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MINNPOST

Putin sends Russia's liberals a message

By Nick Hayes | 10/04/11



REUTERS/Alexander Zemlyanichenko

President Dmitry Medvedev, left, and Vladimir Putin confer.

The last week in Russian politics brought an end to one of the more phony chapters in recent Russian history.

Over the weekend of Sept. 24-25, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin told a meeting of the ruling United Russia Party that he would leave his post as prime minister and run for the presidency in the 2012 election. His protégé, President Dmitry Medvedev would **diplomatically step aside** and step down to run for the prime minister

position.



And so the political charade of the Medvedev presidency came to an end.

Putin's announcement did not come as a shock. There were two aspects to the story, however, that were a bit outrageous even by his standards. First of all, Putin told the party meeting that his decision to run for the presidency had been made "several years earlier" in consultation with Medvedev.

If so, what was behind the spinning of the Medvedev story in the past two to three years?

In Obama's July 2009 visit to Moscow, his meetings with Medvedev played more prominently to the press than had the rather terse meeting with Putin. By September 2010, Medvedev had sacked the powerful and notoriously corrupt mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov. A few weeks later, he championed

the formation of a new liberal party, Forward Russia. The president reopened a few long neglected human rights cases. By the end of September 2010, Newsweek was trumpeting **the emergence** of Medvedev as a new and liberal force eclipsing Putin.

The spin had worked. The story went from the Kremlin-controlled Moscow press to the media in the West that there was a liberal Medvedev camp on the move in Russian politics. In retrospect, the purpose of the story had been not to showcase the advance of democracy in Russia but to show how easily a cynical Putin could manipulate the media and stage manage a political charade drawing out the would-be liberal opposition and casting them in the role of fools in Putin's farce.

Agreed with Putin plan

Secondly, last week Medvedev did more than just fall into line. On Sept. 24, the Russian president explained to the party gathering that he was in agreement with Putin's plan. The lack of enthusiasm at the first statement prompted Medvedev to explain his explanation. On Friday, in an interview broadcast on three television networks, he explained his decision. Medvedev said that Putin was both the "most authoritative" and popular politician in the country. Medvedev threw in a few other incongruous and lame arguments.

The truth may have been the opposite. For the record, recent polling shows Medvedev with an approval rating of 62 to 66 percent to be close and within the margin of error to Putin's approval rating of 68 percent. Democracy in Russia would have been better served if the Russian president had had the courage to be silent. His silence would have implied that his decision to support Putin was coerced precisely because Medvedev was gaining ground on Putin in the public opinion polls.

Old Soviet anecdote

The interview and Putin's treatment of Medvedev last week reminded me of an old anecdote from Soviet history. In the 1940s at a dinner party of the Communist leadership, Joseph Stalin had made a few jokes about Nikita Khrushchev's Ukrainian origins and then commanded Khrushchev to entertain them by dancing the traditional "hopak." Although the stout, middle-aged Khrushchev did not know the dance, he did his best taking to the floor, squatting, kicking, trying to leap up, and attempting a few turns. Stalin nodded at him to continue and, feigning boredom, paid no attention while Khrushchev danced on aching knees. No one at the dinner party intervened on their dancing colleague's behalf and, finally, Stalin told Khrushchev to stop.

There was a touch of Khrushchev's humiliation before Stalin in Medvedev's pathetic interview before Russia's television audience and, presumably, the country's prime minister.

The Obama administration had thrown its support behind Medvedev. In Obama's July 2009 visit to Moscow, the president frequently spoke of his "friend Dmitry" and said Prime Minister Putin has "one foot in the (Cold War) past." The latter remark was a diplomatic faux pas that Obama probably has

come to regret during the past week. Obama had only one meeting with Putin, a two-hour brunch in which the Russian prime minister lectured the U.S. president for 90 minutes on Russia's view of world affairs.

Obama's **meeting** with Putin in Moscow just might have made him feel nostalgic for his meetings with Congressman John Boehner back in Washington. Obama invited Medvedev, not Putin, to visit Washington the following summer. The June 2010 meeting of Obama and Medvedev in Washington produced no diplomatic breakthroughs, even though Obama took his "friend Dmitry" **to lunch** at Ray's Hell Burgers in Arlington, VA.

The Obama administration was neglecting Prime Minister Putin, the man back in Moscow with "one foot in the past," but failed to pick-up the cues that its "friend Dmitry" already had one foot out the door.

Putin has planted both his feet firmly in the past. There was an antecedent for Putin's gesture three years ago of stepping down from the presidency after his two constitutionally allotted terms, assuming the nominally secondary position as prime minister, and deferring in public to the authority of the new president. During the 1920s, 1930s and heroic years of WWII, it was not, as we tend to remember, Joseph Stalin who was the head of the Soviet state. In actuality, from 1919 to 1946, the nominal head of the Soviet state was the forgotten Mikhail Kalinin. Stalin served as the head or general secretary of the Communist Party, which was the actual seat of power and controlled the vast apparatus of the state, just as Putin over the past three years controlled the ruling United Russia Party and the Russian state bureaucracy. Medvedev was Putin's Kalinin.

Tradition from the past

Putin has also reasserted a tradition from the tsars. The autocratic power of the tsars rested in the person of the tsar, not the institutions of the monarchy. Putin orchestrated the Medvedev story to make a mockery of the Russian constitution, its offices and its legislative assembly, or "duma," and to emphasize that his personal power trumped legal institutions.

Putin has also resurrected an ominous symbol from the tsarist past as if to send a message to Russia's liberals that things could be worse. During the past year, Putin has led a highly public campaign to honor **Pyotr Stolypin**, one of tsarist Russia's most ambiguous political figures who served as tsar Nicholas II's prime minister from 1906 to 1911.

Stolypin oversaw sweeping agricultural reforms that transformed rural Russia and a political crackdown on the left that expedited the prosecution of real and suspected radicals. Executions by public hanging were so commonplace during the Stolypin's regime that the noose earned the nickname of "Stolypin's necktie." His assassination in 1911 has not deterred Putin from publically identifying with the Stolypin legacy. Putin organized a national campaign to build a monument to

Stolypin to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his assassination, which occurred on Sept. 18.

Russia's liberals get the message. They will have at least another 12 years of Putin. However, his regime could be worse. He could have been or could be another Stolypin. That is why, as the writer Viktor Erofeyev told the New York Times last week, Russian liberals will not protest too much. Besides, as Erofeyev sardonically notes, it is still "possible to buy vodka."

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