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By Fred Weir

Would Obama save Putin from drowning? Putin says yes.

Putin fielded this question at his annual telethon, along with other more serious queries about the crisis in Ukraine and – asked by Edward Snowden – Russia's domestic spying.

Врятував би Обама Путіна, якби він тонув? Путін каже: так

Путін отримав це питання в ході своєї щорічної "прямої лінії", поряд з більші серйозними питаннями про кризу на Україні і про внутрішнє шпигунство Едварда Сноудена.

Головною темою була ескаляція кризи на Україну і, звичайно, символічне привітання 2 млн нових громадян Російської Федерації з приєднаного до неї Криму, йдеться в статті. Путін також нагадав росіянам, що у нього є дозвіл парламенту на застосування сили на українській території, але додав: "Дуже сподіваюся на те, що мені не доведеться скористатися цим правом і що політико-дипломатичними засобами нам вдасться вирішити всі гострі, якщо не сказати найгостріші, проблеми сьогодення в Україні".

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0417/Would-Obama-save-Putin-from-drowning-Putin-says-yes>

Moscow

Though it seldom breaks fresh news, President Vladimir Putin's annual telethon is always a useful reality check on the man, his state of mind, and his intentions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin thinks Barack Obama would save him if he were drowning, despite the recent strain on their geopolitical relationship. The former KGB...

And Mr. Putin was in fine form Thursday, as he used the nationwide town hall event, honed by Kremlin handlers over his 15 years in power, to showcase his forceful personality, hands-on style of leadership, and magisterial command of details.

In just under four hours – far short of the nearly five hours he talked last year – Putin cheerfully responded to an exhaustive range of questions. Among them, the rising price of bread and train tickets, the perennial threat of flooding in Russia's Far East, and the dreadful state of roads in distant provinces. Putin had clear, firm, and optimistic answers for each.

Putin, whose public approval ratings have surged past 80 percent, always gets a bounce out of these telethons, experts say.

"Direct engagement with the public like this suits a politician [if he does it well] because it shows him involved and responding to peoples' concerns. I expect Putin's ratings to go up after this," says Alexei Grazhdankin, deputy director of the Levada Center, Russia's only independent polling agency.

In response to an apparently serious query from a pensioner about taking back Alaska, which was once part of the Russian Empire, he joked "my dear, what do we want Alaska for?" To another, he insisted that he does not want to be "president for life," but would rather have the chance to retire to his home town of St. Petersburg one day. And he gave what sounded like a hopeful bottom-line assessment on the state of US-Russia relations by telling a young girl that, yes, if Putin were drowning, he thought Barack Obama would jump in to save him.

He also scoffed away a question about his plans, if any, to remarry, saying that he'd need to find a husband for his recently divorced wife Lyudmila first.

Actions in Ukraine

But the main subject of the day was the escalating crisis in Ukraine and, of course, a symbolic welcome to about 2 million new subjects of the Russian Federation in the freshly-annexed territory of Crimea. From a seashore studio in the Crimean naval base of Sevastopol, a crowd of grateful new citizens chanted "thank you" while Putin addressed their special questions. Among other things, he pledged that Crimean living standards would be raised to Russian levels "step by step," without breaking Russia's budget, but "it will take time."

Putin also admitted that Russian special forces did play a major role in securing the territory before last month's referendum, a fact the Kremlin had vigorously denied at the time. "Behind the back of self-defense forces of the Crimea, there were our military men, and they were acting correctly, firmly, and professionally," he said.

But just minutes earlier Putin had strenuously denied Western allegations that Russian agitators are presently involved in the unrest rocking eastern Ukraine. "It's all nonsense, there are no special units, special forces, or instructors in the east of Ukraine," he said.

He reminded Russians that he has parliamentary permission to use force on Ukrainian territory, but added: "I really hope that I don't have to exercise this right and that we are able to solve all of today's pressing issues via political and diplomatic means."

Talks on Ukraine's future opened in Geneva today, with representatives of Russia, the US, the European Union, and Ukraine hoping to hammer out some kind of negotiated settlement for the country's deepening woes. Putin argued that the sides might be closer to agreement than the crossfire of heated public rhetoric suggests.

"People in the east are talking about federalization. Kiev is talking, thank God, about decentralization. What's behind these words? It's necessary to sit at the negotiating table, to try to understand what's being implied, and find a solution. Order in the country can be established only through a dialogue, in the course of democratic procedures, rather than through the use of the armed forces."

Otherwise, Ukraine is heading into "an abyss," he added.

"Putin was at some pains to show that we have achieved success, without negative consequences," says Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the independent Center for Political Technologies in Moscow. "But he made it clear that [the Ukraine crisis] is not over, and he's keeping his options open. He might recognize the results of the coming Ukrainian elections, or he might not. He might introduce troops into Ukraine, or maybe not. No commitments were made."

Oddities

There were a couple of unusual notes. In a distinctly strange aside, Putin accused the current secretary general of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, of secretly tape-recording him during a private conversation several years ago when Mr. Rasmussen was prime minister of Denmark, and then leaking the recording to the media.

"I couldn't believe my ears and eyes – what nonsense!" Putin said.

And in a well-crafted moment, newly minted Russian resident Edward Snowden asked the Kremlin leader by video-link whether Russian authorities spy on their own citizens as the US government does at home.

"Mr Snowden, you are a former agent, a spy. I used to work for the intelligence service, so we are going to speak together in one professional language," Putin said, before going on to insist that Russian special services do everything by the book and never target an individual without a court-ordered warrant.

"This is our law and therefore there is no mass surveillance in our country," Putin said.