

Putin the Populist President

By [Nikolai Petrov](#)

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's address to the State Duma last week was effectively a platform to announce his plan to run in the 2012 presidential race. Putin emphasized the government's concern for a wide range of constituencies, including veterans, pensioners, state employees and students. He promised that salaries for military personnel, doctors and teachers would increase prior to the vote. Putin attempted to co-opt President Dmitry Medvedev's modernization mantra but with a different twist — shifting the focus from the technological progress to social handouts.

Putin's speech was a summary of how much the government has done to protect the people during and after the economic crisis. In his speech, Putin recalled events of no more than three years' past but set his sights no less than 10 years into the future — in other words, on the next two presidential terms.

In his address, Putin criticized “social demagoguery,” a thinly veiled attack on the Communist Party, but much of his speech was full of it — an endless listing of government spending in the social sphere. Even the promise to sharply increase spending on the military-

industrial complex is presented as support for domestic production and jobs.

At the same time, Putin didn't explain how the government would increase revenues to pay for all of this new spending. Presumably, he thinks that the government's oil windfall funds are limitless.

Putin drew a rosy picture of the future that he imagines the people want to see, but he didn't outline how he intends to achieve his ambitious goals of making the country one of the world's five largest economies.

In addition, Putin's call to "double labor productivity over the next decade, perhaps even raising it threefold or fourfold in key industries" is taken directly from the overly optimistic "Strategy 2020" report prepared by dozens of experts in various fields at Putin's request. Contrary to Putin's claims, Russia's current budget is aimed not so much at increasing but decreasing productivity because it increases the share of consumption based on savings — that is, investment in and upgrading of machinery and equipment, infrastructure and so on. (Interestingly, the official presidential web site states that labor productivity has already "grown 3.1 times" this past year, a mistake that nobody has corrected as of this writing.)

Putin's approach is also demagogic in the way he cherry-picks numbers and statistics to boost his position, comparing Russia to the Group of Eight, G20 or BRIC countries only when it puts Russia in a favorable light, ignoring the far more numerous instances when such comparisons would highlight the country's backwardness.

Putin is certainly well aware of the real problems Russia faces. So why does he fail to acknowledge them as if they don't exist at all? And why does he make unrealistic promises for the future?

Judging by his speech, Putin is not planning to continue as prime minister. By exaggerating his accomplishments as prime minister, he only makes matters more difficult for his successor. Putin's political promises are therefore intended not so much to be fulfilled at some later date, but simply to give voters the best possible image of the outgoing prime minister and, most likely, the country's next president.

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