

# Medvedev's Promise Largely Falls Short

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May 04, 2012



Outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev **Denis Grishkin**

“Empower Medvedev” was the headline of The Moscow Times editorial the day after the new president took office on May 8, 2008.

Four years later, there are few who claim that this actually happened. In the final days of his presidency, a majority of observers believe that the head of state has been little more than a placeholder for Vladimir Putin, who returns to the Kremlin for a third term Monday.

“The dominant feeling is frustration,” said Lev Gudkov, head of the Levada Center, the country’s main independent polling agency.

Critics maintain that Medvedev’s key promises, to overcome “legal nihilism” and corruption and to diversify the economy, turned out to be empty.

The president admitted in his farewell television interview last week that his fight against corruption had been ineffective because “bureaucrats are a corporation,” and that four years

turned out not to be enough to reform the judiciary and the economy.

The view that he is a powerless leader has hounded Medvedev since the outset — famously propagated in a leaked U.S. Embassy cable that described him as playing Robin to Putin's Batman.

It massively gained speed after he said in September that he won't stand for a second term because Putin, his predecessor and longtime mentor, had higher ratings.

The announcement was described as suicide by Kremlin-watchers, who now habitually call Medvedev a "political corpse." It also led prominent liberals like Igor Yurgens and former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin to publicly renounce their support for the president.

Gudkov pointed out that the mass opposition protests that broke out after the December State Duma elections were partly fueled by the disappointment of those who hoped Medvedev could change the country into something better.

"When he began as president, there was a strong expectation that he would realize his modernization program and change Putin's authoritarian course. But the hopes began to fade amid growing understanding that he is impotent," Gudkov said by telephone.

Gudkov also argued that the way Medvedev's [ratings](#) shadowed those of Putin throughout his presidency prove that most Russians never saw him as an independent politician.

"He was Putin's clone and fully dependent on him," he said.

Of course, not everybody agrees that Medvedev was a weak president.

Andrei Klimov, a senior Duma deputy for United Russia, the party whose leadership Putin has promised to hand over to Medvedev later this month, rejected the notion that the presidency had become a rubber-stamp position.

Klimov, who serves as a first deputy chairman of the Duma's foreign relations committee, pointed to the 2008 war with Georgia and its aftermath, when Medvedev made all the key decisions.

"He was the commander in chief and acted fully according to the Constitution — I saw it with my own eyes," he said.

But he added that the ensuing talk about Medvedev's differences with Putin was mostly exaggerated.

"The two might have different styles, but they are and remain members of the same team," he said.

The Constitution designates the president as the wielder of foreign policy, but diplomats acknowledge that many foreign leaders sought to also to speak to Putin during Medvedev's term, assuming that he was calling the shots behind the scenes.

"After Putin's return it will be easier because the boss will be back in the top seat," a Western

ambassador told a group of reporters recently, speaking on condition of anonymity in order to be candid.

Even some outspoken Kremlin critics argue that the Medvedev years were not lost ones.

Yelena Panfilova, the head of the Russian branch of anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International, said there were tangible results.

“When he came to power there wasn’t a single piece of anti-corruption and freedom of information law. Now, at least we have some basic legislation,” she told The Moscow Times on Friday.

Panfilova admitted that the results did not live up to expectations and that there were big concerns about their implementation, but she refused to give Medvedev a negative mark.

“The results are neutral. It was certainly better than an Ivanov presidency,” she said.

Sergei Ivanov, the hawkish former defense minister, competed with Medvedev during 2007, when both oversaw national projects as first deputy prime ministers. Their yearlong “race” ended in December of that year when Putin named Medvedev as his chosen successor.

Andrei Piontkovsky, a veteran political analyst and senior member of the Solidarity opposition movement, had little sympathy for Medvedev, calling him a “totally demolished figure.”

Medvedev’s main function was to delay the current protest movement “because everybody was hoping that he would improve something,” Piontkovsky said. He argued that if Putin had ruled during the past four years, the protests would have started in 2008.

But thanks to Medvedev the opposition lost four years, allowing the current elite to rule longer.

“Now we won’t achieve change before 2016. This is what made Medvedev such a good president for Putin,” he said.

A more positive view of this was offered by Yevgeny Gontmakher, a prominent sociologist who works in the Modern Development Institute, a think tank closely associated with Medvedev.

In an essay on Gazeta.ru, Gontmakher argued that while Medvedev achieved little real change, his presidency laid the basis for this to happen in the future.

“Without intending it, he deprived the authorities of public confidence,” he [wrote](#), explaining that the surge in civic activity is there to stay.

This view was echoed by Panfilova, who argued that the development of society was natural and not influenced by Kremlin policies.

“The time has inevitably come — like a child coming of age,” she said.

But Gudkov, the pollster, warned that the debate about Medvedev’s achievements does not

affect the majority of Russians. He argued that the widespread disappointment among educated middle-class citizens in big cities was not shared by the provincial working class.

“For the periphery, all this is insignificant — they will hardly remember Medvedev as president,” he said.

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