

Putin's Approval Rating Hits 2005 Low

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Putin watching a football match with the Serbian branch of the Night Wolves biker club in Belgrade on Wednesday. **Alexei Nikolsky**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's approval rating fell in March to the lowest level since mid-2005 on perceptions of economic stagnation, the independent Levada Center pollster said Thursday.

Putin remains the country's most popular politician, but his rating fell to 69 percent from 73 percent in February, while President Dmitry Medvedev's rating fell to 66, the lowest since he took office in 2008, from 69 percent.

The declines are likely to perturb Kremlin strategists ahead of the March 2012 presidential election. Putin and Medvedev have said they will decide later this year on which of them might run in the election.

Levada said the poll ratings were falling on perceptions that vast revenues from high oil prices were not reaching the population and that Russia's leadership lacked ambitious economic aims.

"The state's revenue from high oil prices is growing, but this does not reach the population," said Alexei Grazhdankin, deputy director with the Levada Center.

"Putin promised in his time to double [gross domestic product], but now there are no aims at all. We have come out of the crisis, but there is no feeling that life is improving," he said.

Putin and Medvedev are by far the most popular politicians in Russia, and their ratings remain high by Western European standards. But such sharp falls ahead of the elections may worry the Kremlin, given the unrest across the Arab world.

"It is the lowest level since mid-2005" for Putin, Grazhdankin said, adding that Putin's popularity fell in 2005 because of an initiative to monetize Soviet-era social benefits.

"Medvedev's rating has never been so low."

The Levada poll showed Thursday that 42 percent of Russians believed the country is going in the wrong direction, 40 percent believe it is going in the right direction and 18 percent could not say.

It also showed that United Russia's rating fell in March.

Levada polled 1,600 people in 45 regions from March 18 to 22. The margin of error was 3.4 percentage points.

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