

# Medvedev Hints at 3rd Presidential Candidate

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President Dmitry Medvedev said a third candidate might appear to run for president in 2012, and he confirmed that he would not run if his mentor, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, was also on the ballot.

Medvedev passed the mid-point of his four-year term in May, and speculation is building about whether he will run again or leave the field clear for Putin to return to the Kremlin.

But Medvedev opened the door to a third alternative Monday, saying for the first time that he and Putin might not run at all.

“I do not know what will happen in 2012, I don’t know who will run,” Medvedev said. “It may be Medvedev, it may be Putin, it may be somebody else.”

Most Russians believe Putin remains the ultimate decision maker and wishes to retain the levers of power well beyond 2012, though he may choose to do so from a different post than that of president.

Putin has said he and Medvedev will come to an agreement before the 2012 election about who should run.

Putin's high popularity among Russian voters, the Kremlin's control of the country's political machinery and the weakness of the opposition mean that the candidate nominated by the current leadership is virtually assured victory in the 2012 election.

The Kremlin's priority is to maintain stability, and a race between two allies would damage the country, Medvedev said.

"The country must have an opportunity to develop stably; the country must live under a predictable scenario," he said. "Putin has thought about this, I am thinking about it, and the person who comes along after me must think about it."

Putin, president from 2000 to 2008, anointed Medvedev as his successor when his second consecutive term, the maximum allowed under the constitution, expired. But Putin can run for president again in 2012 and stay in power until 2024 if he wins two more terms, extended under new rules to six years. Medvedev, criticized by opponents for failing to deliver on his promises of bold reforms, consistently trails Putin in opinion polls.

Twenty-seven percent of 1,600 people questioned last week said they would vote for Putin if the presidential election was held in August, while 20 percent said they would vote for Medvedev, the independent Levada Center said Monday.

But the number of people who believe Medvedev is implementing his own policies, rather than doing the bidding of Putin and his circle, jumped to 36 percent from 22 percent in a similar survey in March.

Forty-nine percent believe Medvedev remains under Putin's control, down from 66 percent in March.

*(Reuters, MT)*

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