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Medvedev Promises Belated Reforms

By Roland Oliphant

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President Dmitry Medvedev walking into a Kremlin hall to make his annual state-of-the-nation address Thursday afternoon. **Sergei Karpukhin**

President Dmitry Medvedev used his final presidential address to promise a slew of radical political reforms including a return to gubernatorial elections and the creation of an editorially independent, publicly funded television station.

In the 90-minute state-of-the-nation address, Medvedev mixed a farewell review of his proudest achievements with a series of detailed policy proposals that implied a confidence that he would continue to wield significant influence even after he steps down.

The bold pronouncements, which appeared almost as a manifesto, were all the more striking because the first half of the speech sounded more like an end-of-term report card.

Medvedev began his final state-of-the-nation address rather like an Oscar winner — thanking all those who had supported him in his four years in the Kremlin, and leading with a list of his accomplishments.

Choosing 10 key policies, he quickly ran through a catalog of trophy statistics and legislation, claiming credit for turning around the country's demographic decline, improving maternity care and support for young families. He said 6 million children had been born in the past four years, "a record in the past two decades."

He hailed his efforts to fight corruption, but conceded that "this large-scale, systemic battle ... has just begun — and we will fight it decisively, systemically and consistently."

And he proudly declared himself satisfied with judicial reforms, including the introduction of alternatives to custodial sentences for lesser crimes, the modernization of the military and a "more modern foreign policy."

Proof of 'Political Competition'

He even cited the recent outburst of anti-government protests that have taken place since the Dec. 4 State Duma elections as proof that he had succeeded in "stimulating political competition." "Civil society has become more influential, significantly increasing the activities of public groups. This is confirmed by the events of the past few weeks," he said.

Medvedev did not mention two of his best-known, and ridiculed, policies — the reduction of Russia's 11 time zones by two and the end of daylight-saving time, and his renaming of the "militia" to "police."

But he waited until halfway through his speech before outlining "serious reforms" that, if realized, would amount to a dismantling of key elements of the vertical power system of governance that the regime has built up over the past 12 years.

"I would like to say that I have heard those who speak about the need for change, and I understand them. We must give all active citizens a legitimate opportunity to take part in political life. So I think we need the following — to return to election of the leaders of regions of the Russian Federation by direct vote of residents," he told an audience that included Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Cabinet ministers and regional leaders.

He did not elaborate, and his audience — and television viewers — barely had time to register what he had said before proceeding to three more proposals, including simplifying the registration procedure for political parties (he suggested a benchmark requirement of 500 signatures from not less than 50 percent of the regions); abolishing the requirement to gather signatures as a condition for election to the Duma or regional assemblies; and slashing the number of signatures needed to register as an independent presidential candidate to 300,000 from the current 2 million — and 100,000 for candidates from parties not represented in parliament.

That was followed by a proposal to introduce proportional representation to 225 districts in a bid to strengthen links between parliament and the electorate. "This measure will allow each region to have a direct representative in parliament. Now, unfortunately, everybody knows it, some regions do not even have one deputy elected by local residents," he said.

The return to elected governors would be accompanied by restoration of a degree of financial independence to the regions and an expansion of their source of revenues, including a gradual

replacement of federal remittances with regional taxation.

"Excessive regulation that prevents independent work on the ground will be removed," he declared.

Television Proposal

Perhaps most surprising was a tacit acknowledgment of criticism of the tightly controlled state-owned federal television channel — and an intriguing remedy for the problem in the form of a "public" broadcaster, possibly formed from the current federal channels, that would finally separate owners from editorial policy.

"None of the owners of this new medium should have a decisive influence on decision-making — neither the government nor private owners," he said. "I am sure such a public television could make our information environment more competitive and thus more interesting," he added. He did not say how such a broadcaster would be funded.

At this point someone in the control room at Rossia-1, which was broadcasting the speech live, cut to a close-up of presidential administration deputy chief Vladislav Surkov, the official widely credited with taming and controlling the state media. Apart from a brief flicker of his eyes to his left, he remained impassive.

Turning to the future of his war on corruption, he called for the replacement of what he ironically referred to as "everyone's favorite Federal Law No. 94," which currently regulates the notoriously corrupt state procurement system. A new law would be passed in the first half of next year to ensure "high-quality public procurement and prevent the formation of monopolistic high prices and billion-dollar corruption schemes," he said.

Medvedev praised the financial foresight that allowed Russia to escape the financial crisis relatively unscathed, but did not mention former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin — the man largely credited with that success.

But, while he warned of further turbulence ahead, he refused to countenance austerity measures or scale back on his mission to "improve the lives of Russians."

Living Within Its Means

"To do this we must all continue to live within our means, not squander our financial resources, especially in the coming global recession. But living within our means does not mean that we should abandon the new social programs, and especially not to reduce existing commitments," he said.

He promised continued support for military personnel and annual pension increases inline with inflation.

Projects announced included more support for families, increased spending on schools and kindergartens, and encouragement for the adoption of orphans.

He also outlined an "accessible environment" policy to make Russia's cities more amenable to disabled people and reiterated his enthusiasm for e-government, promising remote access

to municipal services and "universal electronic cards" for citizens to use in all their interactions with government, "saving time and money."

Medvedev described one new web site that would allow citizens to highlight encounters with burdensome red tape and "senseless regulations" that they think should be eliminated.

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