

Putin Courts Arts Workers Ahead of Vote

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PENZA — Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has promised increased state funding for culture and pay hikes for museum workers, courting the artistic community in an election year.

"We plan to significantly increase outlays to support the industry as a whole," Putin told a meeting on construction and repair of arts facilities on Friday, adding that the plans would be taken into account in the 2012-14 federal budgets.

Putin gave no specifics and said he hoped the business community and local governments would chip in. He promised museum staff and librarians a pay increase on July 1.

Meeting leading actors and directors, he discussed financing, legal issues and a proposal to spend 6 billion rubles (\$217.8 million) over four years to create a new theater district in central Moscow.

With high world oil prices bringing windfall income, Putin has promised extra cash for state workers and students ahead of a State Duma election in December in which his United Russia party hopes to maintain dominance.

But he has stopped short of massive spending plans due to fears that would fuel inflation, a chief concern of voters struggling to keep pace with rising prices for staples.

The visit to Penza, 620 kilometers southeast of Moscow, was the latest in a series of trips to provincial capitals.

He ordered the provincial governor to raise local teachers' salaries from 10,700 rubles (\$388) a month to 14,000 rubles (\$508), which the governor said was the regional average.

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