

Medvedev Is Out: Anti-Corruption Protests Cost Russia's Prime Minister his Future

The race for the premiership during Putin's 4th term has just begun

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Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev **Vedomosti**

At the March 26 protest rallies, which rocked Russia from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, many Russian youngsters showed up carrying pairs of sneakers, a new symbol of corruption. The shoes referred to Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's predilection for ordering sneakers and other clothing online, as humorously exposed in opposition leader Alexei Navalny's viral Youtube investigation.

For millions of Russians, Medvedev is now the face of state corruption. But for Russia's elite, he was much more than just a prime minister over the last five years.

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In 2011, when Medvedev was still president, he made a deal with Vladimir Putin that entered the Russian political narrative as the infamous “castling”: Putin would return to the Kremlin and give the post of prime minister back to Medvedev.

Since then, the elite have viewed Medvedev as Putin’s right-hand man and his most obvious natural successor. Some even argue that a future “re-castling” was part of the original “castling” agreement.

Since the early 2000s, when Medvedev was appointed Putin’s chief-of-staff, the duo have developed a close bond. Their duumvirate during Medvedev’s 2008–2012 presidency — known as a “tandem” — has hardly any analogy in Russia’s history. The shadow of this duumvirate continued to shape Russia’s political hierarchy and the imagery of power long after that tandem ended. Who else but Medvedev could be seen working out — or just having a cup of tea — with Russia’s all-powerful president?

But now, Navalny’s investigation and the subsequent protest rallies have dramatically altered Russia’s political landscape. On March 28, Medvedev received a special invitation from the president to join him for a trip to Russia’s Far North — again, a signal to the elite that Putin places high trust in Medvedev. But now this will hardly deceive Russia’s political establishment.

“Medvedev has lost his shot at a future presidency,” a source close to the authorities told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity.

“He’s not going to keep his bench-warmer seat,” agrees political analyst Yevgeny Minchenko. According to Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Kremlin advisor, Medvedev’s strategic stance has dramatically weakened. He is unlikely to keep his prime minister post after Putin’s re-election in March 2018. This will put an end to his long-term political ambitions.

According to The Moscow Times’ sources, Vladimir Putin will most likely announce his presidential bid next fall. Few doubt that he will begin his fourth and, supposedly, final presidential term with a new government.

In the mid-2000s, Putin appointed so-called seat-filler prime ministers who lacked real influence and ambition. Today, however, observers note that he no longer has this option. During this election, Putin will have to show the nation his new agenda and vision for the future, argues Minchenko. This necessity will determine who he chooses as his right hand man and Russia’s second political authority as framed in the Constitution.

“Former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin and the president’s representative in the Far East, Yuri Trutnev, all have better chances,” says Minchenko.

The choice will be less about name than reputation. Putin will have to pick someone from one of two categories, says Pavlovsky: either a prime minister “for the elite,” or a prime minister “for the nation.” In the Russian context, these are fundamentally opposite political directions. The former would mean relying on a liberal-minded politician close to economic circles, but with little popularity among the masses. The latter would be a well-known

“silovik,” a representative of the military or national security establishment.

The prime ministerial chair is historically viewed in Russia as a springboard to the presidency. With Dmitry Medvedev now a lame duck, the backstage race for the premiership and, potentially, to succeed Putin — a race whose energy has been pent up in the “castling game” for at least a decade — will break loose and quickly gain momentum.

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