

Finding a Way for Putin to Step Aside Powerfully

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It would be wrong to dismiss President Dmitry Medvedev as a lame duck after his news conference last week. All the signals Medvedev sent were the right ones, while his public performance was impressive and likable. There stood a president the nation could be proud of. And the odds are higher now that he will be running this country for the next six years.

With the news conference, Medvedev has rejoined Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's intimidation dance in the run-up to the decision on which of the two might run in the 2012 presidential election.

Putin has deliberately sought to deny Medvedev options for an independent run, a strategy that Medvedev's so-called liberal advisers have been pushing the president to take. This is reflected in Putin's rush to form the All-Russia People's Front.

Putin wants to make the final decision on presidential succession to underscore his

unquestioned status as national leader, which is his principal source of political legitimacy in Russia.

This does not necessarily mean that he will return to the Kremlin but rather that he remains the ultimate decider on who gets to run with his backing.

Medvedev has rightly signaled that the best option for the country would be his nomination as Putin's candidate backed by United Russia or the people's front. He has distanced himself from loopy liberals who have sought to portray him as anti-Putin.

But he also has clearly indicated that less palatable options are available to the president, including his power to dismiss the government and disband the State Duma. In addition, he is willing to experiment with real party politics by backing Right Cause and its incoming leader Mikhail Prokhorov, who could be a game-changer in politics.

Medvedev knows that Putin lacks a viable rationale to return to the Kremlin and is visibly weary of his prime ministerial role. The trick is to devise an arrangement for Putin to remain the ultimate decider while not spending too much time making tough decisions.

Perhaps such an arrangement could be found in Medvedev's inconspicuous decree last week that granted unprecedented powers to the secretary of the Security Council that almost rival the authority of the president and prime minister. After all, Deng Xiaoping's title for many years has been chairman of the Communist Party's Military Commission.

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