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'Useful Idiots' Back Medvedev's Re-Election

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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It was really pointless for observers to have spent the last three years asking the question: "Who is better, Medvedev or Putin?" and to have worked themselves up over the conundrum even more during the run-up to elections each fall.

Make no mistake: Dmitry Medvedev is not an alternative to Vladimir Putin, and vice versa. In practical terms, they are just flip sides of the same coin.

It makes no difference whether Putin or Medvedev is the next president. Moreover, if Putin decides that it is more advantageous for him to have Medvedev stay in office, it might only further delay urgently needed reforms to Russia's institutions and political and economic systems.

As recently as three years, two years and even one year ago, we could still hold out hope that Medvedev would decisively put Russia's house in order by dismissing ineffective ministers, cracking down on corruption and implementing reforms. Many people earnestly responded to

his rousing calls for modernization, the fight against corruption and even Skolkovo. Now those people look like first-class fools, to put it mildly.

Medvedev himself has gone silent regarding modernization, corruption and Skolkovo and has quietly been backing into the shadows. And yet those fools continue their raptures over his modernization message and call zealously for Medvedev to run for a second term. Of course, even these would-be modernizers have not forgotten to keep one foot solidly in the camp of United Russia and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as well — just in case.

The past three years of Medvedev's presidency have shown that he completely lacks the qualities that his foolish admirers — the so-called "modernizers" — ascribe to him. (Vladimir Lenin derogatorily referred to such public figures in tsarist Russia as "useful idiots.")

And despite all his wordy promises of political reform and modernization, not a single thing has resulted from them. Only a faint echo remains of the four I's — innovation, institutions, investment and infrastructure — that he first proclaimed loudly near the start of his presidency. When tested, it turned out that Medvedev was not a leader, a take-charge man or even a real president. For almost four years he has uttered eloquent words without making a single independent decision. He has remained a loyal subordinate and junior partner to Putin.

The more than three years of tandemocracy have given Russia no positive change.

Ahead lies the clear prospect of the authoritarian regime and the monopoly on power held by Putin and his inner circle, United Russia and the siloviki. The real opposition parties will continue to be denied the right to register for elections, and the government's strict censorship of the media will remain in place. Former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his former business partner Platon Lebedev will be slapped with new charges leading to still more prison terms. Moscow will continue appointing governors and denying the residents of ever more cities the right to directly elect their regional and municipal leaders. Corruption will flourish, from the highest ranks of government down. The authorities will continue to falsify the results of so-called elections. (Medvedev made no objections to the absurd way in which former St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko's candidacy for the Federation Council was put forward, or to the disgraceful charade masquerading as elections in his native city.)

This lawyer-president watches indifferently as Russia's court system, prosecutor's office and police force deteriorate with alarming speed, while false charges are leveled against thousands of businesspeople to satisfy their political enemies and competitors. At the same time, Gazprom assets continue to be siphoned off, ever more oil fields are handed out to Putin's friends, endless delays occur in bringing those responsible for Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky's prison death to justice, and millions upon millions of dollars are stolen from the national budget through graft and murky schemes.

In fact, the situation in Russia has actually grown worse because the ballooning state bureaucracy and the uncontrolled personal enrichment of its privileged members have become more difficult to distinguish owing to the rustle and sheen of the silky smooth modernization ruse created by Medvedev.

And yet those "useful idiots" continue to urge: "Just give him another presidential term —

and then he will really start to work!" They suggest that a country that has already lost 3 1/2 years to fruitless expectations and failed hopes should now wait at least another six.

These halfwit "modernizers" write about the need for deep reforms to Russia's institutions and political and economic systems. And they are correct in writing that. But their hero — Medvedev — is far from being up to the task. He has knowingly aligned himself with Putin and has made a mockery of the drive for modernization.

Medvedev has a chance of getting re-elected to the Kremlin for the next six years. An ongoing and aggressive campaign by Putin might actually be aimed at giving United Russia and his All-Russia People's Front a stronger hand in the State Duma. He might retain Medvedev as useful window dressing, as a false ray of hope to a society hungry for real change.

Medvedev has already proved his loyalty and obedience to his patron. Putin might keep him for that reason, and to please a pragmatic West that will pretend it sees significant liberal differences between Medvedev and Putin. And finally, Medvedev would satisfy the professional class clamoring for modernization. No doubt these hapless souls will spend the next six years buttonholing us into corners, winking, whispering and gasping in delight: "Now he'll start! Get ready! Believe me ol' fellow — now it's really going to happen!"

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