The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Poor Medvedev

By The Moscow Times

October 05, 2011



During the United Russia convention on Sept. 24, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin gave President Dmitry Medvedev the top spot on the party list. Now Medvedev is faced with a daunting goal — to lead United Russia to victory in the State Duma elections, a top priority for the Kremlin.

It is already clear that United Russia's campaign will have a large social component — including promises to establish "fair prices" for consumer staples, increasing pensions and salaries for many state employees, pledging to improve the health care and education systems, and controlling the price of utilities.

But there is one hitch regarding Medvedev's new populist role in United Russia. Until now, Medvedev has tried to build an image as a liberal reformer. How will this jibe with a more conservative United Russia, a party of "stabilization" and bureaucracy? How will Medvedev be able to appeal to the party's large electoral base made up of state employees?

Medvedev is also struggling with the problem of political status. Having made himself into a

lame duck by refusing to run for a second term, he will have trouble mobilizing anyone. That is why Medvedev must now employ populism and disavow everything that he said as president.

But creating a "new" Medvedev will be difficult to pull off. His ideology remains undefined, and, more important, his political standing has been severely compromised by his decision to not run for president in 2012 and to continue to play the role of junior tandem partner as prime minister.

As president, Medvedev focused on small and midsize businesspeople, liberals, the youth and technology-oriented Russians. Now, in his new capacity with United Russia, he will have to appeal to a new constituency that he all but ignored before — state employees and pensioners, most of whom are poor.

Last week, the State Statistics Service reported that 14.9 percent of the population lives below the poverty level. Promises by leaders to raise salaries and pensions, rein in the price of utilities and goods controlled by monopolies, and make basic medicines and surgery free of charge should be very popular.

In surveys, Russians consistently say rising prices or a lack of money are the most serious problems they face. For example, an August survey by the Levada Center found that 73 percent of the population consider rising prices the most acute problem in the country, 52 percent cited poverty and the impoverishment of the majority of the population, and 42 percent cited increasing unemployment.

Russians have little faith in elections, with 46 percent believing that the December Duma elections will be marred by manipulation and fraud, according to an August Levada Center poll. People will vote for United Russia on Dec. 4 only if they believe that the party can at least modestly improve their standard of living.

Impoverished voters are more likely to swing their vote from the Communist Party and Liberal Democratic Party to United Russia in response to new promises of handouts. As the new leader of United Russia, Medvedev has the depressing task of pronouncing the populist slogan of "Help for the Poor!"

Poor Medvedev.

In the end, Medvedev has given up the task of trying to develop the country and giving people a way to support themselves through honest labor.

This comment appeared as an editorial in Vedomosti.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/10/05/poor-medvedev-a9972