

Putin Addresses Duma Leaders in Sochi

By [Alexander Winning](#)

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President Vladimir Putin held talks with the leaders of all four Duma factions at his Black Sea residence on Wednesday, telling them that Russia's political system should strive to be flexible and transparent.

The talks marked the first time this year that Putin has held formal talks with leaders of the United Russia, Communist, Just Russia and Liberal Democratic parties, all of which are accused of collaborating with the Kremlin to secure influence.

Opening the meeting in Sochi, Putin applauded all parties for adopting a "consolidated position" on tackling corruption, saying that new, exhaustive requirements were being put in place for the country's parliamentarians.

These remarks set the tone for the meeting, with Putin lavishing praise on Duma leaders for their work — a far cry from meetings between Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Cabinet, which Putin has publicly dressed down for failing to fulfill a number of campaign promises he made in May last year.

The main legislative initiatives raised by Putin on Wednesday included a law banning officials from holding foreign bank accounts and overseas assets, and a bill that would modify rules for parliamentary elections, both of which he backed.

Touching on the so-called "foreign accounts" law, which Putin signed into law last week, the president praised the behavior of those who had left their posts in anticipation of the legislation coming into force. "I think theirs is an honest, correct position," he said, according to a transcript posted on the Kremlin website.

Analysts see the legislation, which was presented as a means of freeing lawmakers from pernicious foreign influence and clamping down on corruption, as part of a broader Kremlin strategy to nationalize Russia's elite.

Putin also said plans to switch to a mixed voting system, whereby half of lawmakers would be elected by party lists and half by single-mandate districts, would boost accountability and lead to the appearance of "new, bright leaders."

On lowering the threshold for parties to enter the Duma to 5 percent, Putin said that there should be no artificial filters restricting small parties from parliamentary work and that the political system should be "open, flexible and democratic."

The bill, soon to be heard in a crucial second reading, narrowly passed a first reading last month, with the Communist and Liberal Democratic parties claiming it was designed to favor the Kremlin-connected United Russia party.

In comments leading up to the Sochi talks, Duma leaders told journalists that they would ask Putin to fire embattled Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov over what they see as his disastrous handling of educational reforms.

But Putin ignored their requests, adopting a similar stance to the one he took during his live call-in show last month by saying that sudden changes wouldn't help matters.

"I regularly meet with rectors [of institutes of higher learning], and they tell me that we need structural changes," Putin said, according to Interfax. "We need to assess the possibilities and our needs, and increase the effectiveness of education."

Contacted by phone, Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the Center for Political Technologies, said that the presidential administration likely organized the talks as a means of ensuring that those invited "didn't wander from the pre-arranged path."

"These meetings are usually conducted in a friendly manner: The parties act deferentially toward Putin, Putin tells them that they play an important role in the political process and that they should cooperate for the good of the people," he said.

Makarkin was dismissive about the parliamentary opposition's chances of influencing the Kremlin's course, however, saying that the final decision always rests with Putin.

"Take Livanov, for instance. He may be fired, but not under pressure from political parties. For the Kremlin, that would set a dangerous precedent," he said.

Contact the author at a.winning@imedia.ru

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