

Medvedev Seen Hanging in the Balance

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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A souvenir seller at a stand on Ploshchad Revolyutsii showing a 100-ruble magnet that features Medvedev or Putin, depending on how it is held. **Igor Tabakov**

When Dmitry Medvedev announced on Sept. 24, 2011, that he would step aside to let Vladimir Putin return as president, he disappointed critics and supporters alike. Disgruntled observers described him as a "political corpse."

A year later, Medvedev is prime minister and leader of United Russia — two jobs he inherited from Putin that formally make him No. 2 in the government and head of the country's most powerful political party.

But being No. 2 doesn't seem to matter much.

Indeed, Putin might fire Medvedev as a scapegoat if an economic crisis erupts, said Vladimir Pribylovsky, an analyst with the Panorama think tank.

"Medvedev is like canned food — he can be eaten whenever it is necessary," he said.

Since Putin's return to the Kremlin in May, a series of tough laws and court decisions have resulted in an atmosphere that pretty much has reversed the spirit of liberal reform that characterized Medvedev's presidency.

Examples include an amendment making libel a criminal offense again — after Medvedev abolished this last year — and the harsh sentence for Taisa Osipova, the wife of a Smolensk opposition activist, who was jailed for eight years last month on contentious drug charges. As president, Medvedev had asked prosecutors to review her case.

In a sign that the country's hawkish security services are gaining strength, the State Duma last Friday passed a bill in its first reading that was lobbied for by the Federal Security Service and widens the definition of treason to allow the arrest of staff from international organizations on spy charges.

The bill actually first entered the Duma in late 2008 but was subsequently held up in the presidential administration, then controlled by Medvedev, Vedomosti reported.

But the biggest fuss about Medvedev's demise broke out after two Duma deputies from the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party introduced a bill that would turn the country's clocks back an hour.

In 2011, Medvedev decreed to abolish daylight saving time by keeping clocks permanently set one hour forward. While switching clocks twice a year had been unpopular in the country, the permanent switch prompted even more complaints, especially from northern cities like St. Petersburg, where people spent winter mornings in the dark until after 10 a.m.

The Duma backpedaled this week, with Deputy Speaker Sergei Zheleznyak, a senior official of Medvedev's United Russia party, saying Tuesday the parliament didn't need to pass a law but wait for the government to formulate a decree. Within hours, Putin declared that it was the Cabinet's responsibility to decide this, thereby putting the burden on its head, Medvedev.

The author of the bill, Sergei Kalashnikov, said Thursday that he would cancel it, Interfax reported.

Medvedev and other members of the Cabinet have not commented on whether they are ready to turn back the clocks on the last Sunday of October.

The uncertainty even has real consequences for consumers: Russian Railways said in a [statement](#) Wednesday that it would not sell international train tickets for dates after Oct. 28 — when the rest of Europe switches to winter time — because it was waiting for a final decision.

Medvedev also has lost other initiatives, most notably with Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who successfully defended his ministry's Zvezda TV channel against plans to transform it into a new public television station, widely seen as Medvedev's pet project. Serdyukov did, however, lose Zvezda's \$48 million in annual state subsidies.

Another battle, with Rosneft president Igor Sechin, remained undecided Thursday. Sechin, who is widely seen as the most powerful of Medvedev's opponents, has railed against the government's plans to use more than \$4 billion of the state-run oil giant's dividends.

As pundits and media reports have started to talk of a de-Medvedevization, the prime minister has put on a brave face and not shied away from confronting Putin.

A public disagreement culminated last week when Medvedev publicly criticized a 2008 incident in which Putin, then prime minister, promised to "send a doctor and prosecutor" to billionaire Igor Zyuzin, the owner of steel and coal producer Mechel.

"In modern Russia these unambiguous instructions are not being made in such form, like to suggest sending the doctor for a cure. Russian business knows what I mean," Medvedev said, according to a [transcript](#) on the government's website.

The comments came just days after Putin criticized the government's budget and complained that Cabinet members were not fulfilling his orders. To this Medvedev retorted dryly that he, too, never liked the budget during his time as president.

Medvedev also voiced public dissent during a Sept. 12 meeting with United Russia officials in Penza, where he criticized both the decision to keep the Pussy Riot band members in jail and called a bill forbidding government officials from owning real estate abroad "senseless."

Putin and Medvedev had publicly bickered before, most famously in March 2011 when Medvedev said that it was unacceptable to compare Western calls for armed intervention in Libya with medieval crusades — hours after Putin had done just that.

The two seemingly addressed fears of a growing split on Thursday by holding a [meeting](#) in Putin's Novo-Ogaryovo residence, in which they discussed the upcoming budget.

Such meetings, with colorful photos, were held regularly during Medvedev's presidency to show that the much-touted "tandem" was working. However, this was the first time such an event was held since they swapped jobs earlier this year.

Observers said that the current configuration is fundamentally less stable than the previous "tandem." They pointed to the mass protests that have shaken the country's politics since the December Duma elections — and that have been explained at least in part by widespread frustration over Medvedev's departure from the Kremlin.

They also note a growing split in the elites that was manifest in the presidential campaign of billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who was widely seen as a candidate for the liberal wing in the government.

"Putin's comeback is much more difficult than originally planned," said Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Lipman suggested that Medvedev is perceived as a threat by the conservative camp simply because he is the most legitimate heir. The Constitution stipulates that the prime minister becomes acting president if the head of state dies or is otherwise incapacitated.

Medvedev also has said he might run again for president.

Lipman said the specter of another Medvedev presidency weakens his present position. "There is a desire to belittle [him] and overshadow his legacy — and to pretend that his

presidency never happened," she said by telephone.

At the same time, Lipman and other pundits said Putin will protect Medvedev to reward him for his proven loyalty during his Kremlin tenure. At least for now.

"It looks likely that he might not serve through Putin's term," Lipman said. Putin's current six-year term ends in 2018.

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