

Medvedev Boasts and Admits Flaws of Reign

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Freedom and democracy are on the way up, corrupt governors are headed out and the country's political culture has improved, outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev said Thursday in summarizing his four years in office.

Speaking in a wide-ranging interview with five national television channels — thought to be his last before handing the presidency to Vladimir Putin next month — Medvedev admitted that he had been less successful in diversifying the economy, reducing corruption and reforming the judiciary.

Medvedev, who is expected to take up Putin's job as prime minister, defended the two men's "tandem" leadership as democratic and said it was here to stay.

"I think you should all relax now, that's all for a long time," he said.

However, he distanced himself from his mentor by announcing that when he assumes leadership of United Russia he will actually join the party because "it is not right" to lead a party without being a member. Putin, who has led the party since 2008 without ever joining it, announced Tuesday that he would hand over the post to Medvedev.

The president appeared at ease and regularly joked during the two-hour interview, despite being frequently cornered by the interviewers.

When Ren-TV presenter Marina Maximovskaya began by asking whether the country had become more free during his reign, Medvedev boldly pointed to the protests that unfolded after the December State Duma elections.

"Let's ask the people who took to the streets whether they are free — regardless who they were for. ... I am convinced that the big majority will say 'Yes I am free, and therefore I stand here,'" Medvedev said.

Russia was rated as "not free" — unchanged from previous years — in the latest annual survey by U.S. advocacy group Freedom House [published](#) earlier this week.

Medvedev said the government should respond to the protesters' demands, even though he reiterated that in his view the elections were not rigged to the extent they claimed.

"People have changed, the level of political culture has risen, there are new information technologies," he said, adding that the state should update voting procedures accordingly.

He also belittled opposition activists who recently staged hunger strikes for free elections in Lermontov and Astrakhan, by claiming that they acted not out of desperation but for political gain.

"Now all [their] aims have been met, everybody is eating with an appetite again," he said.

Pressed about corruption by Mikhail Zygar of the Dozhd online television channel, Medvedev argued that he had replaced dozens of regional governors because of suspected corruption.

"I summoned them and told them 'resign voluntarily, otherwise things will be worse,'" he said.

But he admitted that the results of his anti-corruption campaign are modest.

"Why? Frankly speaking because officials are a corporation, they don't want us to interfere in their affairs."

The president also said four years weren't enough to reform the judiciary and argued that it would be "primitive" to fire all judges. He promised that the reforms would go on.

Medvedev dismissed Zygar's suggestion to appoint anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny to head the National Anti-Corruption Committee because he was "against making certain people an icon." He was also adamant that it was right not to pardon jailed businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, as he had not asked for it.

In an apparent gesture to media freedom, Medvedev invited Dozhd and Ren-TV, the country's most critical television stations, to join the three big state-controlled channels for the interview, which was broadcast live at noon and dominated the channels' evening newscasts.

In another departure from previous Kremlin practice, the interviewers were not the channels' directors but journalists — an opportunity that NTV anchor Alexei Pivovarov snapped up to confront Medvedev publicly about censorship at his channel.

"I regularly face limitations that hinder me to fully perform my professional duties. How do you feel about that?" Pivovarov asked.

Medvedev replied that censorship is unconstitutional and that if it occurs, it would be reason for state interference. He added, however, that the channels should decide for themselves what they deem politically expedient, arguing that the chemistry between a media outlet's executives, journalists and viewers "must be in harmony."

The exchange was shown on NTV's 7 p.m. evening news, presented by Pivovarov.

The Gazprom-Media-owned channel became the subject of heated criticism after it aired a documentary last month that suggested that opposition protesters were paid by the U.S. government.

Since the protests began in December, the country's state-controlled channels have adjusted their political coverage to include opposition activists that had long been left out of broadcasts. But critics have voiced doubts whether the "television thaw" would continue after Putin returns to the Kremlin.

Medvedev reiterated his plans to privatize some state channels and to create a politically neutral public TV station funded by an endowment. But in a gaffe he justified having the channel's director appointed by the president by claiming that the British prime minister appoints the head of the BBC.

The British Broadcasting Corporation's director general is appointed by a 12-member governing body known as the BBC Trust.

Medvedev also defended his main foreign policy decisions by saying the last four years had been "the best in the history of Russian-American relations."

Commenting on Putin's accusation that Washington was supporting the protesters in a plot to overthrow the government, he suggested that it was normal for the United States to seek to influence the country's domestic politics — "because we also try to do that."

He reiterated Moscow's criticism that the democratic uprisings in the Arab world will empower radical Islamists.

"The Arab spring will end in a cold Arab fall," he said.

Medvedev said that ties with Georgia, severed after the 2008 war over South Ossetia, could only be rebuilt when the country's president leaves office.

"[Mikheil] Saakashvili is an empty spot, he is zero," he said.

The difficult relations with the Baltic states will only improve if they stop seeing Russia as a "dangerous bear who wants to tear them to pieces at any moment."

Medvedev was adamant that he would continue his reformist mission as prime minister and promised that his Cabinet will be "substantially renewed."

He refuted criticism that key items of his reforms were already being dismantled. He flatly denied that the Duma had added so-called filters into his law that reintroduces direct gubernatorial elections by arguing that hurdles like getting approval from municipal deputies were "qualifying conditions" that ensure that no wrong candidates could run for office.

He promised that the reforms mean a leap forward toward a new quality of Russian democracy.

"I am ready to work on this, and I will work on this if that is my destiny," he said.

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