

Medvedev Gets Caught In Kremlin Mouse Trap

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It is hard to see a net political gain for President Dmitry Medvedev from his awkward decision to temporarily halt the construction of a federal highway through the Khimki forest.

For one thing, it had the look of a forced move made under public pressure and designed to save face for United Russia, which managed to ignore and mishandle this seemingly local issue until it swelled into a rallying point for the political opposition and threatened a strong voter backlash against the party during regional elections only a month away.

The notion that the president's political credibility could be put on the line just to provide cover for United Russia makes Medvedev look manipulated.

This public relations disaster underscored the growing ineptitude of the Kremlin's political operation and its loss of skills in pre-emptive action.

Medvedev's decision mandates only a temporary halt of the deforestation and calls for more public discussion of the construction plans. This makes Medvedev look wishy-washy on the issue and leaves open the possibility that he might later back the original plan to build the highway through the forest.

The environmentalists opposing the highway do not have a very strong case. The forest is not unique, the public need for the new road is evident, and alternative routes are prohibitively costly. Therefore, the odds that the public hearings will end up with a recommendation to proceed with the original construction plans anyway are high.

Medvedev would look weak in the end, underscoring the assumption that he has allowed himself to be used politically. The fact that Medvedev's order to temporarily halt the construction has only been published in his video blog and is yet to be transformed into an official document only reinforces the impression of a manipulative political operation that the president has been reluctantly dragged into.

Medvedev has been forced into a corner. Whatever decision he ultimately makes will be damaging politically.

He might soon face an even more dangerous and costlier political trap that the Kremlin's operatives have placed for him — what to do with the protests on Triumphalnaya Ploshchad in defense of Article 31 of the Constitution.

It has now turned into a minefield that no one around the president knows how to clear.

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