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# President Medvedev's liberal 'testament'?

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On 3 March, at a conference marking the 150th anniversary of the reforms of Tsar Alexander II, President Dmitri Medvedev gave a speech containing a clear criticism of the Putin system of power. The address signals Medvedev's return to liberal rhetoric and criticism of the system, after recent months in which he sought re-election by demonstrating his loyalty to the ruling elite. Now, in the face of the increasing likelihood of Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin, Medvedev's priority is not running for a second term, but strengthening his image as a moderniser, which is his greatest political capital. Medvedev may be able to cash in on this capital and win the role over the next few years of a representative of the elite who has real authority, in a situation where Putin's position is somewhat weakened as a result of economic or social crises, or if expectations grow for a liberalisation of the system of government.

## 'Turning the screw' does not help development

President Medvedev's address at the Saint Petersburg conference marking the 150th anniversary of Tsar Alexander II's reforms, which included the abolition of the corvée, were both liberal in tone and contained many references to the current situation, including criticism of the state's excessive control over society. Medvedev considered Alexander II's reforms as a decisive step towards freedom in Russian history, which opened up the way for Russia's development and economic progress. According to Medvedev, history has shown that it was this project, of "a normal, humane regime" under Alexander II – rather than fantasies of a 'third way' or the Soviet experiment – which brought Russia the most benefit, and it was the Tsar-Reformer who had history on his side, and not rulers such as Nicholas I and Stalin. In making these historical assessments, Medvedev made an explicit link to the present situation, stressing that 'turning the screw' and excessive control contribute to the degradation of the rule of the state. The President called for "freedom not to be put off until later", and said there should be no fear of the people using their freedom inappropriately. Medvedev finished his speech with the declaration which started his road to the presidency at the 2007 economic forum in Davos: "Freedom is always better than the lack of freedom."

## No re-election?

The Russian media and politicians' statements are starting to present more electoral scenarios for the year 2012, but many of these reports are deliberate disinformation. As

happened during the succession to the Kremlin in 2008, the decision on who will be the government's candidate in the elections will be decided within a narrow circle of the ruling elite, composed of Vladimir Putin's close associates, and it will most likely be announced a few months before the election. In determining the most likely electoral scenario for 2012, then, it is necessary to analyse not public declarations and media speculation, but rather the interests of the ruling elite. Even though Medvedev's presidency has benefited these people, there is much to indicate that Vladimir Putin will return to the Kremlin.
On the one hand, the political experiment whereby Medvedev held the presidency while Putin remained leader can be considered a success for the elite. The change at the president's chair required by the constitution ensured that the political authorities would retain their legitimacy. Medvedev, closely controlled by the ruling elite, has been working in their interest over the last three years.

On the other hand, a further six years of Medvedev's presidency would present the high risk that he would favour taking more autonomous decisions, primarily at the personnel level. The case for this is that his political ambitions have increased (as has his frustration that he is not generally regarded as being an independent politician). This would create the risk of changes being made to the structure of the current elite, which is primarily composed of close colleagues of Putin, but not of Medvedev himself. Another argument is that the president's powers have not been reduced in favour of the prime minister (which would indicate that Putin plans to remain head of government for a longer period). Finally, the elite's leader Vladimir Putin can now, in accordance with the law, return to the office of president for another 12 years, which would seem to be ideal from the point of view of the ruling elite and their business interests. In addition, this scenario may be confirmed by the media's active promotion of Putin.

**Building up political capital**

Dmitri Medvedev was 'anointed' president by the Putin elite, whose representative he is. There is no reliable indication as to the precise length and conditions of the 'presidential contract' between him and the ruling elite. However, in recent months there have been signals that Medvedev is interested in remaining at the Kremlin as their representative. Examples of his attempts to seek re-election may include the muting of his liberal rhetoric (his speech to parliament in November 2010 was dominated by politically neutral social issues), and his support for the government's line on the Khodorkovsky case (at the economic forum in Davos this January, Medvedev actually supported the sentence handed down to the former head of Yukos). In this way, Medvedev has bet on convincing the Putin-led elite that he will be their loyal representative for a further term of office.
Medvedev's latest speech, which contains a clear criticism of Russia's current political model, signals his return to liberal rhetoric. Contrary to the prevailing interpretations, that this Medvedev 'manifesto' is the beginning of his campaign before the presidential elections (March 2012), it should rather be seen as his response to Putin's increasingly likely return to the Kremlin next year.
There are no indications that Medvedev has decided to fight for power with the ruling elite and to become an 'anti-system' politician (he has no support for doing so). For this reason, it

can be ruled out that he will run in the presidential elections against the elite in a situation where the government’s official candidate would, for example, be Putin.

Medvedev's speech, with its criticism of the current system of government, may be a sign that he is not counting on being re-elected. Little time remains before the official announcement of who the Kremlin’s candidate will be (which will most likely be announced in November or December); it is therefore unlikely that Medvedev will succeed in strengthening his position by then, or that his modernising rhetoric will bring him new allies among the elite. In this situation, it appears that his political calculations are now being made in the longer term, and will be focused on strengthening his image as a moderniser, as his main political capital. Medvedev may hope that over the next few years, support for Putin will erode, for example as a result of economic or social crises, or a growth in expectations for the liberalisation of the system of government; then Medvedev can present himself as a representative of the ruling elite who wields real power. It remains an open question as to whether this approach will become his long-term political strategy, or whether he will display a greater focus and effectiveness in gaining support within the ruling elite, and in consolidating those elements who are unhappy with Putin's policy, primarily among the Russian business, intellectual and bureaucratic elites.