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Medvedev Doesn't Matter. Stop Acting Like He Does.

By John Foreman

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Dmitry Medvedev giving a speech in an outfit that was likened to Dr. Evil from the Austin Powers franchise. **Yekaterina Shtukina / POOL / TASS**

U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement last week that he was positioning two U.S. nuclear submarines in "appropriate regions" in response to "foolish and inflammatory statements" was unexpected. It will also have been unexpected by the author of those statements, cantankerous former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, long accustomed to being a marginalized figure both in and out of Russia. His loose lips finally moved ships.

It was unfortunate that Trump reacted to Medvedev as he did. It briefly fueled inaccurate scare stories about an escalation in nuclear tensions between the U.S. and Russia. But by reacting in his own way, Trump clearly communicated to the Kremlin that such nuclear saber-rattling was unwise and inconducive to the bilateral relationship. The Kremlin got the message, blandly asserting that "everyone should be very careful with nuclear rhetoric." Deterrence still holds.

After a period of enforced silence, Medvedev resumed posting. Despite lazy assumptions, it would be a mistake to take his online theatrics as a serious representation of Russian policy. Rather, his aggressive social media ramblings are cynical and born of self-interest and self-preservation. Medvedev isn't the "voice of Putin" of popular Western imagination.

Medvedev has long flattered to deceive. Over a lengthy political career, made possible only by his close association with his predecessor and successor, Vladimir Putin — not his individual talent — he has consistently proven to be another False Dmitry. A vaunted "liberal" who spoke as President about "personal freedom, economic freedom and, finally, freedom of expression," he subsequently steadily eroded those freedoms as Prime Minister. The politician who placed fighting the curse of corruption at the top of his presidential agenda was shown by the late Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny to be "crazy about money," amassing a vast portfolio of land and property. The peacemaker who promised strategic stability to Obama then enabled Putin's annexation of Crimea and a subsequent dirty war in eastern Ukraine.

In truth, Medvedev was never liberal, clean, or outside his master's orbit. Many of these characteristics were projected onto this empty vessel by analysts who should have known better.

In eight undistinguished, listless years as prime minister, he became the lightning rod for criticism, the focus for protest and an object of ridicule for falling asleep in public. Out of step with an increasingly hawkish regime, he became increasingly isolated as his close associates were sacked. It came as no surprise to anyone when he was dispatched to the icy wasteland of the National Security Council.

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Putin's war has been Medvedev's savior from this political Siberia. He swiftly seized the opportunity presented to try to curry favor, display his loyalty and play himself back into a position of influence. No one has been safe from his "macho posturing and genocidal rhetoric," which is extreme even by today's Russian standards. He cosplayed a Stalinist commissar, inspecting arms factories in a long black leather coat. He threatened factory bosses with retribution for not fulfilling defense orders. He channeled Dr. Evil during a bizarre address about Ukraine's borders to the young.

There are a number of possible, overlapping reasons for this metamorphosis from Dmitry the Pathetic into Dmitry the Terrible.

Firstly, he is a good weathervane for those within the system who point themselves to where Putin's priorities are perceived to lie and go one step further: liberal if required, rabid hawk when necessary.

Second, isolated, he is hoping to preserve his ill-gotten gains by demonstrating uber-loyalty to Putin, soothing his fears with the bottle.

Third, aged only 59, he is playing the long game, hoping for a political comeback post-Putin. Or lastly, as one Russian academic put it, he is just a "very aggressive small man with … a Napoleon syndrome" who has revealed his inner self since February 2022.

Whatever the truth, he has little political future. As Mikhail Zygar, founding editor of TV Rain, said, he "cannot be Putin's successor because he would not exist politically without Putin. A puppet does not exist without a puppeteer." He lacks his own power base and the trust of the ascendant hawks who despise him.

Normally, his personal descent would be deemed a tragedy. I have no pity for a man who has become a willing cheerleader for the murder of innocent Ukrainians.

So the next time you see a mad tweet insulting world leaders, inciting racial hatred, or threatening the West — again — with nuclear annihilation, it is best to ignore it. Medvedev is not an avenue for cunning strategic communications from the Kremlin. His ravings are the result of his fear, frustrations and his wounded ego. There is less to him than meets the eye.

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