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Cabinet Promotes Populist Measures

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A teacher being greeted by schoolchildren in Vladimir, Russia. If Putin's forecast made at the recent Cabinet meeting turns out to be true, schoolteachers can expect to see a raise in their salaries i

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin forecast an increase in the salaries of Russian teachers and encouraged opening deputies' and officials' tax returns to public scrutiny at the Cabinet session Monday.

As the presidential elections loom large, making post-crisis improvements evident to the citizenry — not just to big businesses and foreign investors — is becoming increasingly important, gradually forcing the government and ruling party to refocus their rhetoric on domestic problems.

In the run-up to the annual government report to the State Duma on April 20, the prime minister outlined key achievements of the Russian government in 2010, including rolling out comprehensive health care reform and a 45 percent pension increase.

"I am happy we have made people of paramount importance to us during the past years,"

Putin said.

As part of the Cabinet meeting, Putin ordered deputies and government officials to disclose information on their personal spending — a measure, he said, ardently supported by Russian citizens.

He also hoped it would be beneficial for fighting corruption and combating money laundering among state officials.

Putin also promised additional finances to support the labor market, which has started to recover from the crisis slump. The government will allocate 105 billion rubles ($3.7 billion) this year to extend unemployment benefits, he said.

The total number of jobless fell to 5.7 million people in February, compared with 7.1 million during the same month in 2008, Putin said.

The prime minister also said that "in the near future, teachers' salaries might grow by as much as 30 percent."

In response to a question from Boris Gryzlov, the State Duma speaker and leader of the ruling United Russia party — who was also invited to the Cabinet session — about the situation of school teachers, Putin proposed gradually raising teachers' salaries to the overall national average.

Now, Putin said, the average schoolteacher's salary is 13,000 rubles ($460), compared with the average salary nationwide of 18,000 rubles.

The prime minister proposed helping regions with money for school renovations, which would allow them to focus their budgets on salary increases.

At a meeting with journalists following the Cabinet session, Education and Science Minister Andrei Fursenko discussed drug problems at schools.

"[Drug testing] will be only done voluntarily," he said. "The goal here is not to catch anybody but to create an atmosphere of safety and security within the school."

President Dmitry Medvedev first raised the issue of drug testing in schools and colleges in 2009, when he advocated making it mandatory, as drug addiction is becoming a big problem among youth.

About 10 percent to 15 percent of schoolchildren have tried drugs at school, according to estimates by the Moscow Scientific and Practical Narcology Center, Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported in late March.

Pilot school and college drug testing projects are being prepared now by the Health and Social Development Ministry.

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