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Medvedev Supporter Goes Over To Kudrin

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An adviser to Dmitry Medvedev said the outgoing Russian president should abandon plans to become prime minister and make way for the man he fired last year as finance minister.

In an interview Friday, Igor Yurgens said Alexei Kudrin would be a better prime minister than Medvedev.

In September, Medvedev agreed to give up the chance of a second term to allow Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, 59, to reclaim the Kremlin. Putin offered Medvedev the premier's job in return, a move that turned the president into a diminished political figure, said Yurgens, who heads a research group created by Medvedev.

Medvedev wouldn't be "very successful in the job" because Putin's allies in the Cabinet would "tear him apart," Yurgens said. "Kudrin would be an ideal prime minister for an interim period because he's a highly regarded professional and obviously enjoys the trust of future President Putin."

Putin, who has been in power for 12 years, is seeking a new six-year term in the March 4 election.

The Russian leader is forecast to win in the first round with 58.6 percent of the vote, according to an opinion poll published Monday by VTsIOM.

Putin can only overcome distrust of his rule among well-educated Russians by delegating some power to a decisive Cabinet that will implement economic and political changes demanded by protesters, said Gleb Pavlovsky, who heads the Moscow-based Effective Policy Foundation and has advised the Kremlin for more than a decade.

"The main thing that Putin needs to do after the election is to create a strong government, but everything that Medvedev does makes that task harder," Pavlovsky said in an interview last week.

Putin served as president from 2000 to 2008 and then moved to the premiership to comply with constitutional term limits, backing his protege Medvedev to take his place.

As late as September, Yurgens, who heads the Institute of Contemporary Development, was urging Medvedev to ignore Putin's wishes and seek a second term to implement his promises on fighting corruption and diversifying the economy away from oil and gas.

Yurgens said he is now helping Kudrin set up a new political party.

Medvedev discredited himself by ceding the Kremlin to Putin, said Yurgens, who characterized Kudrin as being capable of keeping a check on government spending while maintaining some independence from the president.

"We wouldn't have to worry about the government and its spending, and he would carry out political reforms," Yurgens said.

Kudrin, 51, was the longest-serving finance minister in the Group of Eight major economies until he was forced out by Medvedev after publicly opposing increases in military spending.

During his tenure, Russia cut state debt to less than 10 percent of gross domestic product and posted budget surpluses from 2000 to 2008.

Kudrin, in a radio interview broadcast in December, said being offered the premiership was a possibility, adding that Medvedev's authority had decreased "significantly" after he agreed to make way for Putin.

The prime minister is aware of Kudrin's plans to set up a new party, Yurgens said.

Medvedev's spokeswoman, Natalya Timakova, didn't respond to a request for comment. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said it's too early to comment on whether such a party would be a good development.

"The last legislative initiatives are in fact aimed at activating political life in the country," Peskov said.

The government responded to the protests by promising to make it easier to register political parties.

Kudrin said Feb. 14 on his Twitter account that he had held talks in January with pro-democracy groups involved in the protests to consolidate them into a single entity. His spokesman, Pavel Kuznetsov, declined to comment further on those efforts.

If Putin's opponents don't agree to join Kudrin's movement, that won't deter him, said Yurgens, adding that billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who's running in the presidential race on a pro-business and pro-democracy ticket, would be welcome to take part in the project.

A new Kudrin party may take part in parliamentary elections if Putin agrees to hold a new vote, offering him the chance to establish himself as a political leader, Yurgens said.

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