



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Why doesn't Putin want to meet real Russians?



The list of coincidences has become too long and the explanations too complicated and implausible. Several of Putin's meetings with "ordinary" people since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine have been carefully staged, with selected interlocutors from the establishment, and some of these meetings are still under considerable suspicion of fabrication through the use of modern video technology.

Putin's meeting with mothers of mobilised soldiers fighting in Ukraine is the latest in a series of dubious meetings and encounters with "ordinary" people. Among his interlocutors were indeed mothers whose sons Putin sent to war, but they were invited to tea with the president for other, more important reasons.

Although scores of ordinary mothers have gone public saying they were snubbed by the Kremlin, Putin sat down with a former government official - the mother of a senior military and police official from Chechnya - and other women active in pro-war NGOs financed by the state.

The Guardian has confirmed the identities of at least three of the women who met Putin on Friday, in a highly publicised meeting at his residence in Novo-Ogaryovo on the outskirts of Moscow.

None of the women are critical of the war against Ukraine and several have publicly sought to quell fears about the poor treatment, inadequate training, and other dangers faced by Russian troops being mustered to be sent to the front.

The history of Putin's arranged meetings with "ordinary" people is quite rich. Before the mothers of the mobilised soldiers, there was a meeting with a wounded soldier who was recovering in the hospital. Or was he neither a wounded man nor a soldier?

Newsweek reported in May that images released by the Kremlin pool show Putin shaking the hands of servicemen at Moscow's Mandryk military hospital.

Putin met with hospital staff and asked one soldier about his nine-month old son, whom the Russian leader said would be proud of his father, according to a Rossiya 1 TV post shared on Telegram. But eagle-eyed social media users had an unnerving sense of déjà vu. "Putin met with a wounded soldier who, by a strange coincidence, was also a factory worker he previously met," [tweeted Adam Rang](#), a disinformation volunteer who monitors Kremlin messaging.

In August 2021, the independent news outlet Novaya Gazeta reported how a visit by Putin to a cement factory in the Russian republic of Bashkortostan may not have been all it was cracked up to be. Some locals noticed that three of the employees in high-vis jackets who posed next to Putin in the photo of the president were local administration workers.

This theatrical practice of the Russian president also mirrored his not so distant meeting with "fishermen" in Novgorod in 2016, and with the same "fishermen" at the Christmas service in January 2017. Online enthusiasts documenting Internet frauds pointed out that they were the same people posing with the Russian president in two different situations, and that they were government agents and activists of Putin's United Russia party.

Nevertheless, in an effort to refute accusations that Putin's meetings with "fishermen" and "believers" in the church were staged, "France 24" floated the possibility that Putin wanted to spend Christmas in Novgorod with the very same "fishermen" with whom he met a few months earlier and talked to at their workplace! Is the President of Russia really that attentive to "ordinary" Russians, or is his team in charge of "spontaneous" meetings at work?

However, the most spectacular incident, from the technological point of view, was Putin's meeting with the Russian airlines flight attendant in March, at the very beginning of the aggression against Ukraine. It looked as if the host and the guest were in two different places, but were sitting at the same table using

a green screen, which was seen at the moment when the hand of the Russian president passed through the microphone placed on the table. As if the microphone were a ghost.

Lessons from 2000

Putin learned two important lessons back in 2000, just a few months after becoming president of Russia for the first time. The first: he must never again have spontaneous meetings with "ordinary" Russians, but his interlocutors must be selected and loyal. The second: the media must not be left to themselves to report about the president's activities, without prior control of the Kremlin.

He learned that lesson after meeting with the families of sailors who died in the explosion of the submarine Kursk in the Barents Sea. When a visibly rattled Putin met with the wives and families of Kursk seamen on August 22, 2000, no one was afraid to scream at him and accuse him of incompetence or worse. That encounter may have been the worst moment of Putin's life and he immediately set out to make sure he would never face anything like it again.

"The lies began with the sinking of the Kursk," said in 2015 for RFE/RL lawyer Boris Kuznetsov, who represented the families of 55 of the drowned Kursk seamen. "When the Kursk sank, the government began interfering with the legal and law-enforcement systems. The government began gathering all the mass media under its control. The entire process of undermining democracy in Russia, in many regards, began with this."

Why does Putin fake meetings?

Putin's conversation with the flight attendants was organised during the second week of the invasion of Ukraine, at the beginning of March. Considering that Putin was "placed" near his guests during that conversation, it was supposed to send the message that he was healthy, that he did not fear infection and that

he meets "ordinary" people in their immediate vicinity. Before then, the media was dominated by recordings of his conversations with his closest collaborators, metres away from Putin at the same table, or placed in a completely different end of the room from where the conversation was taking place.

Another reason for faking conversations with "ordinary" people is his attempt to amortise discontent over mobilization, casualties and the bad outcome of the attack on Ukraine. According to The Guardian, Putin's meeting with the families of soldiers is seen as an effort to protect the image of the Russian president who at times has been accused of being out of touch and ridiculed as living "in a bunker".

"Mobilisation has been an enormous stress for all of society," said Denis Volkov, the director of the Levada Center, an independent polling agency in Moscow. Citing recent polls, he added: "Assessments of wellbeing have sharply decreased. There hasn't been such a sharp drop in the history of observation, and support for this decision [on mobilisation] has been far lower than support for the special military operation in general."

Olga Tsukanova, the co-head of the Council of Mothers and Wives, whose son is serving in the army, had previously demanded that Putin meet "real" women. "Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin], are you a man or what?" she said in a video post. "Do you have the courage to look us in the eye, not with handpicked women and mothers in your pocket, but with real [women], who have travelled from various cities here to meet with you?"