

Mixed Martial Arts Fans Boo Putin

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Putin congratulating mixed martial arts star Emelianenko, second right, with his victory in a Sunday match in Moscow. Putin was booed on stage. **Alexsey Druginyn**

Pro-Kremlin officials scrambled Monday to explain away an embarrassing chorus of boos Prime Minister Vladimir Putin faced from a crowd of 20,000 mixed martial arts fans in what was likely the worst public reception of his political career.

Some Putin supporters insisted that the thunderous catcalls were actually meant as praise, while others offered the head-scratching explanation that the crowd simply wanted to go to the toilet.

But several analysts and opposition activists claimed that the reaction was a genuine sign of displeasure from a public tired with Putin and his flashy publicity stunts.

The surprising display of political theater came Sunday when Putin took to the stage of the Olimpiyskiy stadium in Moscow after Russian champion Fedor Emelianenko soundly defeated his American opponent Jeff Monson in a three-round fight.

Putin watched the fight from the first row, and then went to congratulate Emelianenko, a stocky bald man of 183 centimeters and 108 kilograms, who fought naked except for his trunks, but donned a huge cross around his neck after the match.

But as Putin was handed a microphone, his words were drowned out by a flurry of whistles and boos, captured on a [video](#) of the event that garnered 680,000 views on YouTube by late Monday.

Putin plowed ahead with his short speech to say, "We congratulate Fedor Emelianenko, a real Russian hero, from the bottom of our heart," but his voice appears to tremble a bit in the video.

Apparently caught off-guard, the state-owned Russia-2 television channel, known for its fierce loyalty to Putin, broadcasted the unedited recording of the incident, complete with catcalls, in its 4 p.m. news on Sunday.

But it edited the sound in later broadcasts, removing the booing. Putin's official web site offered a photo of him with Emelianenko, to whom he referred as "Fedya," but no video.

Putin, who ruled the country as president from 2000 to 2008, recently announced that he will run for a third presidential term in March. He has been actively boosting his popularity this year through publicity stunts, including diving for ancient amphoras in the Black Sea, riding a three-wheeled motorcycle with bikers and posing on skates in an ice hockey uniform.

But this was the first time that such a show went visibly wrong, which prompted famous whistleblower and Kremlin-basher Alexei Navalny to proclaim it "an end of an era."

"Why does he think that if people like fights, they like crooks and thieves?" Navalny [wrote](#) on his blog, referring to a widely used derogatory term for Putin's political party, United Russia, which is struggling to repeat its 2007 performance at the State Duma elections next week.

Mikhail Moskalyov, director of the Olimpiisky stadium, tried to downplay the accident, telling Ekho Moskvyy that the boos were for Emelianenko's rival Monson, who spent the whole fight on the defensive and was pounded hard by his rival.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov echoed that explanation, telling The Guardian that "the majority of the voices were about that American." Pavel Danilin, a political consultant with United Russia, even insisted on his [blog](#) that the public actually cheered Putin even as it booed Monson.

But the 40-year-old American, who got up after several knockdowns and limped away with a bloodied face and a broken leg, was actually greeted by applause, Gazeta.ru [reported](#).

Emelianenko, whose standing took a serious blow after he lost his three previous fights, also praised Monson's fighting spirit in an interview with Gazeta.ru.

The most bizarre explanation was offered by Kristina Potupchik, a spokeswoman for the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi. She insisted that the public was angered by organizers, who did not let the public visit toilets during Putin's speech.

"Gentlemen, you had to use the bathroom beforehand," Potupchik quipped on her [blog](#) Monday. But most other prominent bloggers ridiculed her version of events.

A spokeswoman for Emelianenko — who, incidentally, represents United Russia in the Belgorod region legislature — declined to [comment](#) Monday.

But Konstantin Ustyantsev, a sport editor with Championat.com who attended the event, told The Moscow Times there was no mistaking the catcalls for praise.

"Most spectators of the match were young, and their reaction to Putin shows that they are well informed about political life in the country and dislike it," Ustyantsev said by telephone Monday.

Even many Kremlin supporters admitted that the incident was not flattering for Putin. One of them, blogger Andrei Barashkin, [reported](#) the story on his LiveJournal blog, saying several "whistlers" later told him that they were angry at what they perceived as Putin's attempt to boost his popularity and that of United Russia.

Putin's approval ratings stand at 61 percent and United Russia's at 51 percent, [according](#) to independent pollster Levada Center. But both ratings have been gradually slipping since the start of the year.

"Discontent with authorities is growing, and people are becoming ever more irritated that public events are interrupted by politicians they see every day on television," said Alexei Makarkin, head of the Center for Political Technologies.

Putin's popularity is still high, Makarkin conceded in a telephone interview Monday. But it is nowhere near the support figures from five years ago, he said.

"People of all walks of life are feeling irritated these days," Makarkin said.

Roman Shishov contributed to this report.

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