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# Putin Says He Could Lose the Election

By Alexander Bratersky

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said the public has a chance to vote him out of office in the presidential election in March, and promised a huge reshuffle in the ruling United Russia party.

The statements were made in a joint interview to the heads of the country's top three television channels, Channel One, Rossia-1 and NTV, recorded Saturday and broadcast Monday evening.

The interview saw Putin encroaching on the turf of outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev, who regularly gave such interviews to the same channels. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, however, played down the similarity, saying Putin's interview was meant as a sequel to Medvedev's late last month.

Putin, looking energetic and speaking in calm, self-assured tone, said he wanted to return to the presidency because of his habit to "see things through to their logical end."

Putin cited U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who served four terms in office, to justify his return — an example he has raised before — and said he and Medvedev agreed on a 2012 job swap four years ago, when Medvedev, a longtime Putin ally, replaced him in the Kremlin.

But they only thought it possible to propose their plan to the public if they "successfully passed through this period of pretty serious hardship," he said.

Putin, who was interviewed at his Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow, was asked whether his candidacy rendered the election a formality in absence of strong competition. "There's always a choice for the ordinary citizen," Putin replied.

He said the only people who believe there is no political choice are opposition activists, and their job is to convince the populace through grassroots work that they are a better alternative than the ruling establishment.

He echoed Medvedev, who said in his interview that any presidential candidate might lose the vote. "Nobody is insured. What kind of predetermination are you talking about?" Medvedev told the same three TV channel heads on Sept. 29.

Neither Medvedev nor Putin has named any potential rival to dethrone them.

Putin's approval rating stood at 68 percent in September, according to the independent Levada Center pollster. The rating for Medvedev, who said he would not run for re-election because Putin is a more popular politician, stood at 62 percent.

Putin also said United Russia, which is poised to win the State Duma vote in December, "must remain the leading political force in the country and in the Duma."

But he reiterated his previously voiced promise to revamp party leadership after the elections. He did not elaborate, but the promise, again, echoed Medvedev's pledge to revamp the party, made at a meeting with his supporters last week.

Putin, who is a leader but not a member of the United Russia, headed its party list in the previous vote in 2007. This year, the honor went to Medvedev, whom Putin promised in September to make prime minister after the elections.

Putin was more cautious when asked about a government revamp, saying the "ministerial leapfrog" is a sign of weakness, but promising to bring in new people with new ideas after the elections while providing unspecified cushy jobs for the veteran officials.

He also fielded a question about the U.S.-Russian "reset," cautiously telling an interviewer who spoke about his reputation as a "hawk" that could threaten the reset that "the hawk is a nice birdie" and that Russia would continue to look for its own interests, but would do so "correctly."

The interview was Putin's first television appearance after he decided to run for president for the third term. His spokesman Peskov said it was "no new format" for his patron, but a follow-up to Medvedev's interview, Kommersant reported Saturday.

Putin has spoken in the past to foreign television channels, including CNN and CCTV, but

in Russia his preferred format is a live televised call-in show. Peskov said the new installment of the conference, held annually since 2001, will take place "this winter."

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