

Medvedev Sets Duma Vote for Dec. 4

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A boy waiting for his parents to vote at a Moscow polling station during the March 2, 2008, presidential election. **Vladimir Filonov**

President Dmitry Medvedev on Monday signed a decree setting the State Duma elections for Dec. 4 and urged party leaders not to stoke nationalist sentiment during campaigning.

The electoral law provides a small window for elections, and the Dec. 4 date had been expected for the vote, which is by party list with no races between individual candidates. Deputies will be elected for five-year terms, a year longer than those in the outgoing parliament.

"I would very much like the makeup of the future Duma to reflect the preferences of the broadest circle of our citizens to the maximum extent possible," Medvedev said during a meeting with leaders of the country's seven registered political parties in his Sochi summer residence.

He also said nationalist sentiment would be a taboo topic on the campaign trail.

"We must completely rule out any attempts to fan national or ethnic hatred. It would be utterly unacceptable," he said, Itar-Tass reported. "This is not just a request — this is my

unconditional demand."

Medvedev's talk of plurality seemed aimed at appealing to Russians who are tired of the primacy of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, which holds a two-thirds Duma majority, large enough to change the Constitution, and dominates politics nationwide.

Steered into the presidency in 2008 by Putin, who faced a constitutional bar on a third straight term, Medvedev has loosened electoral laws, making it slightly easier for other parties to field candidates and win seats.

Critics say the changes are cosmetic adjustments designed to appease critics of United Russia while keeping the political system intact.

The head of United Russia's Duma faction, Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, said in remarks published Monday that the party's aim is to preserve its constitutional majority.

A mid-August poll by Levada independent agency showed [levada.ru/press/2011082505.html] only 54 percent of the populace were ready to vote for United Russia, which would give the party 64 percent of the seats in the Duma, or just below the constitutional majority.

Only two other parties, the Communists and the Liberal Democrats, have a chance of clearing the 7 percent elections threshold, with 18 and 13 percent of the vote, respectively, according to the survey. This would give the Communists 22 percent of the seats and the Liberal Democrats 15 percent.

The fourth party currently represented in the Duma, A Just Russia, narrowly missed the threshold with 6 percent of the vote, said the poll, which has a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

The pro-business Right Cause, still undergoing a revamp under billionaire leader Mikhail Prokhorov, can hope for 3 percent of the vote, while Yabloko and Patriots of Russia can only count on 1 percent each.

(Reuters, MT)

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