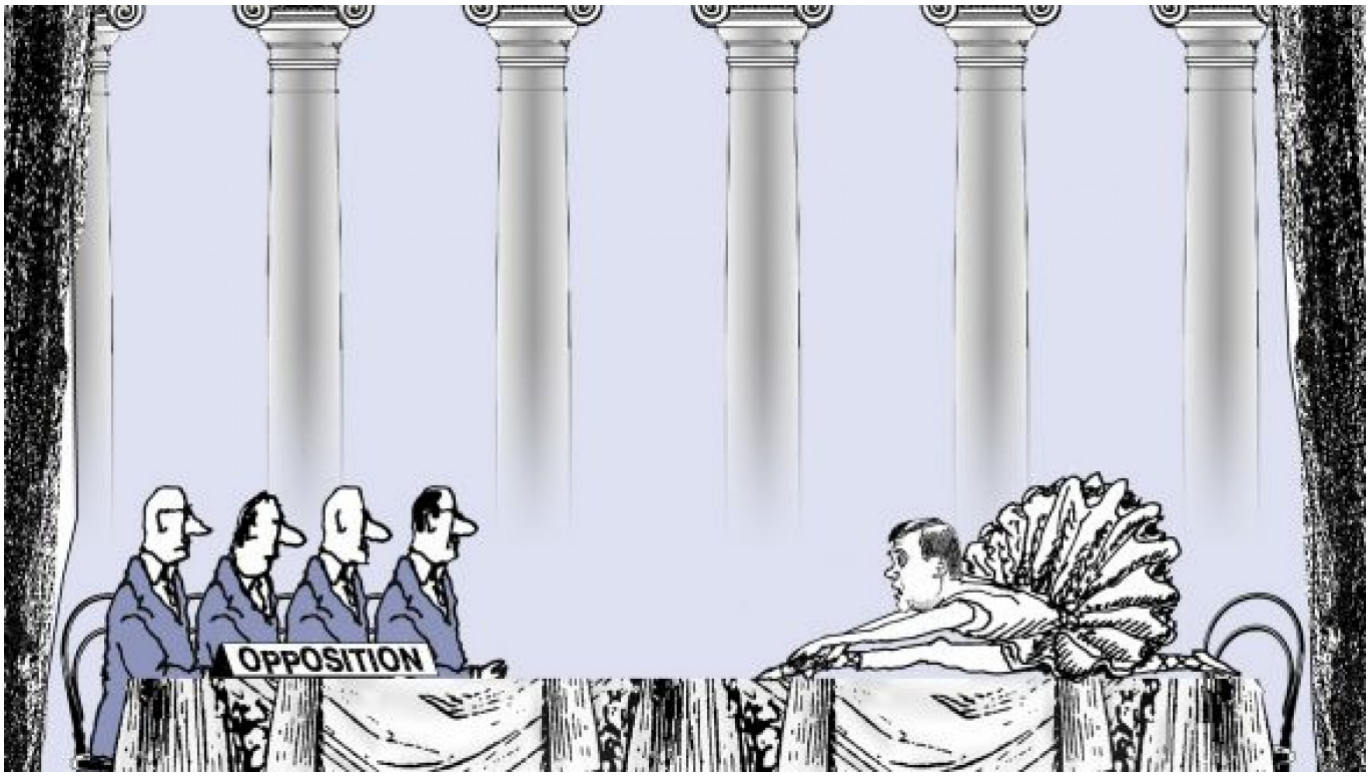
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Medvedev's Swan Song

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

February 27, 2012



A week ago, I took part in an unprecedented meeting with President Dmitry Medvedev at his residence at Gorki. This was the first time that he met with 10 representatives of the so-called "nonsystemic" parties — those that were denied registration on politically motivated grounds. Four of those present — Parnas co-founder Boris Nemtsov, Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov, Russian People's Union head Sergei Baburin and myself — had taken part in the street protests on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova.

There is no doubt that Medvedev's decision to meet with opposition leaders and his sincere desire to listen to our demands was a result of the large-scale street protests in December and February. Most significant, Medvedev left the impression that he shared many of the protesters' views.

Medvedev suggested that he would support a constitutional amendment limiting the president to a total of no more than two terms in office, that he is personally opposed to using a "presidential filter" in gubernatorial elections, that he is not against multiparty political blocs in elections and that he is willing to acknowledge that there are political prisoners in the country — something that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has always denied.

What's more, Medvedev introduced four bills to the Duma that would bring major changes to political and electoral institutions. The three most important of those bills would ease the rules for registering political parties, return direct gubernatorial elections and introduce new procedures for electing State Duma deputies.

Medvedev is sympathetic toward Russians who have taken part in peaceful protests. Moreover, he considers their actions to be part of a larger pro-

democracy movement stretching from North Africa to Eurasia. Medvedev would also like to establish independent public television in the country and to hold more popular referendums on key issues, primarily at the local and regional levels.

Medvedev opposes any attempt to marginalize the mainstream opposition. He agrees with protesters' claims that the new Duma does not reflect the country's entire political spectrum. He also said that if they were represented, there would be less cause for protests.

To be sure, there were disappointments, as well. For example, Medvedev continues to insist that the level of falsifications during recent Duma elections was no worse than previous elections in the past 20 years, and he does not believe that the current Duma is illegitimate. But at the same time, he did not rule out the possibility of holding early Duma elections at some point in the future.

Interestingly, Medvedev acknowledged that he has changed his views on what political system is best suited for Russia. Only two or three years ago, he had not considered it necessary to implement the changes that he is now making. The reasons behind the shift are the new political activism among Russians, the widespread use of the Internet as a forum for political self-expression and the protest movement that has sprung up in the last three months.

Having failed to carry out most of his liberal reform programs during his four years in office, Medvedev still hopes to end his term on a positive note. He called on lawmakers to adopt his package of political reform bills as quickly as possible so that he could sign them into law before leaving the Kremlin in early May. Only two days after we met with him, Medvedev convened the first meeting of a working group to finalize the legislation. It was attended by Duma parties and nonsystemic parties, along with representatives of the presidential administration, the Justice Ministry and the Central Elections Commission.

Under Medvedev's electoral reform bill, dozens of new parties should be able to register this year under a simplified procedure in which only 500 party members will be required, instead of the current 40,000. If all goes according to plan, these new parties will be able to participate in the next round of regional and local elections to be held in the fall. Direct gubernatorial elections may also be held during these elections.

Medvedev's package of political reforms is a good start, but much more needs to be done to reform and liberalize the current vertical power structure. Media censorship hasn't abated. On the contrary, increased pressure has been applied to independent and opposition-minded media outlets, such as Novaya Gazeta newspaper, Ekho Moskvy radio and Dozhd online television. The courts continue to serve the executive branch, and little has been done to battle corruption. There have been no investigations initiated against those accused of election

fraud, and Central Elections Commission chief Vladimir Churov will oversee the March 4 vote, as well as subsequent elections, according to the Kremlin model of "managed democracy" in which the outcome is known long in advance. Former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his former business partner Platon Lebedev remain behind bars, while the country's most talented people continue to flee Russia, along with billions of dollars in capital.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether Medvedev's last-minute reforms combined with the protest movement will lead to irreversible social and political reform. If it doesn't, the next decade will face a growing, dangerous confrontation between civil society and a reactionary regime bent on its own survival.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/02/27/medvedevs-swan-song-a12904