

Putin Links Elections to Recession

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NOVO-OGARYOVO, Moscow Region — The defeat of the ruling United Russia at the polls could plunge the country into an economic crisis "like with our friends in Europe," Prime Minister Vladimir Putin warned Thursday.

He also hinted that the parliament may have its powers slashed in case of a recession, saying it almost happened during the last economic crisis of 2008-09.

Meanwhile, United Russia bosses insisted that the decrease of the party's ratings ahead of the State Duma elections — which one pollster said has slipped 9 percent — was insignificant.

Putin, who heads the ruling party without being a member, met Thursday with United Russia top brass in his Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow.

He urged them to "strike for a maximum result at the elections" on Dec. 4, stressing the dangers of "watering down the legislature."

If one party would not control the Duma, "we would not be able to make the necessary decisions on time and ... find ourselves at the line that our partners and friends in Europe found themselves at," Putin said.

He cited Greece, Portugal, Italy and France as negative examples and praised his own government, which managed "not to drag the country into debt bondage."

This was only possible because of United Russia, Putin said.

Unidentified members of the government lobbied to curb the Duma's powers during the recession, but Putin opted against it because the ruling party promised to fast-track all Cabinet bills, he said, thanking Boris Gryzlov, head of United Russia's Duma faction, for cooperation.

The populace is not necessarily impressed: Ratings for both Putin and United Russia have been gradually slipping over recent months, meanwhile public displays of dissatisfaction multiply by the week.

In a typical example, the anchor who announced at the concert of Russian rock legends Mashina Vremeni in Kemerovo that the show was sponsored by United Russia was booed off stage by a storm of hisses. The musicians later denounced the claim as a lie and said they were "screwed."

Putin himself faced two public snubs in recent days, with mixed martial arts fans booing him at the Olimpiisky stadium on Sunday, when he came to the stage to congratulate a Russian champion with his victory, and with dozens of oppositional Duma deputies refusing to greet him by standing up during his speech at the lower chamber Wednesday.

Officials tried to downplay the public reaction on Thursday, with Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying he preferred to speak about "fluctuations" rather than falling ratings.

"It's a normal working process. Sometimes the rating increases, sometimes it decreases — it's politics. A frozen rating is a bad thing. It doesn't motivate you to improve," he told journalists ahead of the Novo-Ogaryovo meeting.

United Russia senior official Sergei Neverov said the decline was insignificant and the party is still favored by most voters.

"According to the latest polls ... United Russia gets 57 percent [of the Duma vote]. We don't see a sharp decline," he said after the meeting with Putin, part of which happened behind closed doors.

He added that the party hopes to gain a "sustainable majority" in the next Duma. It now has a constitutional majority in the legislature.

United Russia's rating dropped from 60 percent in February to 51 percent in November, independent pollster Levada [said](#) earlier this month. An FOM poll released Thursday gave the ruling party 39 percent of the vote.

Putin also outlined tasks for United Russia in the next Duma, saying they will be "socially

focused," but only to the extent that state finances allow.

"All budget expenses must be based on real budget incomes. On real ones!" he said.

Indeed, no huge increases in social spending are in the government's cards, though at the same time the military is set to receive a record 20 trillion rubles (\$630 billion) by 2020.

Putin and the party bosses contrasted this "responsible" fiscal policy with the opposition's proposals to increase public spending instead of putting oil and gas revenues in state funds.

"Our opponents at the elections, at the debates ... just say it would be better if we spend all the funds now on bigger scholarships, pensions and wages," said Duma faction head Gryzlov.

But Putin said part of the windfall accumulated in the country's reserve funds — the National Welfare Fund and the Reserve Fund — is already being spent to support the country's pension system annually.

"So no need to twaddle," Putin said harshly.

Tensions lifted a bit when the lights in the Novo-Ogaryovo conference room abruptly went off for several seconds for no apparent reason.

"The guard got tired!" Putin joked, to general laughter.

Yet the joke also had a sinister meaning, being a quote from a pro-Bolshevik anarchist sailor, who made the same quip before the All-Russia Constituent Assembly in 1918. With these words, the elective body — created to decide the country's fate after the fall of the monarchy — was dismissed, paving the way for the authoritarian Bolshevik government, which abolished free elections until the fall of the Soviet Union almost 80 years later.

Staff writer Alexander Bratersky contributed to this report from Moscow.

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