

Party Is Over for Medvedev the Modernizer

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

September 28, 2011



Portraits of Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev embroidered on coats being sold at a souvenir and clothing stand in central Moscow. **Igor Tabakov**

When Dmitry Medvedev was named by then-President Vladimir Putin in December 2007 as his preferred successor, he was widely ridiculed as a weak figure who would allow Putin to continue to hold the reins.

Medvedev "worships Putin like a father figure, or at least like an older brother," Valery Musin, Medvedev's former academic adviser and law professor at Leningrad State University, told The Moscow Times at the time.

Almost four years later, the image of Medvedev as a soft and psychologically dependent man has suddenly returned with force.

"Now Putin is the boss, and all that is left for Medvedev is some technical function," said Lilia

Shevtsova, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

It seems that the picture of Medvedev meekly backing Putin as the next president at last weekend's United Russia convention has all but eclipsed the picture of the Kremlin's enthusiastic modernizer who dazzled foreign leaders and investors with visions of a liberal and open Russia.

For many liberals who had clung to the hope that they would see a second Medvedev presidency, the party is over.

"There is no more room for a strong Medvedev. The ruling tandem ceased to exist on Sept. 24," Shevtsova said, referring to the second day of the party convention when Medvedev endorsed Putin as his successor.

The frustration was expressed on Pushkin Square on Sunday, when more than 100 people gathered for a spontaneous protest calling for Putin's ouster. It was illustrated in thousands of blog posts, which often contained a photoshopped image of Putin's face superimposed on Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, whose 18-year tenure is known as the era of stagnation.

Medvedev has said he will lead a new government after the presidential election in March, effectively swapping jobs with Putin.

Igor Yurgens, head of the Institute of Contemporary Development and one of Medvedev's most ardent supporters, said that while the convention's announcement caused deep dissatisfaction, the work started by Medvedev must continue.

"Political modernization and liberalization is unavoidable — after 2012 as well," Yurgens told Interfax.

Sergei Markov, a State Duma deputy for United Russia, said modernization would continue under Putin as president. "It is not correct to call Medvedev the country's main modernizer. Let's not forget that it was Putin who invited him to the presidency," he said.

But experts and opposition figures interviewed for this article expressed serious doubts that Medvedev could be an effective modernizer as prime minister because Putin barely used the three prime ministers who served during his presidency.

"Under Putin, prime ministers played no role — hardly anybody remembers their names," said Ilya Yashin, co-leader of the Solidarity opposition movement.

Putin added insult to injury last weekend by declaring that he and Medvedev had agreed "years ago" on his return to the Kremlin, suggesting that the Medvedev presidency had been a charade.

Medvedev signaled that he wants to be seen as in charge Monday, when he fired Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin in front of television cameras.

The sacking of Kudrin, a longtime ally of Putin who worked with him in the St. Petersburg city administration in the 1990s, has been characterized as Medvedev's boldest move as president, but it failed to convince everyone.

Yashin said Kudrin's dismissal suggested that a final decision about Putin's return was made only last week. He said Kudrin was jealous of Medvedev because he had been promised the prime minister's job, while Medvedev was supposed to become State Duma speaker after his term ends next year.

"When this was changed at the last moment, Putin agreed that Medvedev could sack Kudrin to save his public image," Yashin said.

Shevtsova offered a different explanation, arguing that Putin had agreed to sacrifice his minister as compensation to Medvedev. "This was Putin's payment for humiliating Medvedev at the [party] convention," she said.

Some say the struggle between conservatives and liberal modernizers will only get tougher.

Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who was ousted as leader of the pro-business Right Cause party earlier this month in what he described as a Kremlin-orchestrated coup, said Kudrin's sacking confirmed an ongoing struggle between "conservatives" and "modernizers."

"I think we are facing tectonic upheavals among the ruling elites," Prokhorov wrote in his blog.

But others offered a more sobering line of argument, saying Putin's return to the Kremlin would just unmask the fundamental defects of Medvedev's presidency.

"Let's face it: Many of his admirers are already extremely disillusioned today," said Leonid Gozman, co-founder of Right Cause who quit the party after Prokhorov's ouster.

Gozman said Medvedev had set himself an unsolvable task with his modernization policies.

"The question is whether modernization can be reconciled with the political system built under Putin. I believe this is not possible," he said in a telephone interview.

Shevtsova, from the Carnegie center, went one step further by questioning whether Medvedev deserved any liberal credentials. She said his reforms were "largely cosmetic." His real policy record, she said, was characterized by incidents like the Russia-Georgia war, which she said was "provoked" by Moscow; the Kremlin's initiative for a new European security architecture, which she described as a plot to weaken NATO; the second verdict against Yukos founder Mikhail Khodorkovsky; and the case of Sergei Magnitsky, the lawyer who died in prison.

"Those who call him a liberal are naive," Shevtsova said.

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