

Putin says 'nothing unusual' in Russian protests



By Stuart Williams | AFP - Fri, Dec 30, 2011

[Prime Minister Vladimir Putin](#) on Saturday said there was nothing unusual in the mass protests against his domination of [Russia](#), describing the turbulence as the "unavoidable price of democracy".

Tens of thousands took to the streets on December 10 and December 24 to denounce the Russian strongman and the alleged rigging of parliamentary elections, ahead of his candidacy in March presidential polls.

"Of course, we are in the middle of a political cycle -- the parliamentary elections have finished and the [presidential elections](#) are going to start," Putin said in a televised message to Russians ahead of the New Year.

"In such times, politicians always exploit the feelings of citizens, everything gets shaken around a bit, boils up. But this is the unavoidable price of democracy," Putin said.

"There is nothing unusual here," he added.

Putin has in the last days mocked the nascent protest movement against his rule, saying the opposition appeared to have no programme and no leader.

But in a bid to show a more moderate face for the New Year, he sent his greetings to all Russians, whatever their political sympathies.

"I want to wish wellbeing and prosperity to all Russians and their families -- regardless of their political leanings and including those on the left, the right, above, or below, wherever in fact," said Putin.

The protest movement has not said when it will call the next mass demonstration ahead of the March 4 presidential election, where Putin hopes to win a third term as president after his four-year stint as prime minister.

Supporters of the ultra-left opposition were expected to attend a rally in central Moscow called by radical author Eduard Limonov later Saturday although such protests have only drawn a few dozen in the past.

Moscow police warned ahead of the demonstration that the protest had not been sanctioned by the authorities and "any attempt to hold it will be thwarted," the Interfax news agency reported.

Putin's speech is to be followed just before the stroke of midnight by the last New Year's message as head of state from his protege President Dmitry Medvedev, who is expected to become prime minister under a Putin presidency.

In an unusual move, prominent Russian actress and television host Tatyana Lazareva called on her blog for viewers to boycott Medvedev's address by switching their TV sets off en masse as a sign of dissatisfaction.

"It's been customary for every channel to show the president's address and for everyone to watch it and, until now, this surprised no-one," said the actress, who has attended the opposition protests.

"But times are changing," she wrote on her Live Journal blog (lazareva-tatka.livejournal.com).

The Vedomosti daily wrote in an end-of-year editorial Friday that Russia was going into the New Year at a time when the protest movement was only just starting to develop.

"The main battles are going to be drawn around the March 4 presidential elections" said Vedomosti, which boldly named anti-corruption blogger turned protest leader Alexei Navalny as its "politician of the year".

Putin also sought in the New Year's message to play one of the prime cards of his government -- the relative strength of the Russian economy compared to some of its counterparts in the crisis-hit euro zone.

He said that Russia was still looking like an "island of stability" even though the external situation was "worrying".

"We have overcome the effects of the economic crisis and the economy is gathering growth tempo. This gives us confidence that the coming year will be successful."

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