

Memo to Kremlin Aides: Medvedev Needs Putin

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March 27, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

With Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev publicly sparring over the UN resolution on Libya and the Russian elites agonizing over an emerging rift in the ruling tandem, an ominous question has begun to cloud Russia's political scene: Is the split in the tandem manageable or will it tear the country apart like in 1991? We don't really know.

Just a short while ago it seemed that keeping the tandem intact for another six years would be a no-brainer. After all, it looked like the least costly way of keeping Russia on a course of economic and social modernization, gradually expanding the space for democracy while keeping a tight lid on the destructive forces of Russian nature. Transferring power from Medvedev to another member of Putin's team in 2018 looked like the optimal plan.

Of course, success depended on both members of the tandem behaving rationally with an adequate appreciation of their individual limits. The effectiveness of the tandem relied on both leaders' commitment to work together for a common good, not competing against,

much less undermining, each other.

This commitment seems to be unraveling before our eyes. Both leaders share the blame.

Putin has engaged in needless provocations since his “magical mystery tour” in the Russian Far East last summer, red-flagging the limits on Medvedev’s power and testing his readiness to push back. His criticism of Medvedev’s decision to “let the UN resolution on Libya pass” was inappropriate, undermining Russia’s position abroad (although Putin was probably right on substance). Were Medvedev to let Putin’s statement stand, he would have immediately become a lame duck at home and abroad.

Medvedev, for his part, has allowed a shamelessly self-promoting clique of “advisers” to cast him and his potential second term as a repudiation of Putin and his system of government. Medvedev is ill-served by the ridiculous writings of the Institute for Contemporary Development, the think tank that he chairs and that keeps releasing unsolicited reports with the single message to fire Putin and bring Russia back to the merry 1990s.

Medvedev has no future opposing Putin. Those who prod Medvedev to dismantle Putin’s system are basically inviting Putin back to the Kremlin. He cannot allow a replay of the Gorbachev-Yeltsin tug of war that destroyed the country. Splitting the tandem will end Medvedev’s presidency before it has a chance to succeed. He needs to tell that to his “advisers.”

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