

Russian President Putin's "direct line" discussion dominated by war danger and social crisis

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14 June 2018

The 16th annual "direct line" event with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which took place last Thursday, June 7, under conditions of an ongoing imperialist encirclement and war provocations against Russia, was a testimony to the extraordinary alienation of the ruling oligarchy from the country's population, and to growing social and political discontent.

In a sign of increasing nervousness within the Kremlin, this "direct line," unlike previous ones, included no audience and journalists in the room from which Putin received and answered calls. Instead, the studio was equipped with screens and operators sitting behind them who were receiving video recordings, texts and other messages. Only select messages and questions were answered by Putin. The event was broadcast live on the country's major television channels and several radio stations.

The US-led imperialist encirclement of Russia and the danger of world war, a major and very real concern for the Russian population, were, along with the social crisis, the major theme of the "direct line."

In an attempt to present himself as the "voice of reason" in opposition to the aggressive and unpredictable policies of US president Donald Trump, Putin argued for every country to advance "its own interests" without resorting to "egotistical political methods." He further said, "Russia is regarded as a threat, because they perceive Russia as a rival. I believe that this is an erroneous policy, because one should not try and contain anyone, including Russia, but foster cooperation, which would produce a beneficial effect for the global economy."

To the question "Will there be a World War Three?" Putin responded by quoting Albert Einstein, who once said that while he didn't know what weapons might be used to wage a third world war, "World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." Putin then added: "World War Three could put an end to civilization as we know it. Understanding this

should prevent us from extreme and very dangerous actions in the international arena that could threaten modern civilization."

Meanwhile, Putin evidently avoided denouncing the imperialist powers and their blatant provocations and aggression. When asked about the Skripal case, an obviously staged provocation aimed at providing the pretext for a military build-up and confrontation with Russia, he only said that "we're dealing with something other than a military-grade agent." As long as Russia was not part of the investigation, he added, "it is difficult for us [the Russian government] to comment on anything."

Having emerged out of the destruction of the Soviet state, and the restoration of capitalism in Russia, which was carried out hand-in-glove with the very governments and bourgeoisies that are now threatening to militarily attack and carve up the country, the Russian oligarchy is closely tied to the imperialist powers. Finding itself increasingly encircled and pressured, the Kremlin has been feverishly working to find a rapprochement with imperialism by making limited concessions both in foreign policy and by undertaking steps to further open up Russia to foreign investors.

As tensions between the United States and the EU are growing, the Kremlin is trying to exploit these inter-imperialist divisions to establish alliances with the major imperialist powers of Europe. The Kremlin is also appealing to far-right forces throughout Europe, including the National Front in France and the far-right government in Austria.

In these maneuvers, the Russian oligarchy is driven not least of all by growing social discontent at home, expressions of which dominated the "direct line" with Putin.

Putin's general evaluation of the situation in the country, which, in his words, was "moving ... in the absolute right direction" and was marked by "consistent economic growth" stood in stark contrast to the issues raised by people in their questions: the rapidly rising prices for public utilities, petrol and other products of mass consumption, the

degradation of health care, education and the environment, the miserable wages of the majority of the population against the background of huge profits for the oligarchs, the lack of control over public officials and omnipresent corruption, as well as the plans of the government to increase the retirement age and raise taxes.

According to official statistics, the real income of Russians has declined by a total of some 11 percent over the past four years relative to their 2013 levels, before the crisis triggered by the Western sanctions and decline in oil prices began.

Despite the Kremlin propaganda about a “united people,” Putin clearly showed in his answers which social interests he defends. He rejected the introduction of a progressive income tax and the nationalization of oil and other raw material resources companies. Nor did Putin offer any concrete plans for the financial realization of his “May Decrees,” which promised an improvement of the social situation.

When asked about the raising of the retirement age, something that prime minister Medvedev recently indicated was actively being prepared, Putin refused to provide an assessment of the government’s proposal in this regard, and instead made general remarks about how the welfare of the elderly had to be taken care of. In this way, he implicitly signaled his approval of plans that will lead to a significant decline in the living standards of tens of millions of people.

Another major topic was the sharp rise in petrol prices: Between March 8 and June 8, the average price for one litre of petrol rose from 41,18 rubles (0.66 cents) to 45,28 rubles (0.72). In some regions it has surpassed 50 rubles (about 80 cents). Putin said that this was “the result of incorrect, to put it mildly, regulation” and added that the necessary measures to reverse this process would be put in place. At the same time, he emphasized that the interests of the biggest oil companies, which are responsible for the recent price hike, were not to be touched.

Most questions that were raised in the “direct line” already troubled the population at the beginning of Putin’s time in power, some 20 years ago. Since then, social inequality has continued to rise, and the situation in the key sectors of the economy, the conditions of basic infrastructure and in the social sphere have further deteriorated.

Thus, the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* recently cited the following numbers with regard to health care: “Since 2000, the number of hospitals in Russia has declined by about 300 to 350 per year. In the past 16 years, their number has been reduced by a factor of five. Especially within the framework of the restructuring and optimization of the health care system, clinics in small towns in the countryside and villages are being shut down. The number of polyclinics has also significantly declined: of 21,300 only 18,600 remain.”

The number of pediatricians in Russia has declined from 72,000 to 58,000 between 2000 and 2016, and between 2005 and 2014, the number of outpatient hospitals has declined by 2.4 times in the countryside, thus dramatically worsening the access to medical aid for children there.

At the same time, the government spares no money when it comes to supporting the oligarchs, banks and major businesses. The Russian Central Bank has recently spent 2,62 trillion rubles (\$41.2 billion) to readjust three private banking groups. The “Vneshekonombank”, a state enterprise with special status, which is directly led by the government, has received over 1 trillion rubles (\$15.92 billion) from the state budget between 2016 and 2017, channelled through the Central Bank. By contrast, the latest social initiatives of the president to improve the demographic situation are estimated to cost some 80 billion rubles (\$1.27 billion) per year.

The new Western sanctions against the Russian government and oligarchs that are connected with it will lead to new assaults by the Kremlin on the rights and living standards of the working class. The government has already announced that it will help the major business empires of the oligarchs that are being sanctioned, particularly Oleg Deripaska, who controls much of the aluminium industry, and Viktor Veksel’berg, who is now the richest individual in Russia.

Currently, the creation of two off-shore havens in Russia is being discussed, one on the island Russii near Vladivostok, in the Far East, and the other one on the island Oktiabr’skii in the Kaliningrad oblast. The government is also rapidly preparing a bill which will allow the major companies to not disclose information about deals they are preparing. It would also allow companies that are considered vital to the functioning of the economy to muddle their property structure so as to avoid sanctions.



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