

Without Any Narrative, Medvedev Is in Trouble

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Dmitry Medvedev's presidency from the beginning has been lacking a broad and persuasive political narrative. Medvedev should have tied together all the elements of his reformist agenda into a coherent vision of where he wants to take the country and what he asks the Russian people to do for it. But he has failed to turn "modernization" into such a narrative, casting it instead as an elitist sideshow of Skolkovo while the public is at a loss to figure out whether it had a stake in the president's agenda.

Medvedev accidentally may have discovered the narrative of freedom in his speech at a recent international conference in St. Petersburg that marked the 150th anniversary of the abolition of serfdom in Russia by Tsar Alexander II. There for the first time in three years he provided a clear rationale behind his presidency — enhancing freedom in Russia. "The aim of modernization and progress has always been to enhance freedom in society. ... Freedom cannot be postponed until later and we must not be afraid that a free individual may make an inadequate use of a personal freedom," Medvedev declared.

This may sound like the right vision, but the top-down approach is wrong and Medvedev casting himself as a “liberating tsar” is pathetically grotesque. By wrapping himself up in the mantle of the reformist emperor, Medvedev comes across as arrogantly condescending to the Russian people — another enlightened ruler who generously grants freedom to his oppressed subjects. And he wants that to resonate with the generation of Twitter, Facebook and Google Earth? Medvedev completely ignores the progress Russia has made in its post-Soviet years (we won our freedom 20 years ago, remember?), and he misses the indelible causality between economic prosperity and freedom.

This brings about the sad specter of another “liberal tsar” — Boris Yeltsin, who also sought to “impose freedom” on Russia at the expense of prosperity, with disastrous side effects.

Medvedev is, thus, pandering to an elitist minority who are obsessed with fetish rituals of “liberal freedom” while professing blissful “insouciant” for insuring income growth that is essential for people to enjoy and exercise their liberties. It is a suicidal formula for Medvedev’s re-election.

An incongruous speech with an out-of-tune message from a hapless president. Go figure.

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