

Leave Government If You Want to Trash It

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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President Vladimir Putin has warned members of his government and former tandem partner Dmitry Medvedev against publicly voicing their disagreement with a presidential policy proposal.

He implied that government officials should thrash out their disagreements in closed-door sessions without taking them out to the media, and that those who do not accept this limitation should leave government, as former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin did in 2011.

It is, of course, unacceptable for a state official to denounce a government's decision after it has already been made. It is political good manners to leave government if you disagree with its policies. This is what Kudrin was forced to do when he publicly criticized the government's defense spending programs.

But Medvedev and some members of his economic team were not speaking out against

a government decision already on the books. They criticized a draft legislative proposal, stealthily introduced into the State Duma by the president's office, bypassing, it appears, the government and its interagency legislative commission.

The proposal would give back to the security services the authority, which is currently with the federal tax service, to file criminal chargers against businesses in tax disputes. The public frustration of Medvedev and his team is understandable given the fact that the proposal would torpedo the government's policy to lure investors to Russia at a time when the country's economy has stalled. That the proposal was clandestinely sprung upon the government, bypassing the standard interagency process, makes going public against it the only possible recourse. After all, Russia's parliament is not a place to defeat presidential initiatives.

The public needs to know whether state officials disagree on a policy proposal. This fuels a healthy debate and allows interest groups to openly present and argue their positions. Ultimately, it leads to sound decisions.

Stifling debate and preventing officials from publicly speaking their minds in early stages of policy development is counterproductive and self-defeating. Sycophancy and fear stifle good judgement. The Soviet leadership never allowed public disagreements within its ranks and made terrible decisions.

In China, notes Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev, political debate stops when the government makes a decision; in Russia, it stops when the president makes a proposal.

Maybe the Chinese are on to something.

Vladimir Frolov is president of LEFF Group, a government relations and PR company.

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