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Farewell to Medvedev's Hapless Foreign Policy

By Vladimir Frolov

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Whatever the reasons were for dispatching Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to the Group of Eight summit over the weekend as a stand-in for President Vladimir Putin, one thing is clear: Medvedev was not given an independent role on foreign policy, nor is he part of a dual-key arrangement with Putin to manage the country's foreign affairs.

Putin is moving to eliminate any ambiguity as to where the buck really stops on Russian foreign policy, consolidating his control of the decision-making process. That ambiguity emerged during Medvedev's presidency when he had full constitutional powers to conduct foreign policy, while Putin retained a veto over key decisions. This arrangement, contrary to the recent spin by Medvedev's camp, proved unworkable and even harmful to Russia's interests.

It misled Russia's international partners and created unrealistic expectations in foreign capitals. U.S. President Barack Obama cultivated ties with Medvedev as a partner in the

"reset" and Russia's presumed future leader — only to find out that he was simply dealing with Putin's "messenger." Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych also placed a misguided bet in Kharkiv in April 2010 that Medvedev would cajole Gazprom into lowering gas prices for Ukraine.

It allowed some foreign players who sensed two rival centers of decision making to exploit the loopholes in Russia's system. Obama played up to Medvedev's ambitions and extracted important concessions from him on the New START treaty in long phone chats — all over Putin's head.

Meanwhile, Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat and Syrian President Bashar Assad bypassed Medvedev with a shortcut to Putin to influence the Kremlin's policy to their political gain.

The dual-key foreign policy ignited unhealthy competition among Russian government agencies, with some seeking to prove their loyalty to Putin at the cost of ignoring or even sabotaging Medvedev's initiatives.

Medvedev proved to be a hapless, sometimes erratic foreign policy leader, offering initiatives everyone ignored (the European security treaty), picking personal fights with foreign leaders he could not dislodge (Lukashenko), or backpedaling on an issue after taking a public stand (Libya).

Medvedev was permanently damaged by "castling" with Putin. No foreign power will ever mistake him for an independent player.

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