

## Putin accuses U.S. of meddling in Russian vote

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### **Putin accuses U.S. of meddling in Russian vote Mon Nov 26, 2007 4:18 PM EST**

**By Oleg Shchedrov**

ST PETERSBURG, Russia (Reuters) – President Vladimir Putin accused Washington on Monday of plotting to undermine parliamentary elections on December 2, seen widely as a demonstration of his enduring power in Russia.

Putin, drawing on resurgent nationalist sentiment ahead of Sunday’s poll, said Russia must maintain its defenses to discourage others from “poking their snotty noses” in its affairs.

Europe joined the United States in voicing concern over a weekend police crackdown on protests by an opposition that says it has been banished from the airwaves and from the streets by the Kremlin.

U.S. President George W. Bush, who hosted Putin at his family’s seaside estate for a “lobster summit” in July, said he was “deeply concerned” about the detention of rights activists and political leaders, as well as the force used at rallies.

Putin, who must step down as president early next year, said he saw Washington’s hand in a decision by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s ODIHR monitoring arm to abandon plans to observe the parliamentary election.

“We have information that, once again, this was done on the recommendation of the U.S. State Department,” the 55-year-old leader, running as No. 1 on United Russia’s slate of candidates, said at a meeting with party activists.

“Their aim is to deprive the elections of legitimacy, that is absolutely clear,” Putin said in his home city of St Petersburg.

ODIHR has said Russian obstruction left it with no choice but to cancel the monitoring mission.

U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said that while Washington supported the OSCE’s decision, it had not influenced OSCE representatives.

“Our very clear message (to them) was that this is your decision. We don’t want to try to influence you one way or another,” McCormack told reporters.

He dismissed Putin's sharp language as election rhetoric.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the fact that the U.S. State Department and ODHIR monitors had met proved collusion to influence the observers.

"The issue of ODHIR's refusal to send observers has been indeed discussed between ODHIR and the American side. This only proves that President Vladimir Putin's words were absolutely true," Peskov said by telephone.

## **RETAIN AUTHORITY**

A survey published on Monday by pollster FOM predicted Putin's United Russia party would win 60.1 percent of the vote this weekend, a dip of 2 percent from the previous week. The poll put nearest rivals the Communist Party at 7.5 percent.

A high vote would underline Putin's popularity and help him retain authority in some form after yielding the presidency.

Two rallies by an anti-Putin coalition, to protest that the vote would be unfair, were broken up by police with truncheons.

Former world chess champion Garry Kasparov, a coalition leader, was one of dozens of people arrested. He is serving five days in detention for organizing an illegal protest.

In Brussels, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said he was concerned by the "heavy-handed action" by Russian police. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said Russia's government should explain its actions.

Bush, whose administration's plans for a U.S. missile shield in eastern Europe have strained relations with Moscow, said he hoped the Russian government would investigate allegations of abuse and release those in detention.

Kremlin officials say the protesters are dangerous radicals trying to destabilize Russia with help from foreign governments. Kasparov's coalition barely registers in opinion polls.

Putin has said he will hand over power to a successor in line with a constitutional ban on a head of state serving more than two consecutive terms as president.

Putin, seen by many as bringing stability to Russia, has said he will endorse one of his lieutenants as a successor. But he has refused to say which one.

Some observers speculate Putin might step down early and run in the presidential vote, exploiting a legal loophole to get around the three-term ban.

Russia's upper house of parliament, the Federation Council, has named March 2, 2008 as the date of the presidential vote, shifting the guessing game over what will happen when Putin's term ends into its decisive phase.

After the date has been published in the official gazette on Wednesday, would-be candidates will have 25 days to apply to run in the presidential election.

*(Additional reporting by Guy Faulconbridge, Conor Sweeney and Dmitry Solovyov in Moscow and Brussels and Paris bureaux)*

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