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Medvedev Hints Tycoons Should Pick Him or Putin

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President Dmitry Medvedev has privately signaled to business leaders that they must decide whether they support him for a second term or want Prime Minister Vladimir Putin back in the Kremlin, Vedomosti reported Wednesday.

The report suggested that Medvedev is angling for the backing of Russia's most powerful tycoons in a half-hidden struggle with Putin over which of them will run next March.

Medvedev has in the past hinted strongly that he wants to run but will not do so without a green light from Putin, who has suggested he and Medvedev will decide in the coming months whether one of them will run.

Vedomosti cited one of the 27 business leaders who met Medvedev behind closed doors on Monday as saying he had indirectly but clearly urged them to decide between him and Putin.

"The president delicately and unequivocally gave us to understand that the time has come

for the business community to decide who it wants to see as the next president — Medvedev or Putin," said the participant, who was not identified.

Another participant said Medvedev told business leaders that they should decide whether they want Russia to keep pursuing policies put in place by Putin or shift to a vision Medvedev has set out in recent speeches.

At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum last month, Medvedev said Russia would face stagnation if it failed to modernize the resource-reliant economy and curb the state's dominant role, seen as a hallmark of Putin's rule.

Support from business leaders could help Medvedev. Diplomats and political analysts say Putin will likely take the views of a small number of tycoons and officials into account when he decides on the election.

Medvedev's message in unexpected remarks at the end of Monday's meeting was that "you must decide whether to support my program or leave everything as it is," Vedomosti quoted one participant as saying.

Medvedev has conveyed the same message several times in recent months, casting himself as a reformer who would seek swifter change than Putin while carefully avoiding overt criticism of the mentor who steered him into the presidency.

Participants in the meeting included the heads of oil companies LUKoil, Surgetneftegaz and Rosneft, the lenders VTB and Sberbank, as well as tycoons Mikhail Fridman and Oleg Deripaska.

Participants said Medvedev made no direct appeal for support for a re-election bid, Vedomosti reported, and one suggested that if that was his purpose, he hurt his cause by leaving his intentions unclear.

"The conversation sounded like, 'I want to [run], but I don't know yet whether or not I will — I don't have a firm position,'" the participant said.

It is difficult to throw one's backing behind a potential candidate who has not declared he will run, the participant said, reflecting concerns among tycoons who are seeking signals from Putin and Medvedev but are wary of making the wrong bet.

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