

With a Hug, Putin Launches Kremlin Bid

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Putin, left, and Medvedev, silhouetted against United Russia's logo, walking onto the stage of a pre-election party convention in Luzhniki on Saturday. **Igor Tabakov**

It was the hug that sealed the deal.

President Dmitry Medvedev left the stage to thunderous applause after announcing Saturday at a United Russia convention that he endorsed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's return as president.

More than 11,000 United Russia delegates and supporters, clearly delighted with the news, stood and clapped as Medvedev walked back to his seat next to Putin in the middle of the sixth row.

Then Putin wrapped his arms around Medvedev, his teeth barred in what looked like a forced smile, for a seconds-long embrace.

Putin and Medvedev declared at the convention that they intended to swap jobs next year:

Putin will run in the March 2012 presidential election, and Medvedev is ready to take over the government if Putin wins.

Both leaders announced the moves in carefully staged appearances at the United Russia pre-election convention for the State Duma, ending months of political uncertainty that had paralyzed the country.

Putin was the first to address the attendees, including 639 delegates, in the Luzhniki sports palace.

He told them that Medvedev, his protege, should head the electoral list for the Dec. 4 Duma elections, saying it would be best not to break with the practice of past elections that the incumbent president leads United Russia's list.

"I believe this will raise the party's authority and ensure its expected and just victory," he told the cheering convention.

Medvedev then took to the stage to say he accepted Putin's proposal and, in return, endorsed the prime minister as his successor.

"In light of the proposal that I head the party list, engage in party work and my willingness to engage in government work if we do well in the elections, I think the party convention should support the candidacy of party chairman Vladimir Putin as the country's president," Medvedev [said](#).

When the convention burst into applause, he added, "This means I don't need to explain the experience and authority commanded by Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin."

After receiving Medvedev's embrace, Putin returned to the stage to deliver an hourlong, dry speech about past achievements and future tasks, dwelling mainly on economic and social politics.

At the end of his address, he said, almost in passing, that Medvedev could build a young energetic team and "head the Russian government so that he can continue his work to modernize all walks of our life."

When Medvedev then delivered his second address, he declared himself ready to head the government. "When we manage to get a new government, I am prepared to lead that government and continue to work for the good of the country," he said.

Putin, who served eight years as president starting in 2000, was widely seen as the country's top decision maker even after he handed over the presidency to Medvedev in 2008. The Constitution allows only two consecutive terms.

Putin is set to win the 2012 election, given his unrivaled popularity, the divided opposition and the authorities' demonstrated unwillingness to register serious opposition candidates.

If he is re-elected for two consecutive terms, he could remain in power until 2024 because of a constitutional reform, initiated by Medvedev, that lengthens the presidential term from four to six years. (The Duma's legislative period was also lengthened to five instead of four years.)

While many political observers had believed that Putin would return to the Kremlin, an announcement at the party convention was not widely expected. One senior United Russia deputy, however, correctly predicted the announcement in an interview published in The Moscow Times on Friday. But conventional wisdom suggested that the veil would be lifted only after it became clear how United Russia performed in the Duma elections.

Pundits said the decision to end the uncertainty now dealt an irreparable blow to Medvedev's political credibility.

Gleb Pavlovsky, a political consultant who was fired as a longtime Kremlin adviser earlier this year, called it the president's capitulation. "Maybe it was voluntary, maybe not. But it remains an unique fact that the post of president in a nuclear power has changed hands through a private deal," he told Gazeta.ru.

Much mockery was also directed at Putin's and Medvedev's assurances that their decision was far from spontaneous, seemingly confirming the view that the whole Medvedev presidency, which raised hopes among liberals that Putin's "power vertical" would be softened, had been a charade.

Putin told the convention right at the beginning that an agreement about what he and Medvedev would be doing had been reached "years ago." But he added apologetically that "who sits in which place" was not the most important issue. "Much more important is this: which results we achieve and what our citizens think of them; how our people react and how much they support us," he said.

Medvedev subsequently confessed that he and Putin had discussed the "deeply thought-out decision ... back when we first formed a friendly alliance" in 2007. But at the same time he denied that they had misled the public by repeatedly suggesting that no decision had been made.

"While we waited a long time to reveal publicly our positions ... I hope that you and our citizens will understand that this was a matter of political expediency. I would like to emphasize one thing: We have always told the truth," he said.

These comments were hard to reconcile with the fact that Medvedev's aides have long said he genuinely wanted a second term.

One of them, who was said to be particularly close to him, expressed spontaneous frustration during Saturday's convention.

"Yeah, well, there's nothing to be happy about," Arkady Dvorkovich, the Kremlin's chief economic adviser, [wrote](#) on Twitter. Dvorkovich, long seen as a champion for a second term for Medvedev, then declined an interview request from The New York Times before tweeting, "Time to switch to the sports channel."

Others agreed that it did matter whether Putin or Medvedev was president.

The difference between them is more in style than in substance, but it is style that makes the difference in a personalized and deinstitutionalized government like today's Russia, Jens Siegert, a veteran political commentator who heads of the Moscow office of the Böll

Foundation, a German think tank, wrote on his blog.

He said everyone "feels nauseated" even though such a decision was widely expected. "Everybody keeps telling me how old they will be in 12 years," he [said](#).

On the convention's sidelines, senior party figures took pains to explain that the succession process would be good for the country.

The decision signals government continuity and a predictable future, said Sergei Antufyev, Smolensk region governor and a veteran United Russia member.

"[Political] intrigue, shaking the boat in which we are sailing, is very dangerous because of Russia's multiethnic makeup and complicated history," he told reporters.

This line of argument was dismissed by Just Russia Duma Deputy Gennady Gudkov, who warned that the decision to swap Putin's and Medvedev's positions risked a revolution.

Arguing that Putin would never reform the system that he had built, Gudkov said unrest was brewing if reforms did not take place in the coming two or three years.

"Aggression is rife, and the mood is worsening — the people are tired of hearing the same names. It is wrong to drive people to a stage beyond which is nothing but street protests and blood," he told reporters at his party's convention, which also took place Saturday.

Meanwhile, Medvedev did not give the impression of a defeated leader.

Instead, he often smiled while listening to Putin and looked firm when he delivered a trademark reformist speech about raising United Russia's own level of democracy.

"All of us in this room believe that the party itself needs a major overhaul. It must become more open, efficient and, if you want, more rigorous in asserting its priorities," he said.

Medvedev also called the party to rid itself of "random people who stick to it in order to achieve their own, selfish ends." Curiously, he was borrowing a term that Putin had used when he called for a party purge in April 2008, thus signaling that the task had not been completed even three years later.

Paradoxically, neither Medvedev nor Putin are card-carrying party members.

But in a telling sign of what it deems "efficiency," the convention gave United Russia its election platform by simply declaring that it would consist of Putin's and Medvedev's speeches.

During the applause ending Putin's hourlong address, Deputy Duma Speaker Oleg Morozov, who is also a senior party official, got up and made the seemingly spontaneous suggestion for the platform. The motion was subsequently unanimously endorsed by delegates in a show of hands.

Putin later declared that one delegate had dared to vote against the 600-member party list, which was approved in a secret ballot, in a rare show of dissent.

"Where is he?" he asked the hall, which roared with laughter.

The [list](#) includes some 185 names of nonparty members, selected by the All-Russia People's Front, an organization created by Putin this spring to counter sagging support for United Russia, which only garnered some 40 percent in March regional elections.

Staff writer Alexander Bratersky contributed to this report.

See [our photo gallery](#) of the convention.

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