

Putin Offers Little Political Reform

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin on Wednesday delivering his first state-of-the-nation address since returning to the presidency this year. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

The government will continue to bolster the country's economic and military prowess as well as dole out benefits to citizens, but political change can only be incremental, President Vladimir Putin said in his state-of-the-nation address Wednesday.

Putin's first major policy speech since he returned as head of state earlier this year had a heavy focus on domestic and social achievements. It offered cautious reforms but no major new recipes on domestic or foreign policy.

Much media attention was devoted to the president's physical health, which had been the subject of rampant speculation after he canceled foreign visits throughout October and November amid reports of a back ailment.

However, a vigorous Putin delivered the hour-and-a-half speech while standing, although his arms were periodically leaning on the podium, while his torso slanted to the right.

National television showed the president walking into the hall but did not show him leave after the speech.

A reporter for the Dozhd online television channel who was in the hall said afterward that Putin's path to the podium was shorter than usual.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told Izvestia in an interview published Wednesday that the president planned to go skiing in January.

The address was neither saber-rattling nor aggressive, balancing careful self-criticism with a new ideological impetus on boosting the nation's moral values.

The president kicked off by saying that Russia and the world were facing "epochal change, maybe even upheaval," only to go on to say that the country's rising "civil activism" should be based on responsibility and patriotism.

"No society can survive without civil responsibility," he said, quoting Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

The president added that the country's leadership had to be responsible and transparent.

"The government must not be an isolated caste," he said.

Observers say Putin has appeared increasingly isolated over the past year, which saw unprecedented mass protests against his leadership. Last month, he seemed ill-informed when offering German Chancellor Angela Merkel a description of an allegedly anti-Semitic performance by members of the Pussy Riot punk group, which starkly contrasted with participants' accounts.

In his Wednesday address, Putin mentioned the country's rising middle class but argued that this has more significance for the regions.

"We support the revival of the provincial intelligentsia, which has always been a professional and moral backbone," he said.

As this year's protest movement has largely been carried by the urban middle class, Putin had to increasingly rely on support from the country's more underdeveloped regions.

Putin said widespread indifference about societal ills like corruption, extremism and offensive behavior was the result of Soviet-era "moral benchmarks" being cast away during the last two decades.

"We literally threw out the baby with the bathwater," he said, adding that the problem was getting worse, posing long-term risks to national integrity.

As a cure, Putin suggested strengthening "spiritual ties," which he said were too weak in society. This was widely taken as a hint for more state support for officially sanctioned religious organizations, first and foremost the Russian Orthodox Church.

Controversy over the Kremlin's close ties with the church peaked this summer, when a court

convicted three members of punk band Pussy Riot on charges that sprang from a performance they gave in a church to protest those ties.

Despite warnings that recent population growth will be short-lived, Putin praised his demographic policies and said three children should be the norm among families. The president himself has two daughters.

Putin did offer some political reforms, but they were of limited scope compared with the ones set forth a year ago in Dmitry Medvedev's last address as president, in which he announced direct gubernatorial elections and greatly lowered hurdles for party registration.

Putin proposed the reintroduction of electoral blocs, allowing parties to group together in parliamentary elections. Such a system, which was in place in the 1990s, increases smaller parties' chances of winning seats.

But at the same time, he supported changing the State Duma's electoral system back to a mix of proportional representation and winner-take-all constituencies, which would make it even harder for smaller parties to win seats.

The current system uses proportional representation and party lists combined with a 7 percent hurdle to enter parliament. It replaced a mixed system in 2003.

Putin also backed a proposal to give federal lawmakers the right to initiate bills in their respective regions.

Significantly, he called political competition "a blessing" but added that a set of rules was necessary to rule out separatism, direct or indirect outside interference, foreign financing of political activities and the participation of criminals in politics.

Putin has said that one reason direct gubernatorial elections were abolished was the need to prevent people with a criminal past from entering politics.

In a clear signal to the extraparliamentary opposition, he said "civilized dialogue" can be held only with "civilized" opponents.

"Changing and modernizing the political system is necessary, but to pay for the thirst for change by destroying the very state is unacceptable," he said.

Putin also proposed that lawmakers be obligated to consider matters widely discussed on the Internet and that by 2015, CIS citizens be banned from entering the country without foreign passports.

Civil activists had little sympathy for the speech Wednesday.

"Much about what; little about how," Yelena Panfilova, head of Transparency International Russia, said on Twitter.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny said on his blog that the speech could be summarized as "soon everything will be OK. I promise."

Analysts identified Putin's call for preventing officials from transferring money to offshore accounts as his boldest message. (See story, front page.)

Vyacheslav Nikonov, a State Duma deputy with close Kremlin ties, said Putin's goal was the "renationalization of the elites," who had been orienting themselves toward other countries.

He added that the the address was "an ambitious program to turn Russia into a first-rate state."

Alexei Mukhin, of the Center for Political Information, a think tank, said the address was moderate because it contained no clear enemy image. Putin referred only to "offshore bureaucracy and politicians acting in the interests of foreign states," Mukhin said on his blog.

Staff writers Alexander Bratersky and Natalya Krainova contributed reporting.

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