

Putin Revs Up Election Campaign

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A participant putting on a show during Prime Minister Putin's visit to a bike festival in Novorossiisk late Monday. **Sergei Karpukhin**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin kicked off an election campaign late Monday revving up his three-wheeled Harley Davidson at the head of a bikers motorcade — the latest in a series of macho stunts that have punctuated his political career.

Black-clad Putin, 58, called the bikers his "brothers" as he joined a festival aboard a Soviet-era warship in the Black Sea port of Novorossiisk, held to mark the city's liberation during World War II.

"I want to talk to you, brothers. It is cool that you do not forget the heroes of the past," Putin said. "Boys, girls, you are great. Not only are you having fun while riding your bikes, but you are also combining it with patriotic deeds."

Putin's United Russia party is hoping to secure a constitutional majority in December's vote for the State Duma. Campaigning began in earnest after President Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree on Monday setting the date for the poll as Dec. 4.

The December election will also set the scene for a presidential poll in March 2012. Putin and Medvedev have not said who will run.

In Novorossiisk on Monday, Putin rode along as the hard-rock anthem of the "Night Wolves" biker club blared in the background. Club leader Alexander Zaldostanov, nicknamed "Surgeon," is one of Putin's friends.

During the event, Putin was flanked by veterans of World War II and the conflicts in former Yugoslavia.

Putin's testosterone-fueled appearances have earned him the nickname "alpha-dog" in U.S. diplomatic cables. In the past he has been pictured sparring with his judo coach, flying a fighter jet and firefighting plane, hunting Siberian tigers and shooting darts from a crossbow at a gray whale. Last month, he dived to an archeological site at the bottom of the Black Sea and emerged with two ancient amphoras.

Monday's appearance was not his first on a Harley three-wheeler. Last summer he drove to a "Night Wolves" festival near the Crimean city of Sevastopol in Ukraine, en route to a meeting with President Viktor Yanukovich.

(Reuters, MT)

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