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Medvedev Chases Putin in Vintage Sedan

By Alexandra Odynova

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Presidents Medvedev and Yanukovych standing by their vintage cars on the Ukrainian-Russian border during the St. Petersburg-Kiev motor rally Friday. **Andriy Mosienko**

Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Viktor Yanukovych drove a pair of vintage Pobeda sedans across the border between Russia and Ukraine on a sunny Friday afternoon in what analysts say looked like a second-hand publicity stunt.

The presidents took to the road for a car rally commemorating a similar event held exactly 100 years ago by Russia's last tsar, Nicholas II. Medvedev did not neglect to point out that they bested the emperor by actually driving the vehicles.

"We are more democratic. We drive ourselves," Medvedev said before getting behind the wheel of his own 1948 white Pobeda. Yanukovych drove a beige and dark-red 1951 model.

The rally, which included 16 vintage and 20 modern vehicles, set off from the town of Pushkin

near St. Petersburg on Sept. 13 and traveled to Kiev by way of Moscow.

The drivers included celebrities from both countries, such as actor Bogdan Stupka, actress Anastasia Zavorotnyuk, pop star Dmitry Malikov and former junior welterweight champion Kostya Tszyu.

Medvedev led the column of cars on the Russian side, passing the lead to Yanukovych after crossing the border.

The two presidents set off from Bryansk, a city about 25 kilometers from the Ukrainian border, and drove more than 60 kilometers to Ukraine's Glukhov, where they visited a vintage car show, posing before the cameras in a 1957 Silver Raid Rolls Royce.

Medvedev also visited the Partisan Meadow memorial, 10 kilometers east of Bryansk, dedicated to the 8,500 partisans who fought Nazi forces in the region during World War II, and met with local war veterans for a cup of tea.

He and Yanukovych pledged after the trip to make rules for crossing the border less "insulting and nerve-wracking" for ordinary people, RIA-Novosti reported.

Yanukovych said the idea of a joint road trip was first brought up by Medvedev during the Ukrainian leader's visit to Russia for the Victory Day parade in May, when Medvedev gave him a ride in his Pobeda.

"He just infected me [with the idea], and I had no other choice," Yanukovych told reporters in Glukhov on Friday.

But the rally looked like a carbon copy of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's road trip in a Lada Kalina sedan last month along the new Amur highway, which got wide media coverage. On top of that, Putin visited a car rally on Friday, stopping by the camp of drivers participating in the Silk Way race, part of the Dakar series, between St. Petersburg and Sochi.

Medvedev might be trying to drum up public support through safe, tried-and-true methods, said Alexei Makarkin, a political analyst with the Center for Political Technologies.

"Putin needs to affirm his reputation, while Medvedev has to gain one," Makarkin said. "It looks like they both don't exclude the possibility of running in the 2012 presidential election."

Alexei Mukhin, an analyst at the Center for Political Information, said Putin's Amur adventure boosted his public image, but Medvedev's Pobeda trip was unlikely to succeed because of its lack of originality.

"Medvedev's PR activity is doomed to fail by the rules of the genre," Mukhin said by telephone.

Road tripping is not the only area where Medvedev seems to have followed Putin's PR template recently. Over the past few weeks, the president has stopped by stores in Saratov, Orenburg and Voronezh, and he even bought a loaf of bread in a grocery store in Murmansk on Wednesday.

This show of unity with the average customer appears to be a dead ringer for Putin's surprise visit to a Perekryostok store in Moscow last year when he inspected meat prices and told the supermarket chain's chief executive to lower pork prices.

Analysts noted that Medvedev was taking charge of relations with Ukraine, a sphere of activity previously supervised by Putin.

"Apparently, Medvedev doesn't want to fall behind Putin in any way," Mukhin said.

During a meeting Friday at Medvedev's residence in Zavidovo, Yanukovych presented Medvedev with a memento that Putin almost certainly doesn't own: a miniature model of a Soviet-era Pobeda car on a stand together with a photo of the two presidents.

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