

Putin's Well-Scripted Chat With the People

By [Nikolai Petrov](#)

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President Vladimir Putin's recent televised call-in show forced the country to recall the almost forgotten entertainment genre in which the national leader speaks directly with his people. Whether it was planned this way or not, the program aired on the eve of the long spring holiday, enabling Putin to avoid responding to objections or justifying his statements. Of course, Putin is more comfortable delivering monologues that last for hours than in engaging in the sort of dialogue for which call-in shows are designed. But both Putin

and his staff, who handpicked the questions, seemed better prepared than ever for this event.

Predictably, callers tended to pose questions concerning either their financial well-being — salaries, pensions and rising utilities fees. Meanwhile, the 2012 annual report by the Levada Center shows that citizens are increasingly concerned about the real problems facing the country: the economic crisis, the poor state of Russian industry and agriculture, the growing divide between the rich and poor, corruption and bribery at all levels, the difficulty of obtaining a higher education and the increase in drug abuse. Practically none of these questions were asked during the call-in program.

The live link to the regions was reminiscent of Soviet times, when the regions acted as a tribune for formulating national issues. This time, that role was played by World War II veterans and questions concerning agriculture in Belgorod, military aviation in Lipetsk, culture in St. Petersburg, large families and adoption policies in the Primorye region. Questions concerning the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi were exceptions.

Although Putin spoke at length regarding the Far East, he said little about Chechnya, the North Caucasus, the fight against terrorism and national extremism or the conflict between Chechnya and Ingushetia.

Putin referred to only two regional leaders during the show — the governor of Primorye whom he did not name, and Viktor Ishayev, the presidential envoy to the Far East.

Regarding the relationship between the federal center and the regions as a whole, Putin and former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, who was planted in the studio where the call-in show took place among dozens of guests, discussed the need to decentralize the budget, but Putin made only broad statements without offering any specifics. In addition, both the callers and Putin repeatedly referred to the archetype of a good, kind tsar and his bad governors and other regional officials who do not work enough with the people under their charge, fail to raise the salaries of health workers and misuse federal funding with the result that Russia's roads are still notoriously bad.

It is obvious that Putin's "chat with the people" was orchestrated according to the classic populist formula of portraying a national leader who is kind to citizens while being severe with negligent officials. It was also clear that time is not on Putin's side. However deftly Putin might be at fielding pre-screened questions, viewers increasingly suspect that he alone is to blame for the country's mounting problems, and that promises to allocate more money and to personally intervene to resolve specific problems are not enough to improve the overall situation.

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