

Opposition, Medvedev Share Forum

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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President Dmitry Medvedev hosting a dialogue with leaders of unregistered political parties, who expressed cautious optimism about the outcome. **Yekaterina Shtukina**

President Dmitry Medvedev won tentative praise from opposition leaders Monday after meeting with them and confirming a proposal to create a working group to discuss political reforms.

And in an unexpected move, he also endorsed a two-term lifetime limit for presidents.

But the most prominent leaders said there weren't any breakthroughs at the meeting, which was devoted to the opposition's reform proposals.

And analysts doubted whether the meeting was a signal that the Kremlin is serious about reforms sought by the newly resurgent opposition.

Medvedev invited opposition leaders to join a new working group headed by First Deputy Chief of Staff Vyacheslav Volodin that will discuss changes to his reform proposals.

The reforms include the reinstatement of direct elections for regional governors, a simplified process for registering political parties and a reduction in the number of signatures required for candidates to run for elected office.

"We will be able to influence changes to the bills [through the working group]," said Sergei Udaltsov, leader of the Left Front, Interfax reported. Udaltsov said the first meeting of the working group would take place Wednesday.

Next week, the State Duma will hold its first reading on the reforms, which are widely seen as a concession to opposition protesters.

Rallies that began as a response to allegations of fraud in the Dec. 4 Duma elections have grown into a call for broad-ranging democratic reform.

Udaltsov, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov were the only organizers of the protests invited to the meeting at Medvedev's Gorki residence. A handful of lesser-known politicians attended as well.

The three are thought to have been on a blacklist of figures who were gradually denied airtime on state television following Putin's re-election in 2004.

The meeting itself was a concession, since a Russian head of state hasn't received leaders of the country's marginalized pro-Western opposition in several years.

"I rate the results of the meeting with caution, but positively. There weren't any breakthroughs," Udaltsov said, Interfax reported.

Ryzhkov told Radio Free Europe that Medvedev "honestly wants to carry out these reforms before he leaves office," an impression shared by Sergei Baburin, who heads the Russian People's Union.

Nemtsov told Interfax that he gave Medvedev a list of 37 people widely considered to be political prisoners. Medvedev promised to look into every case, but he refused to grant amnesty based on a list, Udaltsov said.

"Judging by his reaction, I had the feeling that he's decided to pardon someone," Nemtsov said.

Surprisingly, Medvedev also expressed support for limiting presidents to two terms. His political mentor, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, is running for what would be his third term in office and is expected to win the March 4 election by a wide margin.

Under the Constitution, candidates can serve no more than two consecutive terms, but an unlimited number of nonconsecutive terms.

The meeting also saw its share of confrontations.

"There was a very unpleasant moment when we brought up the importance of holding new Duma elections, and the president dug in his heels," Nemtsov said.

At one point, Udaltsov placed a shoe on the table that he said belonged to opposition leader Ilya Ponomarev and had been damaged in a scuffle that broke out Monday morning between opposition and pro-Kremlin youths while both were waiting in line to apply for a rally permit.

Medvedev joked that Ponomarev should be compensated for the damage, and he promised to look into the scuffle, Udaltsov said, Gazeta.ru reported.

But political observers warned that the meeting was by no means intended to give opposition leaders a boost.

As if to confirm that impression, state TV stations led their evening newscasts with the meeting, but the opposition figures were only shown and not quoted.

The observers pointed out that the Kremlin had invited participants individually by telephone with little regard for their organizations.

Thus, two co-founders of the Parnas opposition coalition, Nemtsov and Ryzhkov, were invited, while the third, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, was not.

Also absent from the list were former chess champion Garry Kasparov and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who together with media tycoon Alexander Lebedev founded the [Independent Democratic Party](#) in 2008.

"We are also leaders of a nonregistered party. Are they afraid to call us?" Lebedev [wrote](#) on Twitter.

Denis Bilunov, a leading figure in the Solidarity opposition movement, said the way invitations were issued suggests that the Kremlin intended to sow division by splitting its enemies into those who are ready for compromise and those who are not.

They act according to the principle of "divide and rule," he told The Moscow Times before the meeting.

He added that in order to avoid conflict, Solidarity leaders decided at a meeting with Nemtsov on Saturday that participants in the talks should not represent their respective groups but rather speak for themselves.

"Any political demands from me I will make in a personal capacity," Nemtsov told The Moscow Times.

Bilunov suggested that apart from dividing the opposition, the meeting was intended to remind the public that Medvedev is still there.

Nikolai Petrov, an analyst at the Moscow Carnegie Center, agreed that this was probably Medvedev's motivation, although he added that this was futile.

"Of course, he must do something to signal that he still is the liberal leader and modernizer," he said.

Petrov argued that this comes in handy for Putin, who could maintain his image as being

tough versus the protesters while the Kremlin shows the West that it is ready to seek compromise.

But the analyst warned that this was more show than substance.

"Medvedev is a political corpse, and anything he does now has very little meaning for the future," he said.

The president has been widely ridiculed since he announced in September that he was not seeking a second term in office because his ratings were lower than Putin's.

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