

Medvedev's Dangerous Incompetence

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Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev is a well-meaning yet incompetent man. His recently completed term as president was spent, innocuously enough, tweeting, toying with high-tech gadgets and listening to British rock. Yet, his four years in office have done enormous harm to Russia. Sometimes incompetence can be as dangerous as ill intent.

Medvedev came into office declaring that "freedom is better than no freedom" and promising liberalization, judicial and police reform, modernization and an end to corruption. Very little came out of any of that.

But the liberals were not the only ones who were disappointed in Medvedev. President Vladimir Putin, too, has plenty of reasons to be angry with his protege. After his second presidential term, Putin clearly wanted to retire from politics and enjoy the great wealth he reportedly amassed during his years in power. But he understood very well that every new Russian leader since Josef Stalin gained legitimacy by attacking and disgracing his predecessor. Putin, while not persecuting former President Boris Yeltsin, never missed an opportunity to criticize the lawless 1990s. He therefore feared that his own handpicked

successor could turn against him.

During 2007, Putin wavered between two first deputy prime ministers: Sergei Ivanov and Medvedev. Ivanov, a former defense minister, was more competent and had ties to siloviki circles, while Medvedev was politically weak but extremely loyal. At the last moment, Putin opted for loyalty, assuming that once Medvedev was elected president in 2008, he would build his own power base.

This didn't happen. Medvedev failed to surround himself with loyalists and place them in key positions. Nor could he ever get the entrenched bureaucracy to heed his orders. In the end, Putin realized that if he made Medvedev his true heir, Medvedev would be quickly removed and Putin himself would be in danger. On Sept. 24, rather abruptly and late in the game, Putin declared that he would run for president in the March election.

His failed attempt to install a successor has shown Putin that he can't transfer power safely. Not only is he now facing an extended six-year term, but, if he lasts that long, he'll have to seek another in 2018. He will be able to leave the Kremlin only feet first or by going straight to jail. As he himself once declared in one of the most telling Freudian slips in history, he's been chained to power "like a galley slave." Even though he has appointed Medvedev as his prime minister, Putin can't be too happy with the job Medvedev has done.

As he starts his third term, Putin finds himself in a country far different from what it was in 2008, when he appointed Medvedev as president. Medvedev's promises may have turned out empty, but they raised hopes that Russia could, for the first time in a century, join the community of nations and stop seeking its own "special path" in the wilderness. Even though Medvedev had been discredited long before the Sept. 24 announcement, Putin's abrupt snub showed Russians that the government will not even contemplate meaningful reforms and that Putin's regime has no intention of giving up power peacefully.

Putin's May 7 inauguration was an unmitigated disaster, marked by mass protests, arrests and police beatings. Putin's cortege sped through eerily deserted Moscow streets. It was a frightening harbinger of things to come.

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