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Medvedev Says Tandem Follows 'Liberator'

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Medvedev laying flowers at the tomb of Tsar Alexander II — “the Liberator” — in a St. Petersburg cathedral. **Dmitry Astakhov**

ST. PETERSBURG — President Dmitry Medvedev used the 150th anniversary of the abolition of serfdom in Russia to cast himself as a champion of reform on Thursday but said steps toward broader democracy will be cautious.

Steered into office in 2008 by his predecessor Vladimir Putin, now prime minister, Medvedev portrayed Russia's ruling "tandem" as heirs to Tsar Alexander II, who freed the serfs in 1861 and is a symbol of reform.

"Today we are trying to develop our still-imperfect democratic institutions, modernize our economy and political system," he said in the imperial-era cap¬ital. "We are continuing the course that was outlined a century and a half ago."

"A nation ... cannot live on tightened screws," he said. "It is obvious that excessively strict order, an excess of controls, usually leads not to the victory of good."

Nearly three years into a four-year term that has brought plenty of talk about institutional reforms, political pluralism and economic modernization but few tangible results, Medvedev offered no specific plans.

Alexander II is hailed as "the Liberator" for granting freedom to millions of peasants, but critics say he left serfs with few chances to survive independently, as the soil they tilled was held by landowners for years to come.

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