

Russian President Medvedev appeals to free-market parties amid protests

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In his annual address before the Federal Assembly on December 22, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced limited concessions to the liberal free-market opposition, while again insisting that the results of the parliamentary elections on December 4 were valid.

His speech came after protests on December 10, the biggest demonstration in Russia in 20 years, as tens of thousands of protested in Moscow against ballot fraud. While dominated by the urban middle classes and right-wing, pro-Western opposition parties, the protests reflected wider social discontent with the Kremlin reflected in the collapse of the ruling United Russia party's vote on December 4. It received 49.5 percent of the vote.

Over 50,000 people are expected to attend the next protest rally in Moscow, on December 24.

In his speech, Medvedev announced plans to reintroduce popular election of governors and a liberalization of electoral laws. At the same time, Medvedev confirmed the outcome of the recent parliamentary elections, adding that the government would not tolerate foreign meddling in Russia or that "provocateurs and extremists" undermine stability.

This was a reference to pressure on the Kremlin from Western powers; US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton condemned the elections as "unfair" and "rigged". Organizations involved in the protests, such as Solidarnost of Garry Kasparov or Parnas, led by businessman Boris Nemtsov, maintain close ties with US imperialism.

None of Medvedev's announcements went beyond the comments of Prime Minister Putin in his appearance on national television on December 15.

Commentators have repeatedly called President Medvedev "a lame duck", after the announcement that

Putin would replace Medvedev as United Russia's presidential candidate, in September. As his nomination for the post of Prime Minister depended on "United Russia's" performance in the elections—which was very poor—it is not unlikely that Medvedev will soon take his leave from the political scene. In any case, it has become clear that Medvedev acts as a mere appendage to Putin's administration.

His remarks were aimed at appeasing the liberal opposition, promising it a greater share in the political system, while at the same time signaling to the ruling elite that the Kremlin has the situation under control. Both sides are eager to quickly reach a negotiated settlement, for fear that the protests which so far have been limited to sections of the urban middle classes might spread to the working class.

In the run-up to the rally on Saturday, many liberals have cautioned not to insist on their demands for a recount and new elections, fearing that this might lead to a serious confrontation between the protesters and the ruling elites—something both the liberal opposition and the Kremlin desperately seek to avoid.

The liberal *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, for instance, wrote on December 22, that the opposition should confine itself to the demand for a liberalization of the electoral law:

"The demand for an admission of a real, legal and institutionalized struggle for power is promising, as the ruling elite has already declared (at least in words) its readiness to make such concessions. (...) If the protesters prioritize such demands, putting them before other popular slogans, they will be able to achieve real political independence within the framework of the present system. Otherwise, a substantial stimulus for change will be difficult, not to say impossible—at least in a peaceful way."

Stanislav Belkovsky, the director of the Institute for National Strategy, commented on the speeches by Putin and Medvedev: “All this has one goal: to legitimize both the recent parliamentary and the up-coming presidential elections. This is an address to the active citizen: “Accept the election results, content yourself with them, and we will offer you some changes in return.”

Liberal commentators have tried to present Medvedev’s announcements as a significant concession to the protesters, describing them as “a complex reform of the political system” (Kommersant)—which they are not, in fact.

Putting aside the question of their implementation, the reforms Medvedev proposed are very limited and will have no significant impact on the general population, whose social and democratic rights are under attack from both the ruling elites and the liberal opposition.

The first convention of the newly elected parliament on December 21, furthermore, was a clear signal that the Kremlin would not give in to demands for a recount or new elections. The newly elected Chairman of the Duma is United Russia’s Sergey Naryshkin, the former head of the Kremlin administration and a close confidant of Putin.

The parliamentary opposition—the Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the LDPR and Just Russia—voted against Naryshkin in an obvious attempt to distance itself from the ruling party in the run-up to the Saturday rally. However, all three parties demonstrated their support for the Kremlin’s policy by backing a resolution dismissing a European Union resolution protesting the rigged Duma elections.

Underlying the Kremlin’s attempts to steal the protest movement’s thunder by making compromises with the liberals is the anxiety of a movement by the working class which none of the parties—“oppositional” or otherwise—could control.

The ruling elites well remember the case of Pikolyovo: in the spring of 2009, the population of the town protested the layoff of the entire city’s workforce after the bankruptcy of the factory-owner, oligarch Oleg Deripaska. The trade unions and the CPRF were unable to appease the protests, and control over the situation was only regained when Putin himself went to

Pikolyovo. He rebuked Deripaska for the wage arrears, warning that the state might take over his private company.

However, since then Putin’s popularity has declined significantly. Since December 4 approval ratings for both the work of Putin and Medvedev have dropped by 9 and 10 percent respectively, to 51 percent each, according to a report by the Public Opinion Fund and the All-Russian Center for the Research of Public Opinion. Analysts suggest that Putin will not be able to win the presidential elections in the first round, with only 42 percent of the population ready to vote for him.

Social tensions in Russia remain explosive. In his speech, Medvedev fraudulently tried to present his legacy as successful, claiming that wages and pensions had increased, while inflation and unemployment had declined. In reality, wages have increased by a mere 0.2 percent since the beginning of this year; given an inflation rate of 7 percent this effectively means a significant lowering of living standards.

Large sections of the Russian population subsist with absurdly low wages and pensions.

Furthermore, the alleged success of Medvedev’s modernization-campaign was proven a mere sham by the recent sinking of the obsolete oil-rig “Kolskaya” in the Sea of Orkhotsk on December 17. Neither Putin nor Medvedev deemed it necessary to comment on the tragedy, which claimed the lives of over 50 people.



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