

# Annual press conference of president putin

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The Annual Press Conference conducted by President Putin is viewed as one of the innovative practices in the Public Administration of Russia. President Putin initiated conducting the annual pressers are since 2001. Twelve such press conferences were held between 2001-2016, seven between 2001-2008 (except for 2005) and five between 2012-2016. When President Putin held the post of Russia's prime minister (from May 2008 to May 2012), he paused such meetings with the media. On re-election as the head of the state, these conferences were resumed.

On one hand, popular western media perceive the annual pressers as a media extravaganza whereas Russians watch these conferences keenly as President addresses concerns raised by the citizenry. Since the pressers are normally held in late December, which is the time of Western Christmas, they don't get much coverage in popular western media outside of Russia, except amongst keen Russia-watchers. The pressers are televised live across all Russian TV channels, attended by wide spectrum of media, federal and local new agencies, publications as well as foreign reporters based in Moscow — and their popularity overshadows every other event in Russia. These conferences definitely are consciously and carefully directed, typically last almost four hours, and Putin always emerges as an omniscient and benevolent leader bearing the torchlight for resurgence of the country. No wonder these conferences give a kind of psychological boost at mass level to citizenry in Russia.

On December 14, 2017, Putin's annual media event was held at World Trade Centre in Moscow, attended by 1650 journalists (the maximum so far). It led to an intensive 3 hour 45 minute Q & A session by the President covered

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both internal and external issues. Hailed as Putin's "Big Press Conference", the event was held as the largest ever among the annual media gatherings held for 12 years so far. Grand technical efforts were put into giving Putin the best possible platform to get his message out.

During the last few years, the questions ranged on the following domestic and international issues:

Putin's candidature, plans after elections, absence of opposition, composition of next Govt

Economic performance, taxation, agriculture, inflation, control on Central Bank

International relations: USA, China, DPRK, Kazakhstan, Poland, Ukraine

Social concerns: Children, Retirement age, land taxes, health care

Environmental concerns

Questions from administrative regions of Russia

Use of Media as a powerful weapon by Putin: Annual conferences have been used as a part of the President's image building and projection strategy as a tough leader to the world. His gesture of an omnipotent leader having confidence to make decisions for any domestic and international issue reinforces confidence about him in the Russian populace. There has been systematic curtailment of media freedom since the assumption of presidential office by Putin. Yet the journalists are fascinated by him and

seem to be in a love-hate relationship with the president. The audience remain fascinated by intermittent threats, jokes and flirtation during the conference. Even some of Putin's biggest critics say he knows how to work an audience. These press meetings are also used as a stage-setter for upcoming elections. During the conference, Putin announced his intention to run as an independent candidate in the 2018 election and highlighted the living standard of Russian people as an electoral priority.

As per the statement of Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister of Russia, Putin learned how to craft his image in a special educational program at a school for KGB officers. So tactfully handled are these conferences, that Russian populace in particular wait eagerly for these annual press meets.

The projection of their country head as a confident, omnipotent leader in the world in a way satisfies the mass-psychological need after the breakdown of earlier USSR for the older generation. These conferences have contributed to maintain positive image of the President as an able head of the government, especially after 2012 anti- Putin protests. Moreover, after international issues like Crimean crisis, alleged meddling in the elections in USA, Western sanctions, Skripal incidence, the opinion in the country has definitely turned more anti-western and these annual conferences have been used tactfully by the president to bolster self-image as well as to renew confidence in the general populace about resurgent Russia.

This Annual media event by President Putin led to the following outcomes:

Very successful in burnishing Putin's image as the undisputed leader of Russia

Monitoring system for grievances (which includes definite deadlines (1st August 2018) in the last event and fixing responsibility of the concerned Governors to implement specific directives

Governors and concerned officials were part of the multi-cornered interaction with the grievant and the bottlenecks were addressed immediately

Call centres were set up which received 2 million questions from public, which included Calls/SMS/MMS

Scope of the open-house included health-care, housing, wages, pensions, citizenship, infrastructure etc.

Special mobile app called ' Moskva-Putinu' was launched for communicating the messages to the president

Conferences provided a forum for sharing achievements of Russian government including increasing life expectancy, growth in incomes and clarifying Govt. policies on issues like taxation, oil prices etc.

This platform has been used to underscore the position of the government on various foreign policy issues like Crimea, elections in USA, Skripal case, DPRK etc.

Criticism of the annual press meets: Western media dubs this media event as a farcical exercise that was largely about projecting Putin's unquestioned

authority into the far corners of Russia. They accuse Kremlin of wanting to keep things interesting without risking a loss of control. They mock that the event often felt more like a scene from The Godfather than an exercise in journalism! Sycophancy is also displayed at this event. During this exercise, no follow-up questions are allowed, as sometimes, Putin himself ordered a questioner to sit down and give up the microphone! These meetings are often criticised as no major policy announcements are made at these events, and Putin has a whole bag of rhetorical tricks to evade and deflect critical inquiries. The loyalist media seems to ask softball questions for the president to appear as an omniscient and wise ruler. Many reporters come with large, bright placards to seek president's attention to their regions or specific issues.

Analysis of Putin's media style of interaction: Case study:

Putin has developed recognizable style of public speaking. President uses that style during Direct Line (Teleconference). Putin's response can be divided into 6 techniques:

1. Denial of Speaker's competence
2. Evasion from the topic
3. 'Refutation' or concession or readiness to decrease for a moment to the level of interlocutor and to present that he/she is right
4. Demonstration of total competence of the Speaker by juggling numbers
5. Transfer of responsibility to third parties
6. New promise associated with a demonstration of power

The above techniques are used by President Putin, which are a set of simple, but very effective methods of oral speech. First, speaker evades a direct answer to the question, and then saying the threat to one address and promises in the other. So it shows the details of his omnipotence and at the same time do not assume responsibility for the failure. The listener is drawn a very simplified picture of what is happening: it is enough to understand who is offered “pies & crumpets”, and to whom – “bruises and bumps”. As a result, President Putin achieves an effect that is also greatly enhanced by TV. The expectation is that at the time of the speech, the viewer is not easy to notice the use of these techniques. Speech is perceived by the ears of millions of citizens, and read at best a few hundred thousand. This gap and ensures the success of all such rhetorical tricks, which were used for decades by Castro in Cuba or Chavez in Venezuela.

Conclusion: Media is used an effective tool to build and maintain the image of the head of the governments. President Putin is no exception. But what is unique about this forum is the opportunity made available by him to the general populace to reach the president directly in a very simple way and the follow-up mechanisms to address some of the burning issues in their day-to-day lives, which can be considered as an effective mechanism of communication and grievance redressal. In India, in the radio programme ‘Mann ki baat’, we can see similar attempt to reach out directly to the masses by Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, although, at present, the mechanism is one-sided in this programme.

In addition to serving as a mechanism to acknowledge and address issues raised by the citizens, these annual press meets are an attempt by the

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President to develop rapport and induce confidence in the citizenry about his leadership, which, despite the criticism leveled by the western media, can be considered as a tool of effective leadership in public administration.

In the background of limited freedom of media and nature of the conferences (no follow up questions allowed and selection of questions by Kremlin itself), it is widely criticized as a 'four hour love affair' by western media. Despite these limitations, to conclude, these annual conferences have been able to contribute in creating and maintaining image of the president as a leader strong and competent to maneuver through challenges in international affairs, leader of the masses and approachable head of the state receptive and willing to address the issues of the citizenry and dedicated to the resurgence of the country which has survived through difficult past.