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Election Season Begins

By The Moscow Times

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What did the journalists in attendance expect from President Dmitry Medvedev's first large media event? The reports on the event are full of disappointment: Why didn't he say that he was going to run for president? Why didn't he say anything new?

Really? Did you really expect him to come out with a clear bid 10 months ahead of the polls? Why would he? It is far too early. If there were other candidates in the race, then maybe he would have to. In the United States, the 2012 presidential election just got under way, but even there pundits admit that it is early, and the early polls rarely predict who the early winners are. Indeed, Donald Trump, who amazingly was leading the polls (by dint of being the only person actually campaigning) just withdrew from the race. In Britain where things are a bit more civilized (well, less showy anyway), the race usually starts about six months ahead of the opening of the polls — and there is a real race there.

All of this talk about candidacy misses the point, which was that Medvedev has started a campaign to reach out to voters and create a persona for the elections. And all the media obligingly turned up and put him on air and in print. This news conference marks the opening

of full-blown electioneering by the Kremlin for the twin elections: December for the Duma, and March for the presidency.

The news conference raised several eyebrows, as I am afraid to say that my colleagues are not really giving him a hard time. The election question was, incredibly, only the fourth to come up and came up a total of only twice in the more than two-hour-long junket. Even Medvedev said he was expecting it to be first. But he moved quickly to dodge the issue.

"This is political life, not a show. Political life is complicated and sophisticated, and there is a certain technology to follow in politics," Medvedev said. "Therefore, these decisions have to be made at the right time and when it has maximum effect. You need a different format, and this news conference is not the proper format [to announce a presidential bid]."

This event was a venue for him to showcase his platform and start the age-old process of drumming a message into the consciousness of the people through raw repetition. As the campaign unfolds, he will need a few bones to throw to the masses — actual actions — if he is going to convince, but these will not come until the fall (if they come at all); things like a high-profile sacking of a minister for corruption is one obvious card that the Kremlin could (and should) play.

The platform was neatly summed up in his opening remarks: "Modernization: have we had any outstanding achievements yet? No we haven't ... but modernization is the most important thing in our country today."

Really that is about all you need to know about this speech. Like Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's speeches to the Duma in April and to United Russia in early May, this news conference is part of the launch of what will be a sustained campaign by the Kremlin to rev the people up ahead of the elections.

And I think he did a good job of defining himself as something other than Putin's poodle, which is his main political obstacle to having some sort of creditability on Election Day. He looked comfortable, was confident and in command of his facts, and joked with the journalists.

In general as a pair, you can see why Putin chose Medvedev over Sergei "Mr. Icicle" Ivanov in 2008. Putin is getting on a bit, but has an increasingly clear cut *muzhik* (macho) image. He swears; he visibly loses his cool if you ask him about Chechnya or jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky; he drives cars and flies planes; and he goes bare-chested hunting in the wilderness. By contrast, Medvedev is young; he speaks English and listens to rock music; he tweets and is faithful to his wife; and he has a touch of bookishness left over from his days as a university professor. Between them I think we have most of the bases covered when it comes to the spectrum of voter preferences, don't you? Putin is a "traditionalist" and a nationalist whereas Medvedev is a "modernist" and an internationalist.

What amazes me is that no one is commenting on the silent political crisis that is clearly playing out in Russia. United Russia got toasted in the regional elections this March. I know it "won," but it takes very little digging to see that the entire vote was a travesty, and in reality United Russia had its trousers handed to it by any party that could string more than two words

together (and get registered to run, which wasn't many).

These elections highlighted the mood of the country, and the Kremlin has to get at least close to a real win in the upcoming elections to have any legitimacy. They will fix the last few percentage points if they don't reach certain key voting thresholds, but to organize a wholesale robbery of the vote with a massive ballot stuff is clearly a very dangerous things to do in a world where the hoi polloi has been inspired by the Arab Spring.

One of Putin's distinguishing features is that he is a lot more subtle than this: Ask yourself why he bothered to step down as president at all if he intends to simply steal the upcoming elections. If you are going to abuse the system this badly, why not change the Constitution and make yourself president for life, which he could have done both legally and legitimately thanks to his sky-high popularity in 2008.

So it will be interesting to watch just how good the twins are at running what will have to, ironically, become a Western-style media campaign to win the hearts and minds of the voting public in the next six months. Of course, this is not going to be a democratic election in the way we understand it in the West. Neither is it going to be farce that we saw in places like Kazakhstan or Belarus.

For me, the bottom line is that by simply holding this news conference at all, Medvedev actually did answer Question No. 4: He will run for, and inevitably will become, the next president. After all, why bother mounting what is clearly a major press campaign that is coordinated with Putin's efforts if you don't intend to run?

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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