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Putin Pushes Figure Skating and Services

By Olga Razumovskaya

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin asked his subordinates for more, faster and better efforts in providing government services electronically, and announced Moscow as the new host city for the world figure skating championship during the Cabinet session Thursday.

Electronic government, the universal electronic card and improving the overall quality of services provided by the state to the masses have become key elements of President Dmitry Medvedev's agenda, as the presidential election draws nearer and increasing popularity ratings of the country's leadership becomes ever more important.

Many of these improvements are supposed to be completed over the next two years, and it seems that Putin is showing his commitment by pushing hard on the government services agenda.

"There is an impression that whatever is being done, some problems are solved and others

pop up," Putin said.

On Thursday, the prime minister encouraged his colleagues to look for a systematic and constant approach toward providing government services.

Putin said improvements of government services are progressing, with the completion of the government services Internet portal, "so that citizens no longer have to carry paperwork from one state office to another."

In 2010, more than 3.5 million citizens turned to the so-called multifunctional centers — centralized offices that allow them to use state-provided services through "one window" — and 90 percent of users, according to Putin, were happy with the experience.

According to Economic Development Minister Elvira Nabiullina, the demand for these multifunctional centers has grown, especially in the regions, despite the initial skepticism.

"[Previously], getting a simple government service, a slip or a document resulted in standing in lines and humiliation for people," Putin said.

This experience, the government hopes, will change as early as July 1, when government administrators will be officially forbidden to require citizens to collect multiple documents from different agencies if those documents can be accessed through a planned universal government database.

Bureaucrats who send citizens on a quest for additional paperwork or take too long to process it will be fined up to 5,000 rubles ($176) for administrators and up to 15,000 rubles for their bosses, Nabiullina said, adding that these fines could increase if the punishment turns out to be too lenient.

"Do not cut back on the tempo," the prime minister told Communications and Press Minister Igor Shchyogolev. "This work should be completed."

Also discussed at the Cabinet session was this year's world's figure skating championship, which will be held in Moscow from April 24 through May 1.

The championship was to have begun in Tokyo on Monday, but following the 9.0-magnitude earthquake, a tsunami and a set of explosions at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, Japan decided not to host the event.

Russia competed with six other countries, including Canada, France, Austria and Finland, and won the bid, Putin said, promising that guests of the sporting event beloved by Russians "will feel at home in Moscow."

For the current Russian team, which is starting to compete with a new generation of athletes, this will be the first opportunity to demonstrate its skills in Moscow, Putin said. The prime minister asked sports minister Vitaly Mutko to create an organization committee to make preparations for the event.

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