

## 2 Opposition Parties Snub Putin in Duma

By [Irina Filatova](#)

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Putin addressing the fifth State Duma during its final session Wednesday. **Yana Lapikova**

Dozens of State Duma lawmakers ostentatiously snubbed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Wednesday, refusing to greet him by standing during his rare visit to the lower house of parliament.

While small, the snub is a sign of change, or at least pre-election tensions, given that it is the second time in days that Putin was given the cold shoulder in public, after a crowd of martial arts fans booed him at Moscow's Olimpiisky stadium.

The trend correlates with Putin's own ratings, which have been slowly but steadily sliding all year. But the boiling point has apparently not been reached yet, judging by some lawmakers' hasty attempts to downplay their behavior afterward.

Most lawmakers remaining seated at the sight of Putin on Wednesday were members of the Communist Party and A Just Russia, including the latter party's leader, Sergei Mironov, and his deputy, Gennady Gudkov.

“It was an ostentatious gesture,” Just Russia member Ilya Ponomaryov told The Moscow Times.

Ponomaryov said his party is facing nonstop pressure from the ruling United Russia party, chaired by Putin, ahead of the State Duma vote on Dec. 4. He said opponents print fake Just Russia newspapers, while authorities arrest party activists on the ground.

“We believe this is connected with the prime minister’s position,” he said by telephone.

Putin did not bat an eyelid over the incident, though he struggled to find words to react to the situation.

“I want to thank all State Duma deputies today, regardless of which party and faction they belong to — those who stood up in the hall today and those who didn’t consider it possible to stand up,” the smiling Putin said.

He then called in his address for the opposition to be quiet ahead of the Duma vote and not to “rock the boat” after the new legislature convenes.

“But this is just good wishes,” he conceded. “The opposition exists in order for the ruling party ... to hold the helm tighter and be able to prove to society that the country is developing in the right ways.”

The Wednesday plenary meeting was the current Duma’s last.

“We’ve never been loyal to Putin. It was Sergei Mikhailovich Mironov personally who was loyal to Putin for a certain period of time before their paths diverged,” Ponomaryov said.

He said the party had been loyal to President Dmitry Medvedev over the last four years of the Duma’s work and supported most of the bills initiated by him, while rejecting a majority of those initiated by Putin’s government.

A Just Russia, created with the Kremlin’s blessing in 2006, has fallen out of favor with the authorities after it began chipping votes off United Russia. Mironov, a longtime staunch Putin loyalist, said earlier this month that A Just Russia would not back the prime minister’s bid at the presidential election in March.

On Wednesday, Mironov criticized the work of the current Duma, controlled by United Russia, calling it in a statement on A Just Russia’s web site “the Duma of unfulfilled expectations.”

Mironov did not comment on Putin’s snub. But meanwhile, the leader of A Just Russia’s faction, Nikolai Levichev, who sat in the first row on Wednesday, denied that the incident was politically motivated.

Deputies did not expect Putin to come, and some of them did not have time to react when he entered, said Levichev, who said he stood up.

“No one was aware of the prime minister’s visit. ... Some had laptops on their knees,” he said by telephone.

He had to admit that at least some lawmakers acted intentionally, but chided them, saying to stand up when someone is entering is polite.

Ponomarev insisted that the whole party faction joined the snubbing and did not rise to greet Putin.

The first two rows were about to stand up but changed their mind after looking back at colleagues in the back rows, where Mironov was sitting, Ponomarev said.

Putin was expected to chair a foreign investment commission in his Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow on Wednesday, but changed plans abruptly to come to the Duma.

“If I knew he would come, I’d have brought a whistle,” Ponomarev tweeted from the session, apparently referring to the recent chorus of boos and jeers that Putin faced from mixed martial arts fans at the Olimpiyskiy stadium on Sunday.

Putin took to the stage that day to congratulate Russian star fighter Fedor Emelianenko with breaking his three-loss streak by defeating American Jeff Monson.

The prime minister’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov said after the incident that the 20,000 fans were booing Monson, but the American’s Facebook page was promptly flooded with comments from Russian sports lovers claiming otherwise.

Putin was expected to attend an anti-drug concert in Olimpiyskiy on Tuesday, two days after the booing incident, but did not show up.

Peskov said Wednesday that Putin never intended to attend due to a tight schedule, Interfax reported. The show’s promotion posters, however, featured Putin with the slogan “Bros, you don’t need this.”

Putin’s support rating stood at 61 percent in November, compared with 78 percent in January 2010, [according](#) to the independent pollster Levada.

By opting not to greet Putin, Just Russia deputies showed to their constituencies that they distanced themselves from the position of the United Russia, said Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies.

“Deputies follow the voters, especially before the elections,” he said by telephone.

Unlike the Liberal Democratic Party, which wins votes largely due to the eccentric behavior of its leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, it is crucial for A Just Russia to show that they are “principally different from United Russia,” Makarkin said.

Zhirinovskiy criticized his colleagues’ ostentatious behavior, saying those who refused to stand up showed disrespect to Putin as head of the country’s government. “It’s impudence that some are not standing up,” Zhirinovskiy told journalists after the meeting.

Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov was not present at the Wednesday session and did not comment, but another Communist lawmaker, Valery Rashkin, dismissed the accusations.

“Our behavior is not impudence and not the demonstration of a negative attitude toward the prime minister,” he told Interfax.

Rashkin said the only official whom the Duma is obliged to greet by standing is the president.

“We’ve had many heads of the government — Sergei Kiriyenko, Sergei Stepashin, Yevgeny Primakov, Viktor Zubkov. They all came to the State Duma, as well. But it didn’t come to the deputies’ mind then to jump up from their seats to show their servility,” he said.

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