

Medvedev Says Reforms Need More Time

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Medvedev taking a question from Channel One's Konstantin Ernst, second left, during an interview on Friday. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

President Dmitry Medvedev said Friday that his drive to modernize Russia and shed crippling Soviet traditions needs more time to yield results, but left unclear whether he would seek a second term in 2012.

Still struggling to emerge from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's shadow less than 18 months before the end of his term, Medvedev has struck a softer, more liberal tone on issues ranging from jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky's trial to ties with the United States.

But in the latest appearance in what looks like a contest between the two leaders for public approval, he announced no major initiatives and lamented the pace of his trademark campaign to enliven Russia's economy through innovation.

"Modernization is progressing. Its pace may have accelerated from the start of the year, but of course not much has been achieved so far," Medvedev told the nation in a televised end-of-

year interview with its top three television networks.

"I think there are results. But they are not great in number. ... You cannot achieve colossal success in one year."

Steered into the presidency by Putin, Medvedev took office with an ambitious agenda for broad reforms, from the economy to the justice system, meant to make Russia more competitive on world markets and improve the lives of its citizens.

With results slow to surface, Russians are waiting to learn whether Putin will use the 2012 vote to take back the reins or give Medvedev more time to implement what both have said is, at least in broad terms, a common plan for Russia's future.

Both have said they will together decide who will run as the Kremlin's candidate closer to the vote.

Sipping coffee and looking at ease in a 1 1/2-hour interview, Medvedev struck a contrast with a Dec. 16 televised call-in show in which Putin held court for well over four hours on everything from bread-and-butter issues to national security.

Medvedev spoke more delicately of liberal Kremlin opponents whom Putin has denigrated as greedy and power-hungry, and said Russia should not consider its democracy fully developed until "each person can say 'I am free.'"

And while Putin made no mention of the United States in his television marathon, Medvedev hailed President Barack Obama for winning U.S. Senate ratification of the strategic nuclear arms reduction treaty at the center of a "reset" in relations with Washington.

Obama "fulfills his promises," Medvedev said. He stressed that the release by WikiLeaks of U.S. diplomatic cables painting a negative picture of Russia would not affect relations.

The New START pact and the "reset" are among the biggest achievements for Medvedev, who Putin has said controls foreign policy as president.

Turning back to his domestic agenda, Medvedev admitted that Russia had made poor progress against corruption — a major concern of foreign investors and Russian citizens.

"The therapy should take time," he stressed, saying he had no "magic pill" to cure Russia of graft.

Analysts said Medvedev's measured words calling for more time for reform revealed a desire to run again.

"It was clear today that he would very much like to run again," analyst Alexei Makarkin said. "He clearly stated his liberal position and liberal agenda."

Russian liberals, who have latched onto Medvedev's promises to break with what he has called Russia's "deep totalitarian tradition" and give civil society a stronger say, have voiced frustration over the lack of changes to redress what they say was a rollback in freedoms under Putin's 2000-08 presidency.

Many Russians see Medvedev as little more than a puppet for Putin, who 84 percent believe is as powerful now as during his presidency, a November poll by the independent Levada Center showed.

Putin retained his perch as the nation's most popular politician in a survey this week by state pollster VTsIOM, with a 55 percent choosing Putin and 37 percent naming Medvedev.

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