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# Medvedev's Silent Majority

By Victor Davidoff

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As the year closes, it's customary to look back on the successes and failures of the past 12 months and make resolutions for the year to come. Most people do this in private, but politicians differ from simple mortals. They sum up the year publicly. Both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin gave their impressions of 2010 in their recent television appearances. And for the first time in the history of the ruling tandem, their conclusions were very different.

The two men even looked different on the screen. The smiling Medvedev, casually using foreign and high-tech terms, was in stark contrast to the familiarly dour and now frequently tired appearance of Putin. The audience noticed this right away. The blogger Felbert wrote that Putin "fumbled over several questions and it sometimes seemed that he didn't know how to answer his people." Another blogger, Mikail-nesterov, wrote: "Medvedev's conversational style is a lot more attractive to me. There isn't that arrogance that slips out in Putin's manner."

Perhaps the difference in the leaders' moods reflects the changes in Russians' opinions

of them. The independent Levada Center polls show that 27 percent of Russians are not pleased with Putin's cult of personality &mdash a threefold increase over the last four years. At the same time, however, the number of people who support an authoritarian regime in Russian has fallen, from 40 percent to 27 percent in the last year. In a comment on these poll results, Ekho Moskvy radio noted that there are fewer people in Russia who believe that the enormous power wielded by Putin is benefiting the country. The polls also registered another important change: 67 percent of respondents said that today Russia needs a real political opposition.

As if recognizing this silent majority of Russians, Medvedev unexpectedly spoke on the topic of oppositional politics. "The fact that they are in the opposition doesn't mean that they are cut off from public life. They should openly speak about every problem." It was a real sensation when he mentioned names that have been banned from state television: opposition leaders Mikhail Kasyanov, Boris Nemtsov, Eduard Limonov and even Gary Kasparov, a man whom the prime minister reportedly loathes. Medvedev also stated firmly: "They are also public politicians. ... Each of them has his own electoral base."

Medvedev didn't stop there. He continued to stun the audience with his response to a question about the fate of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Medvedev didn't answer the question directly but managed to say a great deal without saying much of anything. "It is completely clear that neither the president nor any other official in government service has the right to express his position on this case or any other case before the sentence is read &mdash either a conviction or an acquittal," he said.

For Russians who have learned to pick out the message in political newspeak better than a musician can hear the melody in a Mahler symphony, this was really something. When Putin had been asked a similar question, he called Khodorkovsky a "crook" and launched into a tirade of accusations against Khodorkovsky and his business partner Platon Lebedev, including accusations that were not brought against them in court, including alleged complicity in murder. It's hard not to see Medvedev's words as a slap in Putin's face. As journalist Alexander Minkin wrote on his Ekho Moskvy blog, this was "a world sensation."

"It seems like the president and prime minister live in two separate countries," the blogger Felbert commented. "Putin's Russia is rallying for another great leap forward, while Medvedev's Russia is getting ready for another thaw and perestroika."

Nemtsov, one of the opposition politicians mentioned by Medvedev, summed up the year this way: "In the increasingly heated battle between Putin and Medvedev for the right to run for president in 2012, Medvedev has a great chance to win by canceling political censorship on television and freeing Khodorkovsky and Lebedev. The best New Year's present for Russians would be Putin's resignation."

Let's hope that Santa grants Nemtsov his wish.

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