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Surkov Says Putin Is God's Gift

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was sent to Russia by God to help his country during one of its most turbulent times, the Kremlin's chief political strategist said Friday in rare public remarks.

"I honestly believe that Putin is a person who was sent to Russia by fate and by the Lord at a difficult time for Russia," Kremlin first deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov was quoted by Interfax as telling state-run Chechen TV.

Putin was "preordained by fate to preserve our peoples," Surkov said.

Putin, 58, was president from 2000 to 2008 before becoming prime minister and is widely viewed as Russia's key decision maker.

The comments by Surkov, who served in the Kremlin under Putin throughout his presidency, will fuel criticism by opponents that a personality cult is building around the prime minister ahead of the presidential election in 2012.

Two months ago, a nun-like sect appeared in Nizhny Novgorod saying Putin was a saint and a

savior. A spokesman said Putin "does not approve of that kind of admiration."

Putin made no immediate comment about Surkov's remarks.

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