

News Analysis: Medvedev's Pledges Are Too Little, Too Late

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President Dmitry Medvedev's promises on Thursday to liberalize the political system were a reaction to growing public discontent, but they are too little and too late, analysts [said](#).

The pledged reforms, however, do matter for Medvedev's own political future and signal his ambition to remain a policymaker after he swaps seats with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin next year, they said.

The outgoing president said in his state-of-the-nation address that he wants to restore direct gubernatorial elections and ease draconian registration rules for presidential candidates.

State Duma Speaker and longtime Kremlin insider Sergei Naryshkin denied that the pledges were a reaction to "pressure by Bolotnaya Ploshchad," where a record rally took place this month to protest alleged violations at the parliamentary vote on Dec. 4.

But most analysts thought otherwise, including members and supporters of United Russia.

"This is an attempt to catch the agenda of the day proposed at Bolotnaya, because there is a fear that the situation will follow the 'Orange' scenario," said Pavel Salin, a senior researcher with the Center for Political Conjuncture, a United Russia-friendly think tank. He was referencing the grassroots Orange Revolution protests that toppled the Ukrainian government in 2004.

Salin was echoed by United Russia Duma Deputy Vladimir Burmatov, who said Medvedev's promises dispelled any need for more protests such as one scheduled for Saturday on Prospekt Akademika Sakharova and expected to attract tens of thousands of people.

"I think there's nothing left for participants of the rally to do other than go to the square with portraits of Medvedev and 'yes' spelled on them in big red capital letters," Burmatov said in comments posted on his party's web site Thursday.

But United Russia's opponents were less impressed. Liberal politician Leonid Gozman noted that Bolotnaya protesters would not be swayed because Medvedev did not address their demands for a repeat Duma vote and the sacking of Vladimir Churov, head of the Central Elections Commission.

"People did not come because of gubernatorial elections, they came because they wanted Churov's ouster and new elections. I haven't heard a word about these things," Gozman said by telephone.

He also said Medvedev's lame duck status renders his promises unimpressive and that the real power remains with Putin.

Others said Medvedev's promises actually represent the ruling elite's consolidated position, likely supported by Putin and expected to be implemented by the government after the March presidential vote.

Both Medvedev and Putin agree that political reform is needed, but their deep-set beliefs prompt them to react in different ways, said Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies.

"Putin has talked about this, too, but you can see from his reaction that he does so unwillingly. Medvedev wants to preserve his reputation because he wants to be prime minister," Makarkin said.

Medvedev, who made liberal noises during his own Kremlin campaign, has failed to implement any serious reforms during his time in office, alienating many supporters.

He missed a final chance to garner public support for his policies in September when he announced that he was giving up the Kremlin job to Putin, Makarkin said.

Had Medvedev voiced plans to run for re-election back then, "they would have been accepted with a round of hoorays," he said.

Andrei Kolesnikov, political commentator for the liberal-leaning Novaya Gazeta, agreed that

Medvedev's goodwill gesture came too late.

"I see his statements as his unrealized presidential platform for a second term," Kolesnikov said. "All of this sounds like an epitaph."

Independent political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said Medvedev's promises of reform had likely been approved by Putin.

But Belkovsky cautioned that if Medvedev follows through with his proposals as prime minister, he will walk in the footsteps of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who unsuccessfully tried to reform the Soviet system from within.

"The attempt to save the system led to its collapse," he said.

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