

Putin launches re-election bid

By ALEX FRIEDRICH
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MOSCOW — With one foot planted in Russia's autocratic past and the other in its democratic present, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his re-election campaign Thursday during a live, three-hour TV call-in show that resembled a public audience with one of his czarist predecessors.

Once a year, the common folk of Russia get a shot at telling their usually remote president what's on their minds. From Murmansk to Vladivostok, they phone, fax and e-mail questions to their leader, who this year seized the opportunity to confirm, to no one's surprise, that he'll run in the March 14 election.

The 3-year-old call-in show gives Russians a chance to connect with the only man they think can solve their country's problems, and Putin a chance to cultivate his image as Russia's indispensable man.

"The Russian public has this traditional, deeply held belief that the ultimate ruler is someone your life depends on," said Masha Lipman, the editor of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Pro et Contra Journal, a quarterly journal on policy affairs. "And Putin has done a lot to strengthen this attitude."

Preparations began last weekend, when organizers started collecting 1.5 million questions. The Kremlin set up

a dozen or so video links in cities and villages, as well as on an oil rig in eastern Siberia and at a Russian air force base in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan.

TV moderators pitched Putin some questions, and coal miners, ship builders and students huddled around the cameras to ask their own:

What concrete things will the new parliament give Russia in the new year, asked student Katya Ustimenko from Komsomolsk-on-Amur.

Why is it that all the talks have failed to solve the problem of dilapidated housing, asked miner Alexander Nikolayevich Zagzhevsky of Beryozovsk.

And this hardball, which occurred to many inquiring Russian minds: "Will you give away one of your new puppies as a gift?"

There were fewer questions on sensitive topics such as the war in the restive Russian republic of Chechnya, and even fewer surprises in Putin's answers.

Russia is fighting in Chechnya to keep the country from "falling apart," he said. He came out against nationalizing industry — always a worry for foreign investors — and said he wouldn't amend Russia's constitution so he could have a third term.

He chided America for going it alone in Iraq and warned nationalist politicians not to "abuse democratic terminology as they try to ensure their clan interests."

And he looked good doing it. In daily media footage Putin is usually a grim, gray, inscrutable apparatchik of few words, a familiar Russian character that seems to inspire a mixture of reverence and fear.

But he appeared relaxed, engaged and downright smooth Thursday on TV as he juggled a slew of statistics and dispensed czar-like largesse.

No heat in your Siberian school room? Considerate it done. Can't get an essential service? My people are on it.

That could help explain why, although Putin has few if any news conferences and muzzles the media, he has a popularity rating in the 70 percent to 80 percent range.

But to critics such as Lipman, the call-in show is merely window dressing that "helps him disguise a lack of accountability to the public and a lack of information about decision-making."

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