is with the help of vaccinations. We have four vaccines, they are high-tech, safe and effective, so I hope the hesitations of some of our citizens will pass."
- "It is necessary to listen, not to people who understand little about this and spread rumors, but to specialists."
- Explaining why he didn't publicize which vaccine he took this spring, Putin said: "I didn't want to create a competitive advantage for either of them. ... I took the one that takes less time and has fewer side effects."
- Putin revealed that he took the Sputnik V vaccine, saying: "After the first injection, I did not feel anything, a bit of a sore arm about four hours later. The second one, I did it at 12:00 a.m., and at 12:00 p.m. I measured a temperature of 37.2 [Celsius]. I woke up to a temperature of 36.6. After a few days, they looked at my blood results, and there were high levels of antibodies."
- "About 10% got sick [after vaccination], but this passes quite easily. Some very famous people got sick after vaccination. ... People close to me got sick, unfortunately, but it passed quickly enough, and they didn't take heavy drugs to treat it. This is just based on my inner circle."
- A Direct Line host later cited Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova in correcting Putin that 2.5%, not 10% that he originally named, get infected after receiving Sputnik V.

On counterfeit vaccination certificates sold on the black market

- "Such crimes are purely fraud connected to the health of the people and are therefore completely unacceptable," Putin said, adding that law enforcement authorities were working on cracking down on the fake certificates.

On last week's flare-up in the Black Sea over a British warship passing near annexed Crimea

- "Just a few days before this was the meeting [with U.S. President Joe Biden] in Geneva. Why did they have to create such a provocation? They have no respect for the choice of the Crimean people to join the Russian Federation."
- "It was complex and was carried out not only by the British, but also by the Americans."
- "Even if we had sunk that ship, the world wouldn't be on the verge of a third world war. Those who do this know that they cannot emerge victorious from such a war."

On Biden and the U.S.

— "The world is changing and changing rapidly. No matter what sanctions are taken against Russia, no matter how they try to scare us, Russia is still developing, its economic ability and defense power is improving, in some respects even better than in the United States."

— "Our partners in the United States on one hand understand this, but on the other hand, they are still trying to preserve their monopoly position at all costs, and that's where the threats and destructive behavior with exercises, provocations and sanctions stems from. It's not up to us, it's up to them. I hope that the realization that the world is changing will lead them to revisit their values."

On sanctions

— "We won't impose sanctions that hurt us. For example, U.S. rockets are still flying into space using Russian engines. We exported them for a decade and we don't see a reason to why we should stop now."

— "Another example: at least 50% of American Boeing airplanes are made out of Russian titanium — why should we close titanium manufacturing? If the other side crosses a line, we find symmetrical ways to respond that are felt by our partners. I hope that the U.S. relationship toward us and other countries will change soon."

On climate change

— "We are fulfilling all the obligations that we have assumed under international agreements, including the Paris agreement. We have undertaken quite serious obligations, not only not inferior, but also in some way superior in terms of the volume of emission reductions to the European Union, and I am sure that we will do all of this."

— "There are also specific plans. Now the government has developed a plan for our response to the most sensitive sectors including construction, roads and so on. We will contribute to international efforts, we will expand our capabilities to absorb CO₂ in the atmosphere. We have colossal opportunities here, but we will also prepare for the inevitable."

— "Global changes are taking place faster in Russia than in other countries. Part of Russia's territory is located in the northern latitudes, in permafrost. If it starts to melt, there will be serious consequences."

On whether there will be a transfer of power when Putin leaves office

— "The decision regarding who should lead the Russian Federation should ultimately be up to the citizens. They exercise their freedom of choice through direct secret ballot voting. This is the only way."

— "When the time comes, I hope I can say that such and such person, in my opinion, is worthy of leading such a wonderful country as our Motherland Russia."

On inflation

— "Everything is connected to inflation. Inflation is rising, it is around 5.9%. It's unlikely that we'll be able to bring inflation down to 4% this year, I think it will be around 5%."

On rising food prices

- "Soon there will be a new harvest. I hope that, thanks to the new harvest, prices for fruits and vegetables in Russia will decrease."
- "Vegetables and fruits are not produced in sufficient quantity in our country."
- "Food price regulation has had an effect, but unfortunately not for all groups of goods."

On Ukraine

- "I do not think that the Ukrainian people are unfriendly. ... I think in general Ukrainians and Russians are one people."
- "The current leadership of Ukraine is clearly unfriendly to Russia."
- "Some people are thrown into prison, some are placed under house arrest, some are killed in the streets," he said in a possible reference to Ukrainian MP Viktor Medvedchuk, Putin's close ally who is under house arrest on treason accusations.
- "[Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy] gave up his country to full external control. Key decisions are being made in Washington, and Berlin and Paris to some extent. ... I'm not refusing to meet with Zelensky, it's just necessary to understand what there is to talk about."

On whether Russia will block foreign social media platforms like Twitter

- "We have no plans to block any sites. We are going to work with them."
- "There is a problem where they ignore our requests and Russian laws. We tell them, 'you are distributing child pornography, how to make Molotov cocktails and instructions for suicide, you must remove that.' And they just don't listen to us. This is wrong."

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