

Shuvalov Suggests Privatization High on the Agenda

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First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov **Maxim Stulov**

Despite repeated delays to the sale of a government stake in Sberbank, privatization will be the first priority of the new government, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov said.

The next Russian prime minister will sign a new privatization program shortly after being appointed, Shuvalov said on the sidelines of a Moscow conference on Saturday, RIA-Novosti reported.

President-elect Vladimir Putin will appoint a new prime minister, expected to be outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev, after his inauguration on May 7.

"A concrete privatization plan will, more likely than not, be signed by the new prime minister after the formation [of the Cabinet]," Shuvalov said. "There remains a wait of only a few weeks."

Medvedev launched a \$30 billion sell-off of state companies in 2010 and has repeatedly called for it to be expanded, but the project has made little headway.

A 7.6 percent stake in state-owned Sberbank was scheduled to be offered to the market last fall to kick off the round of privatizations, but it never happened.

Sberbank president German Gref has said there is no guarantee that the sale will go ahead this year and that he is "morally" prepared for state-owned rival VTB to undergo its own privatization first.

Shuvalov said the Sberbank sale was likely to be the first state company on the block. Last week the minister, an ombudsman for foreign investors, said "windows" for selling Sberbank could open up this summer, or in the fall.

Putin has expressed public support for privatization. "It is essential to change the ideology of state control over business activity," he wrote in a pre-election article published in January. But Putin has been less outspoken on the issue than Medvedev.

There are also divisions within the government about the speed, focus and scale of privatizations. A decision about expanding the program was delayed until after the formation of the new Cabinet, Vedomosti reported April 4.

"We [the Cabinet] are debating it," Shuvalov said. "But he [Putin] listens to us all and to all the arguments."

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