

Why Medvedev Got Tough on Yanukovych

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September 11, 2011

The  Moscow Times

Can foreign policy serve as an indication of where things are heading within Russia's ruling tandem? A closer look at what's happening in relations with Ukraine provides insight into maneuverings within the tandem as it approaches the time to decide who will run for president.

In the past couple of weeks, President Dmitry Medvedev has taken an unusually hard-line stance toward Ukraine. He has ridiculed President Viktor Yanukovich and his government over their pleas to reconsider Gazprom's lucrative gas contract with Ukraine. He has accused the Ukrainian authorities of "free-riding," admonished them on the sanctity of contracts, and delivered an ultimatum on Ukraine's Independence Day to join the customs union or sell their pipelines and get an "integration discount" for gas. He also rejected Yanukovich's proposal for a "3+1" formula for Ukraine's relations with the customs union.

This is unexpected hardball from Medvedev on an issue that he has counted as one of his

foreign policy achievements — resetting Russia's relations with Ukraine with a friendly leadership in Kiev.

Yanukovych owes his election as president in 2010 to Medvedev as much as he does to the Ukrainian people.

In June 2009, Yanukovych and then-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko flew to St. Petersburg to sign off on a blockbuster political deal to create a supermajority coalition government in Kiev between the Party of the Regions and the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc. Under a new constitution, Ukraine would have become a parliamentary republic with the executive power vested in the prime minister (Tymoshenko), while the president (Yanukovych) would be elected by the parliament with largely ceremonial functions.

Hours before the deal was to be inaugurated, Yanukovych met separately with Medvedev and told him he was uncomfortable with the plan and thought he had a good chance of winning the presidential election in 2010. Medvedev agreed, and Yanukovych scrapped a deal with Tymoshenko that would have provided Russia with much more leverage in Kiev than it has now.

Ever since, Yanukovych and his team have placed their bets on Medvedev and a second Medvedev presidential term, hoping to negotiate a better gas deal with him as opposed to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Yanukovych sought to boost Medvedev's standing by signing a deal with him to extend Russia's lease on its naval base in Sevastopol for another 45 years.

Medvedev's hard-line stance toward Yanukovych is indicative of his desire to closely align himself with Putin in an effort to secure his blessing for a second presidential term.

Putin has made no secret that he regards Yanukovych as weak and untrustworthy. On the contrary, he found in Tymoshenko a rare Ukrainian politician with whom he could do business.

The kangaroo trial of Tymoshenko is a personal affront to Putin, whom the authorities in Kiev have seriously considered calling as a prosecution witness.

Russia's Foreign Ministry has declared the charges against Tymoshenko bogus, while Medvedev has gone as far as to say Tymoshenko is being jailed for her "ability to strike a deal with Russia."

Ever since his major news conference in May, Medvedev has sought to eliminate any difference between his and Putin's positions on international issues. Apart from Ukraine, this approach has been on display with Medvedev's tough stand against Western efforts to pressure President Bashar Assad's regime in Syria and in his criticism of NATO's operations in Libya. This is both smart politics and a good management of foreign policy in the short term. But if Medvedev is serious about re-election, he needs to provide a strategic vision of where he wants to take the country internationally in the 21st century. And he must make sure that this vision aligns with Putin's.

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