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Friends and Foes to Mark Putin's 60th

By Jonathan Earle

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Despite the elaborate celebrations planned across the country, Putin's spokesman said the president would celebrate with family and close friends. **Maxim Stulov**

Opponents and supporters of President Vladimir Putin are preparing to mark his 60th birthday on Sunday with marches, concerts, giant birthday cards and at least one sardonic protest.

It's been a politically shaky year for the long-time Russian leader, but with his approval rating at 67 percent, according to the results of a Levada Center poll last month, it would seem that there is no shortage of Russians willing to wish Putin a happy birthday.

Local chapters of United Russia's youth wing, the Young Guard, will hold events throughout the country, including hanging a celebratory sign across a bridge in Rostov-on-Don, and inviting passersby in Chelyabinsk to sign a giant postcard, Vedomosti reported.

The ruling party itself does not have any events planned, a spokeswoman said by telephone.

Putin's native St. Petersburg looks likely to be the epicenter of festivities, thanks in part to an exuberantly pro-Putin organization called National Committee 60, which has applied for a permit to stage a 60,000-person march and rally, Fontanka.ru reported.

The rally is expected to feature a speech by everyman-turned-bigwig Igor Kholmanskikh, who was plucked from a tank factory and appointed Putin's envoy to the Urals Federal District in May following his nationally televised offer to rough up protesters.

National Committee 60, created to celebrate Putin's jubilee, earlier asked for 2012 to be declared "the year of Putin" and for Baskov Pereulok, where Putin grew up, to be renamed in his honor.

City officials in St. Petersburg are co-organizing a concert for VIP guests in the Tavrichesky garden on Monday, a spokesperson for Leningrad Governor Alexander Drozdenko told Vedomosti.

Opposition activists from Rosagit plan to mark the day with a rally on Moscow's Ilinsky Square, a stone's throw from the presidential administration and the birthplace of the short-lived "Occupy" movement that followed Putin's May inauguration.

The event's Facebook page is called "Help the Old Man Into Retirement," a reference to Putin's having reached official retirement age, and participants will compete for the best geriatric-themed birthday present, such as flip-flops, a watering can or a case for reading glasses.

The Flacon art center will host a tongue-in-cheek exhibition by artist Alexei Sergiyenko called "The President. A Most Kindhearted Man," featuring 15 images of Putin in everyday situations: at a birthday party, on a protest march or with a bouquet of flowers.

Schoolchildren in Yekaterinburg are unlikely to let the birthday pass unnoted, thanks to a reminder printed in some daily planners. "This government official has done many important and necessary things for our country, and he continues to do them," it reads, the Ura.ru news portal reported.

Putin will celebrate with family and close friends in St. Petersburg, his spokesman told Vedomosti.

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