

How Vladimir Putin Runs Russia Without Intermediaries or Institutes

Russia is ready to become the first country in the world where public politics and governance are carried out via daytime TV.

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Another “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin” has come and gone, with one questioner wondering why governors are not required to make use of such a convenient way to connect with the people. Putin liked the idea: why not take up a grass-roots suggestion and organize not only federal, but also regional direct lines?

Picture it: Every governor will field calls from individual citizens, who will wave their golden tickets and rattle off complaints about their particular leaky roofs or problems with the gas. Then officials (and photographers) will materialize on site, the roofs will be fixed and gas will flow. Citizens living in Russia’s regions may also enjoy learning some fun facts about their

leadership.

For example, their thoughts on geopolitics, what kind of music they like, and where they get their shirts pressed. Of course, only if such license is not considered an infringement on the presidential prerogative. Ramzan Kadyrov was quick to point out that an analogous direct line has long existed in Chechnya.

I have written before about how “Direct Line”, where the president engages with the people, is becoming the only political institution in the country. In Russia, where courts are unreliable, the ruling party does not risk leaving elections to chance, the president is not subject to opposition criticism when appearing before parliament and news organizations are tossed from the “Kremlin pool” for reporting on protests, “Direct Line” is a space where authorities and citizens air their feelings toward one another. If ordinary democratic institutions for effective governance, legitimacy and feedback cannot be had, a homegrown Russian invention has sprung up in its place.

There are no intermediaries between the president and the people — nothing but “Direct Line” and the scorched earth of Russian politics.

In 2021, this model will naturally be reproduced on the regional level: We are ready to become the first country in the world where public politics and governance are carried out via daytime TV.

On “Direct Line”, the president had time to express his thoughts on many topics: no, sinking a British destroyer off the coast of Crimea would not lead to a third world war; yes, there are problems with subsidized mortgages, but the advantages are greater; increased costs for holiday-makers within Russia can be traced back to fears of traveling abroad; we braved the worst of the pandemic better than many countries, for which the Duma deserves some credit; climate change may turn the earth into Venus, where temperatures reach 500 degrees Celsius; the problem of waste management in the Russian Federation is a serious concern.

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But the most challenging of all issues raised on “Direct Line” concerned the sharpest controversy of recent weeks: the social conflict around voluntary (and compulsory) vaccination. After months of speculation as to which formulation he received, the president confirmed that he was vaccinated with Russia’s Sputnik V and recommended that others follow his example. At the same time, he expressed his opposition to compulsory vaccination and maintained that a worker cannot be fired for refusing the jab. This hedged stance leaves vaccine skeptics room to speculate and fails to provide a concrete answer as to how Russia plans to beat back the pandemic’s third wave and its record deaths.

As in 2020, responsibility for introducing new restrictions has been delegated to the regions. Accordingly, it is governors who will bear the brunt of any criticism that follows.

Not all questions were topical. The traditional questions were asked about the president’s plans: will there be a successor, and what will Putin do after his retirement?

In Russia's current political reality, such questions belong to the genre of science fiction, dedicated as they are to the distant future — possibly the era of transhumanism. With Putin's constitutional term limit reset to zero, he can delay the search for a successor for decades more. The president even appeared to hint at this in his ironic response: the time will come and a successor will be named, and then the Russian people will decide whether to accept him or not.

As for retirement plans, well, maybe he'll do nothing at all, just “sit by the fire,” as Putin himself said towards the end of the broadcast.

“Direct Line 2021” has thus outlined the new contours of Russian political life. The president now has neither public opponents nor partners for debate, not counting the metaphysical construct of the Russian public, summoned into existence by a television show to become one with its national leader. Beyond that, Putin offers neither promises nor plans. To him, it seems, we already live in the best of all possible worlds.

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