

New Signs of Rift in Ruling Tandem

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In the latest tit-for-tat among the ruling tandem, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Wednesday seemingly lashed out at President Dmitry Medvedev for inhibiting government work by sending wrong signals about next year's presidential vote.

But both Putin and Medvedev denied talk of a rift, and one analyst said the world was witnessing "a smokescreen of massive proportions" aimed at antsy politicians and business leaders seeking clues about who would be in the Kremlin next year.

"Neither I nor Dmitry Anatolyevich rules out that each of us can stand in the election," Putin told reporters after a medical conference in Moscow.

"If we now send out some nervous signals, half of the administration and the bigger half of the government will stop working because they expect some change," he added.

Putin's comments came a day after Medvedev reiterated publicly that he did not rule out running for a second term. A decision will be made "very shortly" because the election is less

than a year away, he said in an interview with Chinese state television, according to a [transcript](#) posted on the Kremlin's web site.

By contrast, Putin warned against rushing to a decision. "We have almost one year to go until the elections, and this topic does not allow us to organize work in a normal way," he said.

He added that "all should hoe their own piece of land like St. Francis," referring to St. Francis of Assisi who according to legend said he would continue to cultivate his garden even if he found out that he would die soon.

Medvedev sought to play down talk of friction with Putin, stressing in the Chinese television interview that he had friendly and warm relations with the prime minister. He said both wanted prosperity for the country but differed over the methods to achieve this.

"This is what democracy is all about. This is what competition is all about. I have my own opinion, but someone else might have a slightly different one," he said.

His words were echoed by Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who denied that Medvedev's comments amounted to a serious rift between the two.

"The main thing is that they have common views on strategic questions. Regarding tactics, each can have his own perceptions," Peskov told Russian News Service radio late Tuesday.

But Putin and Medvedev have been sparring publicly more and more recently. When Putin last month likened the call for armed intervention in Libya to the medieval crusades, Medvedev retorted that the term "crusades" was unacceptable in this context.

Peskov later said Putin had expressed his personal opinion.

Leaders of the liberal opposition have spoken of a dangerous tug of war between Medvedev and his long-standing mentor Putin.

Georgy Bovt, a co-leader of the Right Cause party said Putin's motivation to return as president was probably weaker than Medvedev's to stay. "It is a very complicated configuration," he said by telephone.

Bovt's party, which is pro-business and has Kremlin support, last fall became the first group to publicly advocate a second term for Medvedev.

But many analysts say the tandem's public sparring is just political show.

"What we are seeing at the moment is a smokescreen of massive proportions," said Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, a think tank.

Mukhin and others argue that while Medvedev remains loyal to Putin, behind the scenes there is growing nervousness between the two camps — one of which supports the more conservative Putin, the other the more liberal Medvedev.

The nervousness, Mukhin said, is also reflected in United Russia's reaction to Medvedev's interview.

A leading functionary suggested that Medvedev should only run if this is agreed with Putin and if he is a candidate of United Russia. "Our party leader is Vladimir Putin, and if he says he will stand for president, he will be our candidate," said Oleg Morozov, a first deputy speaker of the State Duma and member of the party's supreme council.

"If the leader of our party and the leader of our country agrees that Dmitry Medvedev will be the candidate, then United Russia is the country's only political force he can rely on," Morozov said in comments on the party's web site.

Putin is United Russia's leader, but neither he nor Medvedev is a party member.

United Russia has performed poorly for its standards recently, winning only an average 46 percent in last month's regional elections.

While Medvedev's popularity trails Putin's in most opinion polls, the number of Russians who would prefer Medvedev's name on next year's ballots has risen lately.

According to a Levada [poll](#) conducted last month and released Wednesday, 18 percent preferred Medvedev, up from 14 percent last October. The number of those who would like Putin stood at 27 percent in March, down from 31 percent in October.

But pundits' opinions on who will become president in 2012 differ widely.

While many suggest that Putin will continue to wield influence either as prime minister or in another post, Mukhin said both Putin and Medvedev would probably stand back and support the candidacy of Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Naryshkin.

"This will dissolve the current dissonances," he said.

Stanislav Belkovsky, an independent analyst and former Kremlin insider, said he expected that Medvedev would be re-elected and that Putin would then trade political office for an international post like head of the International Olympic Committee. "Putin does not need political clout. All he wants is international recognition," Belkovsky said.

Staff writer Anatoly Medetsky contributed reporting.

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