

Putin Call-In Show Liveblog

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Welcome to MT's liveblog of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's annual call-in show. The show came amid unprecedented resistance to his rule — mass protests following the Dec. 4 State Duma elections — and sagging approval ratings. Putin discussed the protests, Mikhail Prokhorov, the allegations of voting fraud and other topics.

To read more about the show itself, see [our article](#) about the program. People were able to submit questions through the show's [web site](#), as well as by calling or sending a text message. Additional questions came from the studio audience, which included current and former government officials and other notable figures.

5:45 p.m. — We're signing off from this liveblog coverage of Vladimir Putin's annual call-in show. If you were following us this afternoon, our thanks, and if you just arrived at this page, there are plenty of Putin comments for the reading.

5:30 p.m. — During the call-in show, Putin alleged that a former government minister who is now part of the opposition, Mikhail Kasyanov, had a reputation for corruption. Putin also said

government ministers at that time — in fall 1999, Putin was acting president and Kasyanov was prime minister — wanted Kasyanov's dismissal.

Kasyanov has posted a statement on his web site following Putin's attack on the call-in show. Here are some of Putin's remarks as translated by Interfax, followed by our translation of some of Kasyanov's response:

"Many liberal government members acknowledged by the liberal community, among them [former Economic Development and Trade Minister] German Gref and another former minister mentioned here, came to me and demanded the dismissal of Kasyanov," Putin said. Those ministers said they "didn't want to work with that thief. 'It is either him or us.'"

"He had a nickname, 'Misha Two Percent,' before he came to the government because of his alleged involvement in some corrupt practice," Putin said.

"There was no proof, and I saw nothing in that situation but personal likes and dislikes, so I permitted him to work for his full term," he said.

In Kasyanov's statement this evening, the former official responded that "Putin is filled with spite."

"He calls foreign politicians 'scoundrels who influence our domestic policy,' and he accuses me of wanting to be president and again calls up rumors and speculation about me.

"Putin still does not understand what is happening in the country and who these people are who took to the street. He continues to engage in demagoguery and cynical contempt for the citizens and their rights and freedoms."

4:45 p.m. — About 13 minutes later, the news recap of the call-in show that finished 14 minutes before is now over.

4:35 p.m. — Yes, the call-in show is over after 4 1/2 hours with no commercials. What's next? [Channel 1](#)'s news program. It's leading with a story featuring Medvedev, but that lasts about a minute or less.

The second story: Putin took part in a call-in show. The news then airs extensive clips from the call-in.

4:35 p.m. — The prime minister thanks the anchorman and shakes his hand, and that's it for the live broadcast of this year's call-in program.

4:35 p.m. — Putin and the big-eyed anchorman exchange a few words about the call-in format. Putin says of the call-in show, "This has been going on for 10 years. Perhaps we can continue it."

4:34 p.m. — Putin wishes everyone a happy new year.

4:30 p.m. — Putin is now reading questions from printouts, from 10-year-old Grisha, a housewife and others.

Samples: "What is happiness?" Putin answers, "Happiness is love."

4:19 p.m. — "It is a little bit more democratic." That is Putin answering a question from an online participant about how Putin relates to the Internet and Internet users. Putin says "it is a free sphere."

He adds that the government shouldn't censor the Internet "because that is technologically difficult and because it's politically wrong." If the government has a disagreement with an argument online, it should respond on the same Internet platform, he says.

Putin says he himself isn't an Internet fan. "When I get to work, I look over notes," that is, printouts, he says.

4:10 p.m. — A French gentleman is allowed to ask a question, and he addresses Putin as "my dear."

4:01 p.m. — A 75-year-old pensioner is phoning in from Ufa (again Bashkortostan), and Putin is now giving an answer about taxes.

3:57 p.m. — The audience is softly laughing and lightly clapping as Putin sarcastically takes apart the concept of alliance in the NATO operation in Afghanistan.

3:55 p.m. — Back in the studio, the microphone is put in front of an audience member who works with the [Valdai Club](#). Putin interrupts to say that this man is "an *American* political analyst" backing the interests of the United States. The Valdai member takes the tart comment in stride and says, "Of course."

The man is challenging Putin about the breadth of Russia's alliances.

3:50 p.m. — A [third question](#) from Nizhny Tagil, but it isn't a question. A man in a business suit and tie thanks Putin for the development and prospects of the country and says, "We don't want to go back."

Then he adds with a half-smile that if the police aren't prepared to deal with protests, "we are prepared." In other words, common people will fight back the protesters, he threatens.

3:42 p.m. — In Nizhny Tagil. (We typed this name as Veliky Tagil earlier; it should be Nizhny Tagil.) The "in the regions" music has played again, and we are in this city in the Urals, at train and tank manufacturer [Uralvagonzavod](#). A man who is in his 20s or 30s and wearing a black-and-orange workman's uniform is asking Putin why Russia buys military hardware from foreign companies and countries.

3:38 p.m. — The prime minister is now discussing the flight of capital out of Russian and market conditions.

3:34 p.m. — Famed director and conservative political crank Nikita Mikhalkov (director of the "Burnt by the Sun" series of films) is reading a letter to Putin.

Putin responds to this letter about living abroad with a discussion of "Rodina Mat," or the Motherland.

3:28 p.m. — "Maybe they thought that the fight was fabricated." Putin is trying to explain why the audience booed at a mixed martial arts event in Moscow the other week. They began to boo as he began speaking in the ring post-fight.

3:25 p.m. — After Putin insists that the call center redial the dropped call, the man gets to continue his question. The caller notes people cried out, "Putin should leave!" at the recent protests. (That's correct; that was a slogan at Saturday's Bolotnaya Ploshchad protest.) He asked the prime minister, "What do you make of that?"

3:23 p.m. — Beep-beep-beep-beep. A call was dropped, and viewers and listeners got an earful of busy signal. The audience found it funny.

3:20 p.m. — Correction on our governor item below: Putin eliminated the direct election of governors during his second term, after the Beslan school terrorist attack in 2004.

3:20 p.m. — In Sochi. The call-in show plays its "in the regions" theme music, and then it shows us a panorama of a major 2014 Winter Olympic construction sites in Sochi. A group of people in white hard hats are standing behind a woman in white hard hat and white fur collar who is armed with a question for Putin.

3:17 p.m. — Astakhov is given the mic for the third time. Now he's finished, and we're heading to Sochi.

3:15 p.m. — If people want to adopt, "people must be ready to accept responsibility," Putin says. "We have changed the laws" to improve the chances for adopted children, he says.

3:10 p.m. — Now two other audience members, both women, continue the topic of families and children. Woman No. 2 says foreign would-be parents adopt sick children, which, she says, Russian parents often don't. She urges authorities to consider the quality of the family looking to adopt.

Putin is answering this second woman. And answering. And answering.

3:00 p.m. — Federal children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov introduces a topic that sells newspapers in Russia: the adoption of Russian children by foreigners and the abuses and murders committed by foreign adoptive parents.

"Thousands and thousands of children are in the hands of foreigners, most of them in the United States," Astakhov complains. Astakhov asks, after citing these murders, should the laws governing the adoption of Russian children by foreigners be changed?

2:50 p.m. — We're back in the TV studio, and a middle-aged woman named Natalya talks on and on about international relations and the breakup of the U.S.S.R. She asks Putin, "What would you have done if you had been in Gorbachev's place?"

2:45 p.m. — In Bashkortostan. The TV feed has switched to a reporter with a crowd of people in Ufa, Bashkortostan, in the southern Urals.

2:40 p.m. — Putin advocates the status quo, but with a French flair.

Responding to the question about registering Kasyanov's party, he suggests Russia could follow the model of European countries. "In France, if I'm not mistaken, I could be making a mistake, the parties are given access to mass media according to how many seats they hold in parliament," Putin said.

But that is the de facto situation here: Opposition politicians are rarely given airtime on state-controlled news or other programs, and when they are shown, they typically are depicted as agitators or weirdos. Meanwhile, United Russia and its leading figures, Putin and Medvedev, dominate the news.

2:40 p.m. — An older woman asks by telephone, "Why can't Mikhail Kasnyanov's party get registered?" This is a foray into the issue of registering independent, opposition parties. Those parties are typically denied registration and thus a place on the ballots because of supposed bureaucratic infractions such as incorrect forms.

2:32 p.m. — Question about Mikhail Prokhorov: A woman phones from Saransk to ask what Putin thinks of the billionaire's just-announced bid for president.

"I think it's right for our country," Putin responds. "I wish him success," he adds.

"I hope that it will be a worthwhile, strong competition," Putin says.

2:32 p.m. — The prime minister answers the question about conflicts between cultures by referring to "my colleagues in European countries," making a reference to his close friend Silvio Berlusconi. Without naming the ousted Italian leader, he talks about North African immigrants who lived "there" for 10 years and haven't learned the local language.

When it comes to Russia, people from various cultures are all Russian citizens, Putin says.

2:30 p.m. — Now we're in the North Caucasus, in the Stavropol region. A young man from the group in front of the camera in Caucasus asks, "How can we resolve conflicts between regions?"

2:27 p.m. — Putin takes a question from an elderly man in the studio audience. He gives a generous response: "I think you're right."

2:18 p.m. — "Yes, we have to invest money there." That was Putin's reply to whether the federal government should continue sending money to the North Caucasus. He suggested that the development of southern Russia, Chechnya and Ingushetia depend on continued federal support of the North Caucasus.

Putin said he is convinced that the corruption in Chechnya — where the leader is Kremlin-backed Ramzan Kadyrov — is "minimal."

2:10 p.m. — The call-in show addresses the issue of nationalism and anti-Caucasus sentiments in Russia. Alexander from St. Petersburg is permitted to ask on-air, "Maybe we should stop feeding the Caucasus?"

"I have heard this phrase," Putin answers. He certainly has: "Stop feeding the Caucasus!" is a rallying cry for nationalists and their supporters, who include opposition figures such as anti-

corruption blogger Alexei Navalny. The phrase refers to the federal funds sent to Chechnya, Dagestan and other republics in Russia's poor and violent North Caucasus.

Putin refers to the Chechen capital and its appearance after the two separatist wars fought there: "People said Grozny looked like Stalingrad [after the World War II battle of Stalingrad]. Should we have left Grozny in that condition?"

2:05 p.m. — An audience member clad in black Nehru jacket tells Putin, "The biggest corrupt player in the country is the little bureaucrat."

2:00 p.m. — The cameras have been switched back to the main studio for the past few minutes. They're taking an audience question now related to composer Sergei Prokofiev.

1:55 p.m. — Important note: Putin's answer on the customs union with Russia's neighbors (see below) marked the first time, an hour and a half into the call-in, that Putin mentions President Dmitry Medvedev. (tip of the hat to The Guardian's Miriam Elder @MiriamElder)

1:50 p.m. — "I personally thought up this system of how governors should relate to the [federal] government authorities. I myself thought it up. No one advised me."

That's Putin answering another question about direct elections for governors. Putin eliminated them during his second term as president.

1:45 p.m. — The prime minister is discussing the Soviet Union.

1:40 p.m. — Putin takes a question from a Vladivostok man about bribes and corruption. The second part of Putin's answer: The region's criminal groups factor into this problem. The region has more criminality than other regions, Putin said.

What is he referring to? Vladivostok had a reputation for violent, mafia-style crime in the 1990s.

Media observers are saying now on Twitter that, judging by the question (it would have been pre-screened and thus approved) and by Putin's response, Primorsky Region Governor Sergei Darkin will soon be out of a job.

1:37 p.m. — Now we're in [Vladivostok](#). The show is showing live coverage of a TV correspondent with a crowd, as well as footage of a bridge in the city that caught fire several days ago.

1:27 p.m. — An elderly man who identifies himself as a former defense official buttonholes Putin and demands an "honest" answer about when veterans will receive the housing that the government has promised for years. A voice in the background chides him, "This is the president."

The former official responds: "I'm relating to you as a presidential candidate."

1:20 p.m. — Yeltsin-era Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov asks a question about Russia's international relations. Putin responds that the customs union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan "isn't the return of the U.S.S.R."

1:15 p.m. — Fielding a question about U.S. Sen. John McCain and the Republican's Twitter comments about an Arab Spring coming to Russia: Putin reiterates his disgust with the way that Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi was killed and how "his killing was broadcast." Putin said, "Who did this?" He answered: U.S. flights over Libya.

1:13 p.m. — "Basic medicine in Russia should be free. Public medicine in Russia must be free," Putin said. The doctor pressed him from the audience about the issue of bribes, and Putin said there is an ongoing struggle against bribes.

1:07 p.m. — A prominent pediatrician tells Putin that businesspeople who were at the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protest complain about how difficult it is to obtain bank loans for their businesses. The doctor also tells Putin that he knows of specific people in the presidential administration who have accepted bribes and asks how medical specialists can be retained in Russia.

1:00 p.m. — Putin answers a question about the Vlast magazine photograph of an absentee ballot scrawled with a profane insult against Putin. "I've heard every insult imaginable," he says, adding that the photo was taken at a polling station in London — which is home to prominent Russian fugitives, including oligarch Boris Berezovsky. Putin said to audience applause, "We know who went to London and why they aren't coming back."

(See [our article](#) on the firing scandal that resulted from the photo's publication.)

12:55 p.m. — First ridiculous question. A text message: Should it-girl Tina Kandelaki become minister of education? Putin's response: 'I'm not sure she has the right experience.'

12:50 p.m. — First call-in question from Tyumen about housing and utility bills. Putin says tariffs must go up, but they should be raised very carefully. Says rate hikes were pushed off as precaution against inflation, not as a pre-election gimmick.

12:45 p.m. — "Alexei Kudrin is my friend. He's never left my inner circle. ... People like Kudrin (who think strategically and 'see' the future) are critical to this government and future governments."

12:40 p.m. — Putin's gets another skeptical question about what Russia can expect from six more years of his leadership. His response: 'I don't agree that everything is completely stable. Yes, we've done the most critical things.' He continues (we're paraphrasing), 'But we can't afford to rest on our laurels, to let the reigns of power go slack.'

12:35 p.m. — Putin touts his record on inflation, economic growth. Takes credit for Russia's relatively smooth passage through the financial crisis. "We have a strong economy." Re: future. We have to strengthen government, improve public trust in the government, modernization, innovation, etc. "The problems that stand in front of us are more difficult than the ones we've solved." Putin gets a round of applause.

12:30 p.m. — "We need to change the way the government interacts with the people," a member of the studio audience says. Municipal level is "the most important," Putin says, because people "literally reach their hand out and touch it." He says voters need to be more careful about whom they elect to municipal posts and says he supports strengthening

government on the municipal level.

12:18 p.m. — Putin is already tired of talking about the protests. Says he initially thought the white ribbons worn by protesters were "anti-AIDS propaganda" or "contraceptives" — namely, condoms.

12:12 p.m. — Ekho Moskvyy editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov asks for response to protesters. Putin repeats himself, i.e., 'thanks for speaking up, follow the law.'

12:10 p.m. — Putin proposes installing web cameras in all polling stations to stem infractions.

12:06 p.m. — "The election results absolutely reflect public opinion. ... The opposition will always say that the elections were dishonest. That happens everywhere, in all countries."

12:05 p.m. — First question is about the protest on Bolotnaya Ploshchad. Putin suggests that he supports people expressing their opinion. "The most important thing is that everybody follow the law."

Putin is answering this question extremely calmly, with a sweet smile, like a grandfather who just lost an argument with a smart grandchild.

Speaking of the protest, Putin says, "If this is the result of the Putin regime, then that's fine." To note, state-controlled television aired footage of the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protests but didn't include the event's many criticisms of Putin in its coverage.

12:03 p.m. — Putin has arrived to a round of applause. Adjusts his tie and suit; he's ready to go.

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