The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Analysis: Medvedev in PR Fiasco

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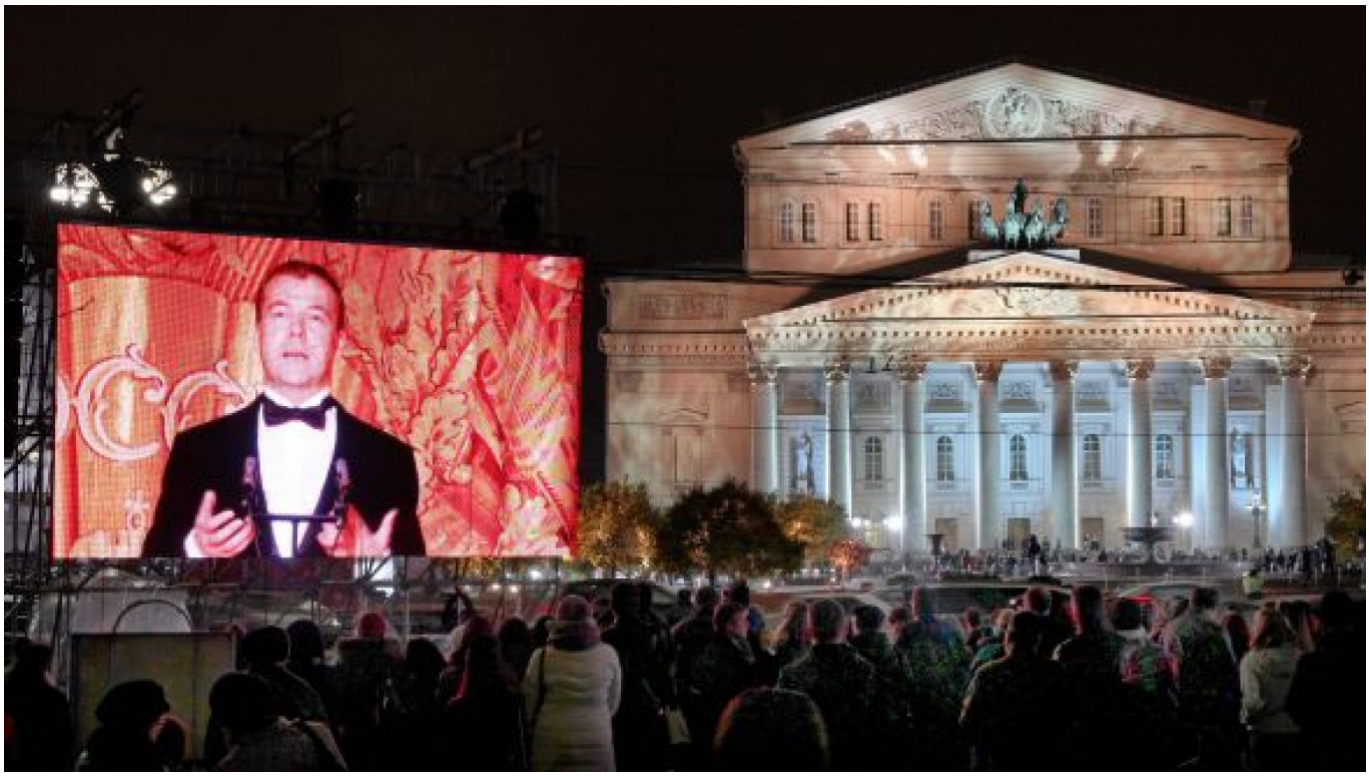
October 30, 2011



People watching a live broadcast of President Medvedev's speech at the gala opening of the Bolshoi Theater on Friday night.

Gadgets can't seem to keep up with Russia's technology-loving president.

Many computers and smartphones automatically set back their clocks by an hour on Sunday morning, unaware that the country would remain permanently on summertime under orders issued by President Dmitry Medvedev in March.

Minor chaos ensued, with some people missing morning appointments and train services breaking down to Ukraine.

But preventing clocks from going back an hour in the winter may wind up being Medvedev's main claim to fame.

Since announcing last month that he would step down to trade places with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin after the March presidential election, Medvedev has mounted a relentless

public campaign in an apparent effort to prove that he is no lame duck.

But the results have been an unending publicity fiasco, prompting the Russian hashtag "#pathetic" to propagate across Twitter, familiar turf for disgruntled supporters who realize that Medvedev might be influential but is not an independent politician.

"His own failure not to seek a second term has convinced the public to not see him as a serious political figure," said Mark Feigin, an independent political analyst.

Perhaps the biggest blunder came last week when Medvedev posted on his blog a video of himself wearing a cerulean T-shirt and swinging a badminton racket to promote the sport. The outgoing president, who was shown swatting a shuttlecock with Putin, touted badminton as a way to develop managerial skills and called for the sport to be added to school programs.

But the stunt, in which Medvedev came across more as a sports commentator than a politician, failed to impress anyone except, perhaps, his fan club Medvedev Girls, who played badminton in honor of the president on Red Square last week.

"He is ... speaking about badminton to a country that just might be heading toward a new crisis," Feigin said by phone.

There was more, too. Days before the badminton video hit the web, Medvedev visited the journalism department at Moscow State University, only to snub its students in favor of Kremlin youth activists who had nothing to do with journalism.

Journalism students harshly criticized the perceived slight and the brief detention of seven of their own who protested the Oct. 20 visit. Some even staged a symbolic cleanup of the premises after Medvedev left.

In an unprecedented attempt to save face, Medvedev on Oct. 22 praised the reporters and students who organized the cleanup and pledged to come again, this time to speak with the journalism majors. But so far, he hasn't.

Before that, on Oct. 15, the president spoke to a motley group of 200 high-profile supporters ranging from billionaires to art critics who were disappointed with his decision to leave the Kremlin. At the meeting, staged at the high-tech Red October conference hall near the Kremlin, Medvedev promised to bring about change when he became prime minister and proposed to create a vague "Big Government." But he gave no details, then or afterward, about how the big government would work and why has he not implemented the change as president.

The whole PR fiasco started with his first attempt to explain why he is stepping down. In a joint interview to three leading television channels on Sept. 30, Medvedev explicitly admitted his inferiority to Putin, saying he is not running for re-election because Putin was more popular than him.

Medvedev has sent other signals to the ruling establishment as well, sacking Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin last month and starting a campaign against former Mayor Yury Luzhkov, both of whom had publicly criticized him.

But analysts also scorned those decisions as ill-advised, saying Kudrin was too valuable an asset for the government to lose and Luzhkov, 75, is a retiree with no real influence.

Medvedev, a member of Putin's team from the 1990s, was endorsed before the 2008 presidential elections by Putin, then the incumbent president barred by the Constitution from running for a third consecutive term in office. Although his ties with Putin have always raised suspicions, the middle class had embraced him as a modernizer.

But Medvedev, who has burnished his image as a tech-savvy president, has not implemented any serious reforms despite his much-publicized efforts to root out corruption and revamp the police force and armed forces, observers said. Now the liberal-minded populace is taking out their anger on Medvedev for their "broken dreams," said Sergei Markov, a State Duma deputy with United Russia.

"Supporters who see themselves as anti-Putin and hoped Medvedev would rebel against him ... are taking revenge on him now. But this is temporary," Markov said. Medvedev leads United Russia's electoral list in the December Duma vote, even though he is not a member of the party.

Markov blamed the sharp response from the public on Medvedev's "mediocre" public relations team.

Medvedev was deeply hurt by the backlash to his decision to swap places with Putin and is trying to prove himself a veritable political force, political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said on Slon.ru.

"He is trying to send a message to the political elite that he remains a serious player," said Mikhail Vinogradov, an analyst with the Petersburg Politics Foundation, a think tank. "But he is not very good at it, so the public sees him as a lame duck."

But pro-Kremlin analyst Vyachaslav Nikonov argued that there was no problem, citing Medvedev's approval ratings, which remain at some 60 percent. "I don't see his public image becoming flawed given that this image is liked by two-thirds of the populace," Nikonov said.

Still, he conceded that Medvedev's public image has a "certain dualism."

"He is a president who would become a prime minister," he said.

Indeed, Medvedev's main problem seems to be that his job as Putin's placeholder prevents him from implementing any substantial reform — a key thing that his supporters want from him — other than keeping Russia on summertime as the rest of Europe and even Ukraine set back their clocks by an hour on Sunday for the winter months.

In making the time change, Medvedev said it was needed to eliminate the stress of turning back the clocks, and other officials spoke about an annual surge in suicides associated with giving up summertime.

Russian social networking sites were flooded on Sunday with complaints about gadgets still switching back one hour, disrupting users' plans. Forty-two trains to Ukraine will be running one hour late until early December due to time zone discrepancy, Russian Railways said.

But even that reform of Medvedev's had limited impact. Representatives for the Russian Railways, as well as Moscow's Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo airports, said Sunday that there was no increase in passengers running late and missing their trains or flights, Rosbalt.ru reported.

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