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Would the Real Medvedev Please Stand Up

By Andrew Wood

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Western analysts assume that a second presidency for Dmitry Medvedev would offer a markedly different and more liberal perspective for Russia from what could be expected if Prime Minister Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin. But few Russian observers are confident of this.

Perhaps cynicism is ingrained in Russians, while hope is natural to Western well-wishers. That Western hope may be bolstered by the clear need for Russia to change direction if it is to realize its promise. Medvedev has articulated that general proposition well.

Although Putin has also spoken of diversification and development, it is often assumed by Western commentators that Putin has frustrated Medvedev's efforts to move toward a more liberal approach. Take, for example, Putin's April 20 address to the State Duma in which he emphasized the role of the state and the need to preserve stability over the next decade.

There are, however, questions that have to be asked before concluding that Medvedev would

in reality pursue radical change if he were to stay on as president. Has he been consistent? Has he put the general interest of his country before the particular interests of the ruling elite? And if the answer to these and similar questions is "not yet," then what would change after Medvedev's victory in 2012 that would turn him into a different person?

Apply these sorts of questions to Putin, and the contrasting answers for Medvedev write themselves. Putin's policies may not be what everyone would wish, and his understanding of the interests of his country may be disputable, but his ability to act as a leader is not to date in doubt. Medvedev has for some years said things that liberal-minded people in the West and in Russia too have welcomed. But little concrete action has followed. That has disillusioned Medvedev's potential sympathizers in Russia.

He has also made a number of statements, usually passed over in embarrassed silence by Western analysts or justified by a perceived need for him to protect himself against domestic critics, that run counter to his liberal image. His language about the North Caucasus has been as crude as Putin's, if less vivid, and he has had no fresh ideas as to how to cope with its dangers.

He has threatened the West with a new arms race, possibly even thinking that practicable. He has ramped up the Kurils/Northern Territories issue to no purpose but to show himself determined to stand up to a scarcely threatening Japan. He was a major figure in the 2008 campaign against Georgia and spoke out against Ukraine under former President Viktor Yushchenko. His language about the recent unrest in Egypt was so extreme that the Russian media reportedly cut him off as he was urging Mubarak to shed the blood of thousands, later quoting him as saying that "they" (probably the United States) were preparing a similarly malign scenario for Russia.

Medvedev has regularly promised action against corruption and professed determination to pursue notorious criminal cases. The results have been negligible. He has fired a number of officials and second rank political figures — with former Mayor Yury Luzhkov as his most prominent victim, but a man also in Putin's sights and one whose time had come. He has been a persistent critic of the state corporations, and after three years in the presidency has acted against the direct role of senior members of the Russian political establishment in state-owned or dominated enterprises. But the record of concrete achievement in pursuit of economic reform, let alone the political adjustment needed to advance it, has been notably thin.

Medvedev would clearly like a second term as president. There are quite a few Russians who would prefer him to Putin and who would hope to promote change through him after 2012. But his direct following is limited and so far includes few prepared to stick their necks out for him. Medvedev has not tried very hard to be much more than Putin's willing, if occasionally resentful, partner.

The changes the president has himself backed are restricted and do not imply a willingness on his part to confront the present ruling system or its principal groupings. It is arguable that his remarks on the need for reform and the dangers of stagnation have had an enlivening effect on the public, and that this will have consequences over the next few months. It is arguable, too, that if he stays on as president and is freed after 2012 from Putin's dominance, his

inadequacies as well as his proclaimed purposes will feed useful flexibility and constructive societal evolution. It would be good to hope for that.

But if the present rules of Russian politics remain essentially unchanged after the 2011-12 electoral cycle, it would be rash to count on a benign outcome. Stagnation, as Medvedev has termed it, would have its risks. Structural change would be tough, disruptive and unwelcome to many. The record so far is insufficient to show whether Medvedev is up to the job of leading a country with Russia's emerging problems. Are the Russians right to be skeptical, or are those Western analysts right who see him as a determined harbinger of the next and hopeful era of change in Russia?

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