

News Analysis: Medvedev's Future Dims as Term Ends

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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President Dmitry Medvedev visiting a newly built border checkpoint with Abkhazia's leader, Alexander Ankvaba, left, outside Sochi on Tuesday. **Dmitry Astakhov**

CORRECTION APPENDED

As his term in office comes to a close, Dmitry Medvedev has made direct gubernatorial elections his last attempt at major reform. But in a sign of his dwindling influence, the effort has come under withering pressure from critics and even his mentor, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who suggested on Tuesday that the proposal needs more review.

"Today, we need to implement this reform. How? Let's think about it together," Putin said at a forum in the southern city of Kislovodsk, effectively guaranteeing that [the bill](#) would not become law before the end of Medvedev's term in May.

The measure was the latest reform effort to crumble under Medvedev's watch, which began

in 2008 with high hopes for the creation of a "modernized" Russia. No area of life was to go untouched: he would tackle corruption, modernize the economy, open up the political system, streamline the country's bloated bureaucracy and even get Russians to live healthier lives.

Liberals hoped that the relatively unknown technocrat could even rollback Putin's "power vertical" — the centralized system built over two presidential terms in the name of stability.

Hopes faded with time and were finally dashed on Sept. 24, when the so-called "tandem" announced their plans to switch places, with Putin standing for president and pledging to name Medvedev prime minister in the likely event of victory.

The move made Medvedev the first lame duck president in post-Soviet history and sparked a furious reaction among many voters, who felt their powerlessness over the political process was being rubbed in their faces. Adding insult to injury, Putin said the decision was made well in advance, giving credence to the suspicion that Medvedev had been a puppet all along.

Of the tens of thousands who took to the streets to protest the results of the Dec. 4 State Duma elections, which were tarnished by widespread allegations of fraud, many said the planned swap helped provoke a new spirit of political activism and shake up a political scene often dismissed as moribund.

As for Medvedev — who at one point was branded with the tag "pitiful" on Twitter — analysts said his political future is anything but certain.

"President Dmitry Medvedev is worse than a lame duck, he's a dead duck," said Nikolai Petrov, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Many feel that Medvedev accomplished few of the progressive programs he rode into office with, and suspect that despite public assurances from Putin, there's no promise he will be prime minister.

Medvedev has never built up a team of powerful allies, and a recent reshuffle — which moved two Putin allies to the presidential administration — did nothing to lay the groundwork for a Medvedev premiership, Petrov said.

"Unlike Deputy Prime Ministers Dmitry Kozak and Igor Shuvalov, Medvedev is a bad manager. The prime minister's job isn't for him," Petrov said, adding that growing speculation that Medvedev would be named head of the Constitutional Court made more sense.

Pavel Salin, an analyst at the Center for Political Conjecture, suspected that Medvedev may leave politics altogether.

Putin will be inclined to appoint a more liberal prime minister to appease the frustrated middle class, Salin said, pointing to former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin or businessman-turned-presidential hopeful Mikhail Prokhorov as candidates.

Former United Russia deputy and political analyst Sergei Markov offered a rosier prediction for the outgoing president, saying he not only expected Medvedev to assume the premiership, but that Medvedev would use his remaining time in office to plan future reforms.

"I think Medvedev is happy to be free from having to fight for the presidency," Markov said, "Earlier, he had more power, but less freedom. Now he has less power, but more freedom," which Markov said freed Medvedev to work on his pet projects.

Last week, Medvedev sent a bill to the Duma that promised to reintroduce the direct election of regional governors, a practice abolished by Putin in 2004. Putin argued that the change was necessary because governors had obtained office "through semicriminal local elites" in the 1990s.

In September 2009, Medvedev said there was no reason to change the process "neither now, nor in 100 years."

Medvedev's public role appears increasingly diminished as he involves himself in more ceremonial tasks. On Monday, Medvedev went skiing with the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan during a summit — the tenth held between the three leaders during Medvedev's tenure, which has not produced an agreement on the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, which both Caucasus nations claim.

On Tuesday, Medvedev attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony at a new border checkpoint between Russia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia.

Noting a shift in the focus of state-run media coverage from Medvedev to Putin, Salin and Olga Mefodyeva — an analyst with the Center for Political Technology — speculated it was intended to help bolster Putin's image for his election bid.

Putin is polling at 45 percent, according to a Jan. 14-15 poll by state-run VTsIOM, and he needs at least 50 percent to avoid an embarrassing runoff.

But Petrov, of the Carnegie Center, offered the most damning assessment of the Medvedev interlude.

"He's been a lame duck almost from the beginning. ... Medvedev isn't any more powerful in 2012 than he was in 2008," Petrov said.

He said nothing will change in how Medvedev occupies himself from now until May.

"He wasn't doing anything before September, besides allegedly bolstering the Kremlin's liberal credentials, and he won't be doing anything through May."

Correction: An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the breakaway, ethnic-Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan. It is Nagorno-Karabakh, not Kabardino-Balkaria, a North Caucasus republic that is part of the Russian Federation.

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