The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

From Liberal to Lackey

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

October 24, 2011



When President Dmitry Medvedev assumed office four years ago, it didn't take long for a deep split between Russia's main liberals to develop. As a result, two new camps formed: liberal modernizers and a liberal opposition.

The first group was led by Igor Yurgens, Yevgeny Gontmakher and other analysts from the Kremlin-linked Institute of Contemporary Development. In their numerous articles, reports and interviews, they supported Medvedev, proclaiming that he was a liberal reformer. They called for a broad "modernization coalition" that would convince Medvedev that he had his own social base and would motivate him to shift from making vague hints and liberal speeches to taking decisive action.

The second group, which included most members of the nonsystemic opposition, was convinced from the very beginning of what eventually became obvious to everybody — that Putin was using Medvedev as a placeholder to protect and strengthen his personal hold on power. In the end, the ruling tandem has only been pretending to address society's growing demands for reform to prolong the life of the corrupt and ineffective system.

A significant portion of the liberal intelligentsia bought into the myth that Medvedev is the new Mikhail Gorbachev and appealed to him to run for a second term. The West, by and large, also put political stock in Medvedev as a liberal. U.S. President Barack Obama led these efforts because he thought that Medvedev would maintain and further develop the "reset" in U.S.-

Russian relations better than the other tandem member, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Liberal modernizers lapped up Medvedev's attractive rhetoric about the need for sweeping modernization of the country that included political reforms and developing of the Four I's — institutions, innovation, infrastructure and investment. They wasted countless hours writing extensive analytical reports and developing strategic plans to advance Medvedev's supposed political and economic modernization agenda.

But in time, it became clear that Medvedev was only making a superficial and meaningless call for modernization. He never truly considered reforming the foundation of the corrupt bureaucratic state because reformation would have necessarily entailed at least a partial dismantlement of Putin's vertical power structure — something that was clearly off the table.

On Sept. 24, Medvedev announced that he would support Putin's return to the Kremlin. Both members of the tandem confirmed the switch had been planned before 2008, when Medvedev became president. What's more, Medvedev agreed to head the party list for the State Duma elections in December. This underscores how much Medvedev has degraded — from being a self-proclaimed liberal to becoming a status-quo United Russia lackey and top functionary.

Yurgens has already proposed that both the liberal modernizers and liberal opposition meet to discuss what he terms the "new" situation in the country. But Putin's return to the Kremlin means that hard times are in store for Russia. Having already squandered the windfall petrodollars of the 2000s,

It is likely that Putin will now push the country — already lagging so far behind in building a modern economy and institutions — down an increasingly steep slope that could end in total collapse. To save the country along with other progressive forces in society, liberals from both sides must now consolidate and develop a common vision of the future.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, hosts a political talk show on Ekho Moskvy radio and is co-founder of the opposition Party of People's Freedom.

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

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/10/24/from-liberal-to-lackey-a10376