

Dvorkovich Upbeat on His, and Russia's, Future

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May 21, 2013



Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich

In an attempt to squash media reports and assure investors, Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich said Tuesday that he had no plans to leave government and intended to help guide the country's economic course at least until the next presidential election in 2018.

Dvorkovich, speaking at a news conference dedicated to the first anniversary of the appointment of the Cabinet, which saw him promoted from Kremlin aide to deputy prime minister, said he "doesn't have a desire" to leave Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's government before its term ends.

"I knew that I would have to work six years, if I worked well and wasn't fired," Dvorkovich said, adding that he wouldn't leave by his own will.

Dvorkovich, who oversees the fuel and energy sector and is embraced by the foreign

and Russian business community for his liberal-leaning policies, found himself answering questions about his future a day after Federal Guard Service officers reportedly blocked his car from entering Vladimir Putin's residence in Sochi, where the president is on a working vacation. RBK Daily newspaper reported Tuesday that Dvorkovich name had not been on the list of approved guests and that his aides had been forced to resolve the matter.

Dvorkovich, however, denied that the incident had occurred.

Medvedev's Cabinet has come under fire recently from lawmakers and analysts, who accuse it of failing to enact the policies needed to bolster the country's sagging economy. Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin called the government's performance "disappointing" during a meeting with a State Duma panel on Monday.

Fears about a recession are growing as the economy shows troubling signs of stagnation. The economy expanded by an annual 1.6 percent in the first quarter, the Federal Statistics Service said Friday. The Economic Development Ministry in April lowered its GDP forecast to 2.4 percent for the year, down from an earlier 3.6 percent.

Medvedev sought to ease jitters this week, telling the Komsomolskaya Pravda that the economy needs a growth rate of 4 percent to 5 percent and the current situation is "more or less acceptable."

Dvorkovich said that the economy, which is heavily dependent on oil, would get a boost via a slight year-on-year growth in crude production in 2013. "There is no reason to expect a contraction," Dvorkovich said.

With the government looking to liberalize the liquified natural gas exports, Dvorkovich said this would be achieved after exports such as Rosneft and Novotek reach agreements with Japan, South Korea and China. He said he expects the agreements to be signed this year.

Dvorkovich also said that an upcoming Russia-EU summit in Yekaterinburg, which will take place June 3, would send a "political signal" to the European Union about Russia's desire to boost energy cooperation. He said the summit, chaired by Putin, would discuss energy issues "in detail." He did not elaborate.

While Europe buys almost 30 percent of its gas from Russia, Gazprom, the country's gas monopoly, reported recently that its net profit declined by 15 percent and sales to the EU fell by about 9 percent. The situation was a result of discounts that European governments were able to get from Gazprom due to the competition from U.S. shale gas producers.

European countries also are currently looking for shale gas development as an alternative to Russian supplies.

Dvorkovich said that he understood the desire of European countries to extract gas at home but he hoped that "ecological issues" would be taken into an account.

Some analysts have warned that the extraction of shale gas might damage the environment and the gas wells can produce large amounts of methane, a potential greenhouse gas.

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Original url:

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