

Medvedev Soothes Old MGU Wounds

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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President Dmitry Medvedev taking questions during a meeting with 200 students from the journalism school at Moscow State University on Wednesday. **Alexander Nemenov**

President Dmitry Medvedev took a major step toward repairing damage inflicted to his reputation over a carefully staged meeting at Moscow State University last fall when he held a repeat of the event Wednesday.

During an informal question-and-answer session, Medvedev told a classroom of more than 200 journalism students and faculty that he had no plans to leave politics, was ready to die for his ideals and was currently reading Stieg Larsson's "The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest."

Medvedev's previous visit in October erupted in scandal, with the busing in of pro-Kremlin youth activists and students from other universities to attend a meeting showcased as a sit-down with MGU journalism students. Indeed, Medvedev's security detail detained seven students excluded from the meeting when they showed up with posters with questions like "Why do you tweet while Khodorkovsky rots in jail?" and "Why did you fire Kudrin?"

MGU students were given the chance to ask similarly uncomfortable questions Wednesday at a meeting where several attendees gave Medvedev high marks for sincerity and courage. They said the visit would help soothe wounds stemming from his last trip, which resulted in a group of students staging an impromptu "washing down" of an MGU building to symbolically expunge the stain left by the visit.

"Because my last visit provoked a range of emotions, I decided that it was right to come and wish you a happy Tatyana Day and give you the opportunity, naturally, to ask any sort of questions you might have," Medvedev said in his opening remarks, standing beside a lectern and chalkboard.

Jan. 25 is Tatyana Day, otherwise known as Russian Student's Day.

Medvedev left even his most ardent student critics devoid of harsh words during more than two hours of questioning — mostly about recent opposition protests, human rights and his political future.

Medvedev declared that the disputed State Duma elections on Dec. 4 were the most honest in Russian history and reiterated a pledge recently made by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that he was ready to meet with opposition leaders. He said, however, that the meeting would not take place at a protest rally.

The Duma elections were followed by a sort of political awakening among the urban middle class, best illustrated by two central Moscow rallies in which tens of thousands of people chanted for new elections and Putin's ouster.

Medvedev said he didn't see the conditions for a revolution or an "extreme scenario" in Russia. When asked whether he was afraid of being tried or even executed for his actions should a revolution occur, he boldly declared, "I'm of course ready to die for my ideals. ... I'm not afraid of anything, otherwise I couldn't do the work of a president."

In less dramatic form, Medvedev told students that he was not leaving politics and wouldn't rule out running for president again in the future.

Asked about the fate of jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whom many opposition-minded Russians consider a political prisoner, Medvedev said, "His fate is a sad one. I sympathize with him." He added that the president could only pardon a prisoner who had appealed to him.

Vera Kichanova, a fourth-year journalism student who was detained during Medvedev's last visit, praised students for asking tough questions, including one about the progress of an investigation into the brutal beating of Kommersant journalist Oleg Kashin in November 2010.

Medvedev said he didn't know exactly where Kashin's case stood, but he said he had been presented with a list of suspects and reiterated an earlier promise to bring those responsible to justice.

Unlike most students, who were selected by their peers to attend the event, Kichanova received a personal invitation. She said Medvedev seemed sincere and speculated that he had little to lose, given that he is not participating in the March 4 presidential election.

Olga Kuzmenko, a second-year student who was also detained last time, said she "felt nothing" after the meeting. She said there was laughter when Medvedev declared the Duma elections the most honest elections in Russian history.

Despite the personal invitations, none of the students detained in October were called on to ask any questions, although Kichanova said others posed the questions she would have asked.

Some students criticized their peers for not asking tough enough questions. "The students looked pathetic," said Zaur Gazdarov, a third-year student, who watched the discussion on a simulcast.

"The whole department said he was pathetic and complained that they didn't get to ask their tough questions last time. Then, when they had the chance, they asked about personal nonsense," he said, referring specifically to several early questions, including one from a man who asked Medvedev for a job.

But Gazdarov also said he didn't approve of students asking hard questions to "get attention" and said if he had been in the room, he would have asked why the abuse of flashing blue lights — which give VIP drivers the right to ignore traffic rules — hasn't decreased in the city center, despite pledges.

Ivan Zassoursky, a professor at the school of journalism and the grandson of the school's president, Yassen Zassoursky, said the students had been happy to see Medvedev, who did not broadcast the meeting live on television, presumably to avoid the perception that it was merely a publicity stunt.

"Some of the questions were good. Some of them were stupid. Most importantly, there was fair play," he said.

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