

Putin Asks for May Holiday Extension

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Thursday announced a change in the May national holiday schedule that could shatter plans to hold a large opposition rally around the day of his inauguration as president.

He ordered an extended break for the Victory Day holiday, a development that gives malcontents a tempting option to spend that time out of town, catching some fresh air.

A large turnout would encourage anti-Putin sentiment and increase pressure for an earnest crackdown on corruption and greater democracy.

Instead of one day off on Wednesday, May 9, people will have four days that week to celebrate and tend to their dachas.

Time off will start May 6, which as a Sunday would have been off anyway.

But the following two days before Victory Day will provide unexpected downtime

for businesses, including the day of Putin's inauguration as president on May 7.

As compensation, people will have to work two Saturdays, May 5 and May 12.

Putin told the Presidium, a subset of the Cabinet, that he moved around the week and weekend days based on requests from citizens.

At the Presidium session, Putin also heard some heart-warming economic numbers.

Russian airlines flew 12.6 percent more passengers last year, or 64 million people, Transportation Minister Igor Levitin said.

Deputy Economic Development Minister Valery Savelyev reported that 54 federal programs — which account for about 10 percent of federal spending and cover investment in areas ranging from satellite navigation to the Bolshoi Theater — had met their targets last year.

"It's gratifying to realize that the negative developments in the Russian economy that were linked to the [global] financial crisis are little by little a thing of the past," he said at a news conference after the session.

Private co-financing of the projects, which the federal programs seek to attract, rose 6 percent above the plan last year, he said. Business participation in the same programs in 2010 was down 20 percent.

As an example of successes, he said the Glonass satellite navigation system went into operation last year.

Other achievements of last year included construction of 350 kilometers of federal roads and 1,000 kilometers of regional and municipal roads, Savelyev said.

Access to running water in rural areas increased to more than 57 percent.

Russia destroyed 60 percent of its chemical weapons stockpile by the end of last year as part of its obligations under international agreements.

Putin himself spewed some feel-good numbers Thursday.

Average wages rose 9 percent last year, he said at a separate meeting of a commission that brings together officials, businesses and unions. That number is higher than what the Economic Development Ministry forecast for this year.

Putin also said the jobless rate dipped below the pre-crisis level, with 4.9 million people out of work at the start of this year.

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