

Putin Asks United Russia Not to Talk About 2012

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NOVO-OGARYOVO, Moscow Region — Prime Minister Vladimir Putin told leaders of his ruling United Russia party on Friday to focus on December parliamentary elections and not get "excited" about the 2012 presidential vote.

A senior United Russia official said Thursday that the party wanted Putin to return to the presidency in the election next March. Putin has hinted he may run himself or endorse President Dmitry Medvedev for a second term.

The party official's remarks reflected growing tension between backers of the two leaders, who have said they will decide together on a candidate. A series of assertive moves by Medvedev have suggested he wants to stay on.

"As for the presidential campaign, I would ask you not to talk about this issue, not to get excited — it is not until next year," Putin told United Russia leaders at his residence outside Moscow.

He said United Russia, the dominant party he has used as a source of support and instrument of power, should concentrate on the elections for the State Duma, where it holds a controlling majority.

United Russia relies heavily on Putin for its public support. Polls have shown the party's popularity falling, and strong showings by rivals in regional elections last month pointed to concerns about the country's economic troubles and discontent with the entrenched ruling party.

Poor results for United Russia in December would be unlikely to affect Putin's chances of winning the presidency if he runs, but they could undermine his mandate and embolden opponents.

President from 2000 to 2008, Putin became leader of the party after steering his protege Medvedev into the Kremlin when he faced a constitutional ban on seeking a third straight term.

Putin helped United Russia win a commanding victory in 2007 Duma elections by putting his name atop the candidate list.

Putin has not said when a presidential candidate will be named. After Medvedev said recently that he would decide whether to seek re-election soon, Putin indirectly rebuked him by saying it was too early to announce a candidate.

Putin on Friday urged United Russia to ensure that its most effective members rise to the top. "If United Russia wants to be competitive against other Russian political parties, it needs to create an atmosphere of competition within its ranks," he said.

He told party leaders that Russia expects 1.138 trillion rubles (\$40 billion) in windfall energy revenues this year due to high world oil prices, and urged them to think about how to best use the money to improve the lives of citizens.

Putin ordered the party to prepare a campaign program and candidate lists for the Duma elections by September. He said it should discuss potential candidates with voters.

State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, chairman of United Russia's Supreme Council, said the party would hold internal elections to choose candidates for its Duma list.

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