

# Medvedev Plays 'Good Tsar' Online

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President Dmitry Medvedev listening during an Internet conference in Moscow on Monday. **Vladimir Rodionov**

President Dmitry Medvedev tried to give his image as a tech-savvy modernizer a broader appeal Monday, fielding dozens of questions from citizens during an online video conference with his 83 new public offices nationwide.

The president's decision to play the “good tsar” ahead of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's own upcoming televised call-in show indicates that he has ambitions to run for re-election, said Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies, a think tank.

Rossia One television showed Medvedev dressed in a smart suit and sitting in front of an Apple laptop at the Kremlin's reception office on Ulitsa Ilyinka across the road from the Kremlin. Several government members and governors also participated in the event.

Medvedev's 83 public offices began operating Monday, giving people in every region a chance to lodge a complaint with the president. He pledged to hold online conferences with

petitioners at least twice a year.

Many Russians, however, lack ready access to Internet, particularly in far-flung and remote areas. About 43 million out of the 141-million Russian population are Internet users.

Monday's conference was not broadcast on television, and a complete list of the questions and Medvedev's answers was not immediately published on the Kremlin web site.

The conference was dominated by questions about public utilities, which the Kremlin press office said are the most popular complaints filed with the presidential public offices nationwide.

In an example of a typical complaint, residents of a Bashkortostan village asked Medvedev to do something about local street lamps, which only function from 6 p.m to 11 p.m.

Regional Development Minister Viktor Basargin told Medvedev that half of the small villages in the country have a similar problem. The president — who has made energy efficiency one of the five cornerstones of his modernization program — pledged to speed up the replacement of street lamps with more efficient devices, ordering Bashkortostan leader Rustem Khamitov to report on progress in that area in March.

Vladivostok resident Natalya Tsvetayeva, a middle-aged, stylishly dressed woman, complained to Medvedev about the city's obsolete heating stations that run on coal, not gas, polluting the air, RIA-Novosti reported.

Energy Minister Sergei Shmatko, who spoke to Medvedev via video link from Brussels, said 10 of the 14 heating stations in Vladivostok will switch to gas by 2012, when an ASEAN summit will take place in the city.

Many of the people who spoke to Medvedev accused local authorities of ignoring their problems or giving run-arounds to complaints, which prompted the president to criticize the procrastinators.

"If I am spending time on this, you should spend even more time," Medvedev said, addressing local bureaucrats, whom he threatened to punish for slacking off on their duties.

"Administrative and disciplinary measures should be taken against those who fail to give an answer to the people," he said.

Medvedev also called for the introduction of an online system that would allow citizens to track how their requests and complaints are handled by officials.

Public utilities, being the most important topic for the populace, are expected to be included in Medvedev's upcoming state-of-the-nation address, which is expected to be delivered next Tuesday.

The online conference was Medvedev's fourth since assuming the presidency in 2008. In contrast, his patron Putin opts for lengthy televised call-in shows, which he started holding annually in 2001 and continued after becoming the prime minister in 2008. He is scheduled to hold his next call-in show at an as-yet unannounced date in December.

Putin only once has held an Internet conference, in 2006, and he was flooded with joke questions that he mostly ignored.

“Medvedev is trying to combine the image of a statesman who cares about many in a fatherly way with the image of a modern and intellectual leader,” regional politics analyst Alexander Kynev told The Moscow Times.

Just like Putin, Medvedev is trying to appeal to the broader and less educated Russian population, but this format does him no favors because his conferences pale in comparison to Putin's lengthy and intense shows, said Makarkin of the Center for Political Technologies.

He said Medvedev is more used to blogging, a surefire way to appeal to his target audience of urban intellectuals — the same people he is courting with his modernization agenda.

Medvedev has his own [video blog](#) and a [LiveJournal account](#) and is an avid user of the Twitter microblogging service, where he opened a second account last week to separate his formal posts from his informal ones.

Speaking at a Yaroslavl modernization forum in September, Medvedev said that speaking to the public through his blog is “organic” for him. He also said the necessity for him to maintain direct contact with the public indicates that the political institutions normally expected to handle such complaints are not functioning effectively.

Makarkin linked Medvedev's online conference to 2012, when his first term in office expires. “Those are people who believe in a good tsar who will solve their problems,” Makarkin said, noting that while Medvedev has never said he will run for re-election, he has never denied it, either.

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