

News Analysis: After Jarring Week, Putin Is Showing New Image

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Since President Dmitry Medvedev spectacularly backed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to become his successor last weekend, the world has stopped guessing who will be the country's next leader.

But Kremlinology does not stop here, and the guessing game started immediately with a new question: What sort of Putin will the world get?

Some political commentators have suggested that Putin is about to change. A popular thesis, propagated in a New York Times article this week, speaks of a "Putin 2.0" who is going to pursue the path followed by Medvedev since 2008.

Putin, the argument goes, is already showing a new image of himself.

Last Friday, he made some unusually friendly comments about human rights activists, when

he told a roundtable at the first day of a United Russia party convention that they draw attention to issues necessary for social development. If those aren't addressed, "people won't feel connected to the government," he [said](#).

At a Cabinet [meeting](#) on Monday, he ordered government agencies to exchange information online instead of on paper.

On Wednesday, Putin attended a roundtable with writers and publishers, where he for the first time discussed corruption allegations against Gennady Timchenko, owner of secretive oil trader Gunvor, and against state-owned pipeline operator Transneft.

And on Thursday, he [chaired](#) a government meeting devoted to rooting out corruption in state contracts — a sphere notorious for graft and kickbacks.

Human rights, e-government and fighting corruption are all hallmarks of Medvedev's presidency that raised hopes among the country's liberals and Western governments that the Kremlin was slowly rolling back the soft-authoritarian system built under Putin's two terms as president from 2000 to 2008.

So has Putin embarked on a campaign to soften his hard-line image?

His spokesman Dmitry Peskov disagreed with the question Thursday, saying by phone that there was no need for Putin to change.

"Vladimir Putin has always demonstrated that he is ready to accept constructive criticism. He just does not accept agenda-driven criticism and paid media coverage," Peskov said.

Valery Borshchyov, a veteran lawyer and human rights activist, said that while it was difficult to gauge whether Putin would change, it would be hard for him to overturn some of the liberal changes carried out by Medvedev.

"Yes, he strongly opposes reforms and will do everything to protect the siloviki faction," he said, referring to a group of security services officers who rose in power and influence during the last decade.

But Borshchyov also said an investigation into the death of Sergei Magnitsky was evidence of progress, arguing that the state has recognized its guilt.

Magnitsky, a lawyer for the Hermitage Capital investment fund, died under murky circumstances in a Moscow prison in 2009. Last month, a deputy warden and chief doctor at the city's notorious Butyrskaya prison were charged with negligence in his death. Prosecutors said earlier this week that they are investigating why the two officials had admitted themselves into hospitals for medical treatment — a popular ruse among Russians who don't want to lose their jobs or be arrested.

"The [investigation's] results are open, and you cannot hide them again," said Borshchyov, who led an independent, Kremlin-ordered investigation into the death.

Ilya Ponomarev, a State Duma deputy for the Just Russia party, said Putin was making an about-face on the surface, but that did not mean he would change his deeper beliefs. "He is

a mature man and an experienced politician. And he is deeply cynical," he said.

Ponomarev said Wednesday's meeting with writers and publishers showed that one of Putin's strengths is to "behave differently with different audiences."

"With writers he is always very nice," he said.

Putin was asked by dissident writer Zakhar Prilepin how it was possible for Timchenko to earn huge amounts of money by selling Russian oil and then obtain Finnish citizenship.

The Timchenko affair has been at the heart of corruption allegations against Putin since opposition politician Ivan Rybkin claimed during the 2004 presidential race that Putin was a secret co-owner of Gunvor and that Timchenko was effectively the manager of Putin's personal fortune.

Putin had never directly addressed the allegations, which were repeated by political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky in the run-up to the 2007 Duma elections.

On Wednesday, Putin said that while he had known Timchenko since they both worked in St. Petersburg in the 1990s, Timchenko had come to his business "absolutely without my involvement."

Prilepin complained Thursday that Putin's comments on Timchenko were not shown on state television. However, the full transcript and video was available on his prime minister's [web site](#).

Sergei Shargunov, a colleague of Prilepin who was not invited to the roundtable, said Prilepin had probably played the role of the lone heckler. "To have a single heckler is allowed," Shargunov told The Moscow Times.

Putin has faced sensitive questions from artists before, most notably from rock singer Yury Shevchuk, who challenged him during a charity event in St. Petersburg in May 2010.

Edward Limonov, a writer and radical opposition activist and a friend of Prilepin, said by phone that he opposed such intimate meetings. "Putin is a man who needs publicity, and there is no need to give him that. Imagine how he would feel if he weren't given such an opportunity," he said.

Limonov's words were echoed by Belkovsky, the analyst and former Kremlin insider, who said any trace of liberalization these days was purely a political show.

"Putin won't allow more democracy, but he will do all he can to correct his negative image abroad," Belkovsky said by telephone, adding that the Kremlin was well aware that Western governments were shocked by last weekend's news that Putin would run for the presidency.

Belkovsky suggested that any efforts to maintain Medvedev's modernization and reform drives were not motivated by hopes of attracting foreign investment but to keep oil and gas revenues flowing.

He said incidents like this week's raids on several EU-based Gazprom offices by EU antitrust

investigators raised the Kremlin's fears that profits from energy sales would be diminished.

"All they want is to be legitimate members of the international business community," he said.

Staff writer Alexander Bratersky contributed to this report.

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