

# Riddle of 2012 Presidential Vote Might Be Solved Saturday

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*Correction: An earlier version of this article misstated the length of a presidential term. It is six years.*

All eyes will shift to a United Russia convention this weekend for clues about whether Vladimir Putin might return to the Kremlin and Dmitry Medvedev might move to the State Duma as speaker.

United Russia kicks off a two-day convention for the State Duma elections at the Gostiny Dvor business center on Friday. But it will be speeches by Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev at the Luzhniki sports palace on Saturday that observers hope shed light on the presidential vote next year.

Their hopes are well founded. At the United Russia convention before the 2007 Duma elections, then-President Putin provided his first clear signal about what he would do after

leaving the Kremlin. He announced at the convention, also held in Gostiny Dvor, that he would serve as prime minister if United Russia won by a landslide and he found a "worthy candidate for the presidency" whom he could work with.

Two months later, United Russia won a two-thirds majority — enough to change the Constitution, which it did by extending the presidential term by one year — and Putin tapped Medvedev for the presidency.

Expectations are rife that Putin and Medvedev will end an ongoing political limbo by finally saying publicly on Saturday whether one of them will run for president in the March 2012 election.

Lawmakers and political pundits have recently swung behind the notion that Putin is finally eyeing a return to the Kremlin for a six-year term.

"I do not exclude that President Medvedev will support Putin's candidature for the presidential election," a senior United Russia deputy told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

The lawmaker spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to publicly speculate about the party leadership. Putin heads United Russia, although he is not a member. Medvedev does not belong to any party.

The convention will also decide the fate of the party's 311 deputies, half of whom are not expected to make it into the next Duma after the elections on Dec. 4.

United Russia's federal list of candidates is expected to be headed by Putin, as in 2007, but speculation was rife Thursday that he and Medvedev might appear side by side as equals.

Putin might be the No. 2 candidate after Medvedev, Gazeta.ru reported late Thursday, citing a source in the party's executive committee.

United Russia has been at the center of much speculation because its popularity has sagged in recent months to about 40 percent.

Some analysts speculated that Putin would wait for the result in the Dec. 4 elections to make a decision — just as he did in 2007. They said a strong showing by United Russia would make a second term for Medvedev more plausible, while a relatively poor showing, possibly making falsifications necessary, would make Putin's return more likely.

But new, seemingly radical theories, have also surfaced this week.

The Argumenti Nedely weekly, quoting United Russia sources, said Putin might announce a wide-ranging constitutional reform that reshapes the country from a presidential into a parliamentary republic according to the German model, with a powerful prime minister elected by parliament and a figurehead president.

Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, the party's No. 2 leader after Putin, denied the report Thursday, saying the party has no plans to change the country's current form of government.

"The current structure of government is well balanced between the executive and legislative

branches of power," he said in comments published on United Russia's web site.

But analysts said the scenario was realistic if Putin indeed decided to return to the Kremlin.

One of the options is to make Medvedev the next Duma speaker, said Nikolai Petrov, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

In such a scenario, he said, parliamentary powers would be greatly increased in a constitutional reform that would be initiated sometime after the Duma elections.

"As Duma speaker, Medvedev would then have the necessary powers to continue his reformist policies," Petrov said by telephone.

As evidence, he pointed to signs that government members who are running again with United Russia will this time probably take their seats in parliament. Ministers ran in 2007 — but to attract votes to United Russia, not to serve in the Duma.

All of Putin's seven deputy and two first deputy prime ministers are tipped to lead regional party lists.

Among the more difficult lists, Petrov named St. Petersburg, expected to be led by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, and the Stavropol region in the North Caucasus, expected to be headed by Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin.

As another candidate for a Duma job, he named First Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov, expected to head the list in the Volgograd region.

Putin and Gryzlov have said that around half of the 311 United Russia Duma deputies will lose their mandates.

Only 167 of them appear on the federal list, said Sergei Markov, a United Russia Duma deputy.

Gryzlov said Wednesday that 360 of the roughly 700 names on the list would be first-time candidates who have never before taken part in federal elections, and that 185 would be nonparty members.

United Russia is feeling the heat after Putin, apparently concerned by the poor ratings, in spring formed the All-Russia People's Front, a loose political organization to put nonparty members on the party's lists.

Some prominent United Russia lawmakers have already signaled that they will leave by making openly critical statements, like Deputy Duma Speaker Lyubov Sliska, who criticized the Mikhail Khodorkovsky case this summer. Others are apparently considering defecting to other parties, like Transportation Committee chairman Sergei Shishkaryov, who was reported this week to be switching to the Communists.

The party conducted primaries to determine its regional lists for the first time, but most of them were won by senior officials, leading to numerous accusations that the primaries were a sham.

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