

Rally Organizers Snub Putin's Ceremony

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Several leaders of recent anti-government protests have snubbed a media award ceremony with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, whose spokesman said they had missed their chance for dialogue by not turning up.

Putin, who faced the biggest protests of his 12-year rule less than two months before he is expected to return to the Kremlin in a presidential vote, has angered the opposition by comparing rally participants to chattering monkeys.

Political satirist and poet Dmitry Bykov, journalist Sergei Parkhomenko and author Boris Akunin were among the prominent opposition activists who declined invitations to the event Friday.

"I just didn't want to go. I was invited, but I didn't want to take part in all of this," said Leonid Parfyonov, a television journalist who was voted the most trustworthy of the protest movement's leaders by Russians polled during a Dec. 24 rally.

"I don't think he intended to talk about [the protests]. I think he wanted some PR for himself and had no intention to speak to anyone."

Putin recently softened his stance, saying he was ready for dialogue with the opposition but that it lacked a common platform and a leader with whom to hold talks.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said protest organizers missed their chance to talk with the prime minister. His press office distributed a list of participants and the reasons given by those not attending, listing many as on vacation.

"Earlier many of them had expressed a desire to take their message to Putin. They were given such an opportunity," he said. "They talk loudly about a dialogue, but when they are called they do not turn up."

The event was organized at short notice at a time when many Russians were still on extended New Year's and Orthodox Christmas vacations. Peskov said invitations were sent out last Monday.

Dmitry Muratov, editor-in-chief of the opposition-minded Novaya Gazeta newspaper, said the government invitation to the media award ceremony held no mention of an offer for dialogue with the opposition and he simply chose not to attend.

The event, at which Putin handed an award for bravery to Mikhail Beketov, a reporter left disabled by a severe beating while campaigning to save the Khimki forest, appeared to be the latest in recent government moves to appease its critics.

Beketov was nominated for the award by Novaya Gazeta for his reporting in a battle to stop construction of a \$1 billion road that cuts through the forest in the suburb of Moscow.

He lost three fingers, part of his lower leg and still has difficulty speaking after being savagely beaten by unidentified attackers in 2008.

At the ceremony Putin hugged a frail and scarred Beketov, who was loudly applauded as he walked up with the use of a crutch to receive the \$32,000 award, and promised to speed up an investigation to find those responsible for his beating.

The state-backed road construction project is being carried out by the world's largest construction company, Vinci, in partnership with a Russian firm in which Putin's former judo partner Arkady Rotenberg has a stake.

Environmentalists say local officials with commercial interests linked to the road construction project are behind the attack — charges denied by local officials.

"I cannot call Putin's behavior anything other than hypocrisy," said environmentalist and opposition activist Yevgeniya Chirikova, who has worked closely with Beketov. "No awards will bring back his health."

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