

# Medvedev Bland in Annual Address

By [Nabi Abdullaev](#)

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Medvedev making his third state-of-the-nation address in the Kremlin. **Misha Japaridze**

President Dmitry Medvedev did not say a word about political stagnation or United Russia's monopoly on power during his annual state-of-the-nation address Tuesday, passing up a chance to elaborate on remarks he made last week.

Instead, the 72-minute speech focused on social issues, mainly demography, child protection and public utilities, treading lightly into territory where the ruling tandem's dominant partner, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, rules unequivocally.

A gloomy-looking Putin — who was applauded as he entered the Kremlin's Georgiyevsky Hall moments before the speech began — appeared bored throughout Medvedev's speech, which was rich in generalities and repetitions of previous initiatives on the economy and social policy.

Analysts had called the speech an opportunity for Medvedev to articulate a clear message to the country's elite that could serve as a manifesto for a possible re-election campaign in 2012.

“Medvedev plants the seeds in clay, while Putin has long been cultivating the rich soil of the state-dependent electorate,” said Yury Korgunyuk, a political analyst with the Indem think tank.

The format for the speech to a large crowd of lawmakers and regional leaders is better suited to Putin, he said.

Political analysts agree that Medvedev — whose core constituency is Westernized, urban young people — has been trying in recent months to extend his appeal in a country where most people and many businesses rely heavily on state support.

Opening the address before the two chambers of the parliament and leading government members, Medvedev said he would not add to the 20 demands for modernizing the economy and political system, which he formulated in his two previous addresses.

Those speeches, along with infrequent video blog posts and last year’s “Go, Russia!” article, had instilled hopes among the Russian liberals and many foreign commentators that Medvedev is genuinely seeking to re-hash the country’s ossified political system, which relies heavily on the so-called power vertical created by Putin and glued together by a cobweb of informal agreements and corruption.

Modernization of the economy has become the core of Medvedev’s leadership agenda over the past two years, although his rhetoric has occasionally included references to the political system as well.

## **Tepid Results**

He admitted on Tuesday that progress in diversifying the economy away from its dependence on the extraction of natural resources had been slow, while the anti-corruption campaign is off to a sputtering start.

Medvedev only briefly touched upon the political system, suggested to expand the proportional and mixed systems of elections into local councils for small towns and municipalities, which are traditionally formed by single-mandate candidates.

The move would boost the influence of the Putin-led United Russia at the lowest levels of the power vertical, where it is still often challenged by single-mandate candidates representing local interests or other parties.

Interestingly, Medvedev lashed out at the United Russia’s stranglehold on decision making, saying in his video blog on Nov. 23 that the lack of competition was leading to a degradation of the political system.

More than the half of the address, which was covered by nearly 340 journalists, was dedicated to the plight of children.

Calling children Russia’s “No. 1 task,” Medvedev proposed tax breaks and giving free land to families with three children or more. He pledged 100 billion rubles (\$3.3 billion) to develop children’s medical care over the next two years, promised a tougher law for the sale of alcohol

and tobacco to minors, and tax breaks to charities helping children.

“Pedophiles should be kept a canon-shot’s distance from institutions for children,” Medvedev said. Measures against pedophiles are a favorite topic for Russian politicians, with parties in the State Duma regularly competing to draft the harshest anti-pedophile laws.

Medvedev, who has a 15-year-old son, Ilya, spoke at length about improving conditions in orphanages, opening more kindergartens, supporting talented students and assisting children with physical disabilities.

## **NATO and Foreign Policy**

Moving on to foreign policy, Medvedev warned the West that if NATO doesn’t reach a deal with Russia over the joint development of an anti-missile shield over Europe, a new arms race would start within the next decade and Russia would be forced to build up its offensive strategic forces.

He made similar warnings at a NATO-Russia summit in Lisbon earlier this month.

The Wall Street Journal reported Monday, citing unidentified U.S. officials, that Russia has moved short-range tactical nuclear warheads to facilities nearer the borders of unspecified NATO member this spring.

Mikhail Margelov, head of the Federation Council’s Foreign Affairs Committee, dismissed the report, telling Bloomberg that Moscow would not jeopardize trust with Washington by taking such a provocative step without informing and consulting with Washington.

Russia and NATO agreed to consider cooperation options at the Lisbon summit, though security analysts agree that the United States will not allow Russia to be an equal partner in the missile shield. Washington argues the shield is needed to protect NATO allies from potential missile strikes by Iran.

Medvedev also said he expected approval soon from Western partners for Russian entry into the World Trade Organization, as well as the eventual introduction of the visa-free travel between Russia and the European Union.

The ongoing rapprochement with the West, which Medvedev indicated he hopes to continue, is clearly a credit to the president, not Putin, said Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies.

Continued efforts to boost ties could be taken as a hint that Medvedev is preparing to run for the presidency based on his achievements for Russia abroad, he said.

Medvedev also called for further expansion of financial punishments, in place of prison terms, for non-violent crime, which is part of his efforts to make the Russian justice system more humane and less corrupt.

But analysts said the address offered few suggestions that Medvedev was preparing to continue working on his priorities in a second term as president.

On Friday, Putin once again told journalists in Berlin that he and Medvedev would decide ahead of the next elections who would run for presidency in 2012.

He and Medvedev have been equally vague about their plans, and Medvedev even suggested in passing earlier this year that a third person could run with the ruling tandem's backing.

"The state-of-the-nation address is not a very comfortable format for Medvedev," said Alexander Morozov, an analyst with the Center for Media Studies, a Moscow think tank. He said the president seems more at ease when he deals with Internet users than bureaucrats.

Medvedev had developed a whole array of other, less formal, channels to convey his ideas to the country's thinking class, the analyst said.

Earlier this month, Medvedev opened a second, personal Twitter account, which has featured emoticons and occasional replies to other users of the microblogging service. The Kremlin has continued to operate his first account as a feed of formal statements and information.

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