

Putin Meets for First Time With Nonparliamentary Opposition

By [Natalya Krainova](#)

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President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday met with leaders of major nonparliamentary parties for the first time in his 13 years in power, to discuss issues that will be addressed in his state-of-the-nation speech to be delivered next month.

Participants in the meeting, who included billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov of Civil Platform, Vladimir Ryzhkov of RPR-Parnas and Sergei Mitrokhin of Yabloko, raised concerns about what they called politically motivated prosecutions of opposition supporters and capital outflow, among other topics.

Opening the meeting, Putin said his state-of-the-nation address would "form ... joint work" of the government and political opposition for next year, and perhaps in the longer term, in economic and social spheres.

Ryzhkov, speaking about the planned large-scale amnesty to mark the 20th anniversary

of the Constitution on Dec. 12, urged Putin to release those on a list of 70 "political prisoners" compiled by the Memorial human rights group in late October. The list includes 12 participants in the May 2012 opposition rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in Moscow and the two jailed members of anti-Kremlin punk band Pussy Riot, among others.

Mitrokhin supported Ryzhkov in asking Putin to announce a broad amnesty of perceived political prisoners.

"I will of course look into this, and in the most attentive way possible," Putin said, Interfax reported.

"I think that this [the amnesty] is in demand but we must by no means create some kind of nervous environment in society [by making it fear] that tomorrow some kind of criminals will be let out into the streets," Putin said.

Prokhorov asked to Putin to look into what his party believes to be the politically motivated arrest in July of Yaroslavl Mayor Yevgeny Urlashov, a member of Prokhorov's party, on extortion charges.

Apparently worried about capital outflow, Mitrokhin made a proposal to Putin to ban offshore companies from key sectors of the economy, which Putin promised to consider.

The other five participants in the meeting were leaders of lower-profile parties such as Right Cause, Patriots of Russia, Rodina, and the Russian Party of Pensioners for Justice.

Putin's meeting with the nonparliamentary opposition was the first of its kind for him as president, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Interfax on Tuesday.

Political analysts said they believed that Putin wanted to diffuse public discontent with the authorities simply by meeting with the nonparliamentary opposition, but without actually fulfilling their demands.

"The aim is purely demonstrative: to show that the authorities do not disregard the opposition while preparing such an important document," Roman Larionov, an analyst at the Center for Political Technologies, said by phone of Putin's address to the Federal Assembly.

Larionov pointed out that the authorities had failed to take into account earlier proposals of nonparliamentary political opposition leaders to amend electoral laws, which they voiced after meeting with then-President Dmitry Medvedev in February.

Putin, on the contrary, noted a "serious liberalization in party laws" at Wednesday's meeting, referring to the decrease in the required number of members of a party and the easing of registration rules.

Anna Lunyova, deputy head of the Center of Political Information, said Putin will "unlikely take into account the wishes or opinions of the opposition."

Lunyova recalled Putin comparing the one-time symbol of the political opposition, a white ribbon, to "contraceptives" during his televised call-in show in December 2011, which

reflected his "disrespect" of his opponents, she said.

Putin's address to the Federal Assembly, his tenth during his three terms as president since 2000, is scheduled for Dec. 12, Constitution Day, and is to be followed by a news conference Dec. 19.

Wednesday's meeting comes after similar receptions of leaders of parliamentary parties in late October and earlier in November.

President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday briefly addressed domestic and foreign criticism of the federal law passed this summer outlawing gay propaganda among minors.

"Xenophobia" toward gay people "must not be created in society," Putin said at a meeting with nonparliamentary party leaders, Interfax reported. The comment is the latest in what appears to be a softening of his position on gay rights, an issue over which foreign governments and rights groups have criticized the Kremlin. (MT)

Contact the author at n.krainova@imedia.ru

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