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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin to Give Annual Address as His Popularity Declines

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President Vladimir Putin chairs a meeting of the Security Council at the Kremlin in Moscow, Nov. 20.

As President Vladimir Putin prepares for his annual keynote address to the nation Thursday that sets state policy for the coming year, a new poll showed a dip in his ratings.

Lawmakers from both houses of parliament will gather at the Kremlin, along with governors of the country's 85 regions, members of the Cabinet and heads of state media and oil companies. The address will be televised live on state-run channels.

In the context of a stuttering economy and open confrontation with the West, this year's speech is more anticipated in some circles than usual.

In earlier remarks, Putin promised to address a number of social and economic issues, including the stability of the tax system and the future of the payments given to women upon the birth of their children.

In the face of painful Western sanctions and a sinking economy, Putin will announce

a program of "economic liberalization" during the speech, Bloomberg reported.

The new policy will concentrate on fighting corruption and easing administrative barriers for business.

This year's speech was drafted by Putin's administration, with the Cabinet having a very limited influence on the text, the RBC newspaper reported in November.

Last year's speech, which was 70 minutes long, concentrated on the development of Siberia and the Far East, accessible housing and imposing barriers for offshore companies to work in Russia.

According to a poll by the independent Levada Center released Monday, 82 percent of Russians said they would vote for Putin if presidential elections were held this Sunday. That number is down from 88 percent a month earlier.

The poll was conducted among 1,600 people across the country with a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

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