The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Medvedev's Liberal Hot Air

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January 19, 2014




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Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev often looks like the odd man out in the government he heads. Many people expected him to be retired to some meaningless sinecure once his four-year stint as figurehead president ended in May 2012. Yet President Vladimir Putin is keeping him on. The question is why.

Medvedev's presidency was not a success by any measure. His early liberal agenda, which stirred hope among some members of the intelligentsia, quickly proved nothing but hot air. He was ineffectual, timid and maladroit in his public appearances. His infantile delight

in high-tech gadgets and the social media was ridiculed, and his love of 1960s British rock bands made him look like a latent teenager.

The low assessment of Medvedev is probably the only thing the opposition and Putin's supporters share today. Putin himself often seemed irritated by Medvedev during his protege's presidency. Since returning to the Kremlin, he pointedly curbed the modernization program Medvedev advocated. Some of the oligarchs who supported the former president felt pressured.

So far, Medvedev's tenure as prime minister has done little to dispel the impression of him as a nonentity. Putin has criticized the work of Medvedev's government, expressing impatience with its failures to implement his May 2012 directives on social programs and the economy.

Medvedev must also be a constant reminder to Putin of his failure to create a viable successor. In 2007 to 2008, Putin was determined to retire from politics. He wanted someone who would be able to assume power but remain loyal and allow him to enjoy his considerable fortune unmolested — something Putin himself had scrupulously done with regard to former President Boris Yeltsin. After months of trying to choose between former Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov and Medvedev, Putin opted for the latter as more trustworthy of the two. But, despite Putin's best efforts, Medvedev did not become a true political leader, necessitating Putin's return to presidency.

Putin is no longer thinking of a successor and is likely to stay on for the remainder of his current six-year term as president and the next — that is, at least until 2024. It is not clear who will succeed Putin after that, but it certainly will not be Medvedev. Most likely, Putin has other plans for Medvedev.

First of all, there is the economy, which stagnated in 2013 and may suffer a recession this year. If oil prices fall, the economic downturn may prove severe. It would seem that Putin does not expect a major economic debacle, throwing money around as if there is no tomorrow. For example, he is providing billions of dollars in loans to Ukraine and Belarus and assuming the huge financial burden for the Sochi Olympics. He is also keeping Medvedev at the helm, which is not a wise decision if he expects stormy weather ahead. At the same time, however, if the economy does hit the skids, Medvedev and his government could always be used as a scapegoat, while respected former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin could be then brought in to deal with the economic crisis.

Medvedev's lingering liberal image could also come handy if Putin clamps down on dissent after the Sochi Olympics, as many in the opposition fear. Medvedev could then be blamed for undermining the state. By the same token, if the recent small-scale amnesty were to be followed by other steps designed to achieve reconciliation at home and burnish Russia's image abroad, Medvedev could once again be put forward as a reformer. But in any case, Putin will remain as the country's tough and uncompromising national leader.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/01/19/medvedevs-liberal-hot-air-a31206