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# Medvedev's Big Presser Disappoints

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Medvedev walking into the hall at the Skolkovo innovation center where he held a news conference Wednesday. **Dmitry Astakhov**

SKOLKOVO, Moscow Region — President Dmitry Medvedev's much-awaited first "big" news conference on Wednesday left hundreds of journalists and many pundits disappointed and confused.

With less than 10 months remaining before the 2012 presidential election, Medvedev shed no light on his plans. He didn't even get asked about the election until a mind-boggling 15 minutes into the news conference — after taking questions that included one from an Avtoradio reporter about Moscow's parking problems.

"Finally you asked the question," Medvedev quipped when a Nezavisimaya Gazeta reporter asked whether he would run for a second term.

But to the noticeable disappointment of nearly everybody in the packed Skolkovo Business School hall, he dodged a direct answer, explaining instead that politics were governed

by "certain technologies" that should be respected.

Medvedev and his predecessor, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, have repeatedly said they will decide together whether one of them will run. Still, there is little doubt among pundits and the general public that Putin's voice will be decisive in making the decision.

When veteran NTV reporter Vladimir Kondratyev tried to corner Medvedev on whether he would stand against Putin or join a political party, the president addressed him like a principal speaking to a schoolboy. "This is not some children's game. These sort of decisions should be made exactly when all reasons are ripe and have a final political effect," he said. "If I decide to make such a statement, I will make it."

He added that this might happen soon.

Medvedev, who in a break with a Putin tradition previously had not given a big news conference in his three years in office, seemed relaxed and jovial while addressing the crowd of 800 journalists. Yet suspicion lingered that he was not improvising as much as it seemed.

Medvedev regularly looked down at his iPad lying on the lectern. The iPad surely contained questions sent by journalists in advance, which he took at the end of the two-hour, 15-minute briefing, which was broadcast live on state television. But some reporters wondered out loud whether the device also offered instructions on whose questions to take.

He was clearly in control. Each time he paused, hundreds of desperate reporters' arms shot up, some of them waiving notepads with their media outlet's name.

Medvedev seem to waiver on whom to chose — first saying apologetically, "I will first take those I know," but later giving in to screams like "village, village" from a certain Vasily Melnichenko, who introduced himself as chairman of a farm and reporter with a newspaper called People's Power Territory.

In an ensuing debate, Melnichenko begged the president to sign a decree against farmers' bankruptcy. Medvedev's reply was friendly but decisively vague.

His strategy was similar with Yelimkhan Yakhikhanov, a Chechen journalist who came up with the prickly question of which memories he had of Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov, who was assassinated in 2004, and whether he could award the title "City of Military Glory" to Grozny. Medvedev politely said he had fond memories of Kadyrov and that he would look into the Grozny request.

Often the briefing descended into triviality, like when the editor of the gardening magazine Shest Sotok wanted to hear the president's "view of the world," and even hit outright absurd when an unidentified female reporter from the Mordovia republic burst into an eulogy that mentioned Medvedev's "fashionable jeans" and ended with a request for him to lecture students in the regional capital, Saransk.

After everything was over, many reporters expressed their frustration that most of Medvedev's answers to the 34 questions largely repeated his earlier statements.

"We waited for a miracle, but the miracle never came," said Oksana Nikulina, editor

of Context–Agenda, a political magazine published by a United Russia-linked think tank, the Institute for Modern Ideology Development.

Hoping to get selected for a question, Nikulina held up a notepad with a heart scribbled on it in red whenever Medvedev took a new question.

Notably, neither reporters nor Medvedev made any reference to the fight against corruption, one of the hallmarks of his presidency.

But one of the toughest questions came from the state-run Itar-Tass news agency, whose reporter wanted to know why Medvedev had not touched any member of Putin's government despite public outcries over their failures and the fact that he had fired heavyweight governors.

A Norwegian journalist later named Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev and Prosecutor General Yury Chaika as scandal-tarnished candidates for dismissal.

To both questions, Medvedev calmly retorted that it would be wrong to single out officials for punishment over problems in their agencies and added that the overall government performs well as a team.

He argued that top officials should not be removed immediately because they had not created but inherited agencies already burdened with problems.

But he said federal officials could not stay in office indefinitely. "No one comes to power forever. People who have such illusions usually end badly," he said.

Chaika has headed the Prosecutor General's Office since 2006, while Nurgaliyev has held his post since 2005.

Asked about his relationship with Putin, he said they knew each other well, were like-minded and close in strategy. "But that doesn't mean we agree on everything. It must not be that way, that would be very boring and simply wrong," he said.

He also took an apparent jab at Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, with whom Medvedev is said to have an uneasy relationship.

Asked what consequences this week's failure of a $16 billion oil deal between Rosneft and BP would have for the country's investment climate, he said those responsible should have prepared the agreement more thoroughly.

"They should have paid more attention to the legal issues," he said. "If the deal goes through I will be happy because this is a good deal for our country."

Sechin was the chairman of Rosneft until Medvedev instructed him and other federal officials chairing state company boards to step down in March.

Medvedev on Wednesday also made some tough comments on cooperation with NATO, especially over missile defense.

He said NATO has not convinced him that a European missile shield is not directed against Russia, and Moscow will eventually resort to building up offensive nuclear capabilities if the Western alliance presses ahead with plans to build it.

Perhaps his sharpest response came when a reporter for Kommersant-FM radio asked whether he believes that jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky poses a threat to society.

"He is absolutely not dangerous," Medvedev said.

Khodorkovsky and his partner Platon Lebedev saw their prison sentences extended to 2017 in December in a politically tinged tax and fraud case backed by Putin. The Moscow City Court on Tuesday postponed a hearing of their appeal for May 24.

Days before the two were sentenced in December, Putin said Khodorkovsky "has blood on his hands" — although Khodorkovsky has not been charged with violent crimes.

Medvedev also reiterated his stance in the case of the Hermitage Capital investment fund and its lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in a Moscow prison in 2009. He said he had ordered the Investigative Committee and the Federal Security Service to find out whether anyone was responsible for the death.

Political analysts said their expectations had been low, given Medvedev's political constraints as the perceived junior partner in the ruling tandem with Putin. But they agreed that he should have performed better if he was going to take the effort to call such a big news conference and say so little.

"With Putin fully owning the populist program within the tandem, Medvedev could have positioned himself as an independent leader Wednesday by at least talking about values and by appealing to the international community," said Alexander Morozov, an analyst with the Center for Media Studies, a think tank.

Yevgeny Minchenko, of the Minchenko Consulting think tank, said Medvedev had failed to send a positive message to any electoral group except, perhaps, Putin and his retinue. "This whole event, whose expediency is difficult to understand, may mean that Medvedev has decided to seek Putin's support for re-election," he said.

The news conference was the only way for Medvedev to respond to Putin's creation of the All-Russia People's Front, an umbrella group centered around United Russia in which pro-Putin public groups are expected to mobilize voters in the upcoming State Duma and presidential elections, said Alexei Makarkin of the Center for Political Technologies. Officials have said the idea to create the group, which Putin announced two weeks ago, had been batted around since February.

"If Medvedev did nothing, everyone would say he has surrendered," Makarkin said. "But at the same time you cannot expect the president to publicly assail the very system that has backed him and of which he is a part."

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