

Putin Shows Victor's Benevolence at Annual Call-In

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President Vladimir Putin gesturing during a live broadcast nationwide phone-in on Thursday.

Breaking his tradition of publicly tongue-lashing opponents at home and abroad, President Vladimir Putin assumed a non-predatory stance Thursday to diffuse fears of escalation of the ongoing rift with the West over the Ukraine crisis during his annual live call-in show broadcast on national television and online.

"I believe our aim today must be to create a unified Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok," Putin said. "If we choose a different course of action, if we divide Europe, European values and peoples, if we pursue separatism, then we will be marginal players and will not be able to exert any influence on world development or even our own development."

In this year's show, Putin's answers were mostly devoid of his trademark criticism of the domestic opposition, whom he has accused of being the West's "fifth column" in Russia and seeking to destroy the country, and he avoided the harsh rhetoric with which he has

routinely filled the national airwaves in other years.

Political pundits questioned by The Moscow Times agreed that in view of his burgeoning public approval rating, Putin avoided extreme statements because he is satisfied with his current standing.

"The main aim of this show was to demonstrate that he is not an aggressive radical, which is how many people around the world perceive him after Crimea," said Alexander Morozov, head of the Moscow Media Research Center. "Putin is sending reconciliatory signals to the West and any educated reader would understand this."

Nikolai Petrov, professor at Moscow's Higher School of Economics, said he had been expecting Putin to announce harsh measures with regard to internal politics.

"Putin feels that he is the top dog and that he can do whatever he wants. That is why he felt at ease even with harsh questions, as he knows that so many people love him in the country," he said.

The latest poll released by the independent pollster Levada Center on Wednesday found that 71 percent of Russians trust Putin.

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In contrast with his stance on Europe, Putin used tougher rhetoric when speaking about the U.S., putting all responsibility for the deteriorating relations between the two countries on Washington, but the president largely stuck to his longtime mantra of rejecting American unilateralism.

"What happens is that the U.S. is able to act as it does in Yugoslavia, Libya and Afghanistan, while Russia is forbidden from defending its interests," Putin complained.

The show, the 12th since Putin first assumed the presidency in 2001, lasted 3 hours and 56 minutes and marked a departure from Putin's image as someone who is mostly concerned with the everyday maintenance of the country to a man of conservative vision, willing to offer his own understanding of world affairs and Russia's place in it.

"We are less pragmatic and less thrifty than other peoples," Putin said in his concluding remarks. "We stand out for the depth of our souls and maybe this is reflected in the greatness of our country and its vast size," he said, appearing more emotional than during the previous 3 1/2 hours.

While as in previous years, many questions turned into speeches thanking Putin for what were described as his recent victories, Putin also took several critical questions about the lack of tolerance and freedom of speech in Russia.

"We must build our internal and external policies on the opinion of the majority, but we must never forget about people who are in a minority and have their own point of view about what is happening in the country and the international arena," Putin said.

Curiously, in contrast to previous shows when Putin dazzled the audience by bombarding viewers with dozens of optimistic economic indicators, very little time was devoted to the economy that has remained sluggish over the past year and could take a further hit if strict sanctions are applied by Western countries in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine.

After the show, when a group of journalists surrounded Putin in the large hall outside the studio, Putin said in answer to a question about the economy that the government would stick to conservative fiscal policy regardless of the additional revenues that have resulted from recent currency fluctuations.

Most of the more than 2.5 million questions that were sent via telephone, web and text message concerned social policy, housing and infrastructure. But most of the show was occupied by questions about the ongoing crisis in eastern Ukraine and Russia's recent annexation of Crimea.

For the first time, Putin admitted that the unidentified soldiers who appeared in Crimea at the beginning of March were Russian soldiers. Putin asserted that Russia has a historical right to be involved in Ukrainian affairs, as a large chunk of Ukraine's southeast was transferred to Ukraine only in the 1920s.

Putin fielded the questions from a studio inside the historic Gostiny Dvor shopping mall located close to the Kremlin and used today as an exhibition center and concert hall. Viewers asked questions live both inside the studio and from locations across the country, including the Far East, Sochi and Sevastopol in Crimea, as well as Berlin. The show was heavily staged, with short videos of the Sochi Olympics, Crimea and summer floods in the Far East appearing before each of the main sections.

The president broke another tradition Thursday by wrapping up the show himself, which in previous years was done by the television anchors hosting the show.

"For centuries we have lived according to our values, which have never let us down. They will be useful for us in the future," Putin said before thanking the applauding audience, standing up and leaving the studio.

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