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Medvedev's Address Must Break From the Past

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Today, President Dmitry Medvedev will give his third annual state-of-the-nation address to the Federal Assembly. And yet, it is difficult to recall exactly what he spoke about in the first two addresses, which, according to the Constitution, should be the main speech by the head of state and should define the political course of the country's leadership for each subsequent year.

The main reason why Medvedev's presidential addresses are so quickly forgotten and play no significant role in Russia's political life is that they are abstract and laden with insignificant initiatives. Abstract arguments about the need for modernization are quickly forgotten, while imitation or superficial reforms elicit indifference or disappointment from the public.

In fact, Medvedev has said quite a few correct and positive things during the past two years. On the whole, the issues he has addressed reflect the real and pressing needs of the country if Russia is to make the transition from increasing degradation to successful development. The

call for modernization really does reflect the vital need for political, legal, social and economic transformation. His repeated call for the authorities to stop "nightmarizing" businesses is the proper reaction to development-inhibiting abuses aimed at defenseless private business and property owners. The emphasis on battling corruption indicates that the head of state recognizes that corruption has not only become the country's main problem, but that it is steadily turning Russia into the world's largest failed state. The recent reference to "political stagnation" demonstrates the president's awareness of the long-obvious fact that the destruction of the country's freedom of speech and political competition has released the corrupt Russian bureaucracy and its affiliated businesses from any form of control and has made the situation in the country effectively unmanageable.

Medvedev's problem, however, is that after putting forward what is essentially the right agenda, he has been unable to implement it in practice. What's more, in every area that he has listed, the situation has grown worse over these past few years.

Having correctly highlighted the problem of the corrupt decay and blatant ineffectiveness among the police, the president introduced a bill to the State Duma that, according to all observers, would produce no meaningful changes to the system. What's more, even the savage killing of 12 unarmed residents in the Krasnodar region village of Kushchyovskaya — where for many years the police were either inactive or on the take from local criminals — did not compel the president to implement more decisive reforms to the law enforcement system.

Two years of fighting corruption has resulted in the passage of extremely weak anti-corruption legislation that does not even work. For example, mandatory income statements by officials are not verified for accuracy. Even revelations about large-scale embezzlement are not investigated properly — including, for example, in the Transneft case or the bribes given by Daimler-Chrysler to receive contracts in Russia. Even when the presidential administration itself uncovers large-scale corruption, nothing happens, like when the president's control department discovered that more than 1 trillion rubles ($32 billion) is embezzled from the federal procurement budget annually. As a result of the authorities' inaction and the adoption of corruption-friendly legislation, Russia has continued its decline in Transparency International's rating of corruption perceptions — falling a full eight spots during the past year alone.

The situation is not getting any easier for businesses, either. Another guilty verdict is expected in the show trial against former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his former business partner Platon Lebedev. Investigators could not convince a jury that the former directors of Yevroset were guilty of any crime, but the firm has already been taken over by others and former owner Yevgeny Chichvarkin continues to seek asylum in London. A strange brigade of police and security agents continues to fabricate absurd criminal charges against the bank of Alexander Lebedev, a co-owner of Novaya Gazeta and prominent social figure. The state sector of the economy continues to grow and now accounts for more than half of the country's gross domestic product. Added to that, after New Year's, the business community is anticipating a sharp increase in tax rates along with a rise in fees charged by state monopolies.

As a result, Russia continues to fall in international rankings on the protection of property rights. According to the Property Rights Alliance, of 125 countries ranked, Russia fell from

63rd place in 2007 to 88th in 2010, placing behind states such as Kenya, Kazakhstan and Moldova.

Neither has anything improved regarding freedom of speech and the protection of journalists. Will Dmitry Medvedev say something about the vicious attacks against Kommersant journalist Oleg Kashin and other reporters? Will he respond to the claim by television host Leonid Parfyonov that the journalists at state-controlled television channels have become functionaries serving the interests of the government, and not society? Will investigators ever find and prosecute those responsible for the murders of Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya, human rights activist Natalya Estemirova, investigative journalist and State Duma Deputy Yury Shchekochikhin and others?

Medvedev's much-vaunted political reforms are, in fact, only superficial measures that in no way alter the political monopoly held by the ruling bureaucracy and the overwhelming dominance of United Russia as its primary political tool. Will the president announce his intention to register new opposition parties and serious opposition candidates for the presidential elections? Will he stop depriving people in major cities the right to directly elect their own mayors? Will he admit that eliminating gubernatorial elections was a mistake? Will he guarantee an end to massive election fraud at all levels?

Medvedev has only one way to restore confidence in himself and his political speeches. His address to the Federal Assembly must contain a decisive program of political and economic reforms, and they must then be put into practice.

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