

Putin: Russia Ready to Throw Weight Behind Breakaway Republics

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During his first official meetings with foreign leaders as president, Vladimir Putin said Russia is ready to stand behind the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with particular attention to social and economic development.

"Russia is ready to lend a shoulder to support Abkhazia in the social sphere and the development of its economy," Putin said Friday during talks with Abkhazia's president Alexander Ankvab.

The Kremlin published a statement on its website about the meeting, which took place at Bocharov Ruchei, Putin's ornate residence near the the Black Sea.

"Much has been done in previous years for the establishment of Abkhazia as independent state, but more needs to be done," Putin told Ankvab, the statement said. Putin said during border crossing between Russia and Abkhazia, everything should be done so "people feel comfortable, communicate, relax and do business."

Ankvab congratulated Putin on assuming the office of president and stressed Abkhazia's

appreciation of Russia. Ankvab said Abkhazia's population has a "positive mood, because the people feel Russia's support."

Putin also met with South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov Saturday, who made his first official visit to Russia. The two leaders discussed bilateral cooperation and the socio-economic reconstruction and development of South Ossetia.

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