

Putin Courts Russian Drivers With Epic Road Check

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin sought to court millions of drivers this week by sending supporters on an epic car journey across eight time zones to check the state of the country's notoriously poor roads.

Opinion polls show that more than half of voters are unhappy with the dire state of roads, an issue that could become a theme in State Duma elections and a presidential election in March.

Putin told officials that members of his All-Russia People's Front, a movement he created to boost the ratings of his ruling United Russia party, would inspect the roads on a car journey of more than 7,350 kilometers from the Pacific port of Vladivostok to Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea.

"They will see with their own eyes how the roads are being built and what they look like," Putin told government officials, construction workers and activists during a video conference Wednesday.

"We are here today to speak about an eternal problem, one of Russia's eternal problems — the roads," he said, hinting at a popular proverb that says Russia has two eternal problems: idiots and roads.

Car ownership has doubled to 40 million over the past decade as high oil prices fueled the longest Russian boom in a generation, though many roads remain unpaved and even major highways are littered with potholes the size of graves.

Putin's government says Russia needs to spend \$285 billion over the next decade to double the rate of road building and cope with soaring car ownership forecast to reach 60 million by 2020.

Foreign and local investors are eyeing Russia's ambitious plans to upgrade aging Soviet infrastructure — including roads, airports, hospitals and schools.

Putin has still not said whether he will run in the March election. But he has been sharpening his image among voters with a string of stunts, baring his muscular torso for a well-publicized medical checkup and revving up a three-wheeled Harley-Davidson at the head of a bikers motorcade.

In one stunt last year, Putin drove 2,165 kilometers in a yellow Lada Kalina along a newly paved road that for the first time linked the European part of Russia with the Far East.

But Putin was stunned when told by an activist that some of the road covering had all ready disintegrated, a frequent problem for hastily constructed roads that have to endure the strains of the bitter Russian winter.

"For me it is a surprise. I was there last year, and everything was paved. Are there unpaved parts? Or parts of the road are under repairs?" Putin said.

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