

# Putin's Shadow and Shoelaces

April 05, 2011

**The**  **Moscow Times**

There was a great joke that was popular after Dmitry Medvedev became president in 2008:

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin gave Medvedev a car without a steering wheel. “But where is the steering wheel?” asks Medvedev.

“Don’t worry,” answers Putin. “I’ll be doing the driving.”

On April Fools’ Day, Putin played this joke out in reality. He drove a Yo-Mobile, the new hybrid automobile, to Medvedev’s residence. Posing for television crews from every national channel, Putin picked up Medvedev and drove for a while with the president in the passenger’s seat.

Medvedev’s press secretary Natalya Timakova didn’t particularly like the way the president was presented in the video and called all the channels’ general directors. She instructed them to edit the video to show only Putin in the car driving without images of Medvedev sitting passively and smiling fawningly close by.

In fact, this story is a perfect illustration of the nature of the “struggle” between Putin and

Medvedev — a conflict that exists only in the fantasy world of political scientists. I have a question to all those starry-eyed political analysts who write about a rivalry within the tandem and the beginning of an election campaign contest between the two leaders.

Interesting question: Who are the voters? Answer: In reality, there is really only one voter — Putin. He will decide between himself and Medvedev who will run for president in 2012. It is not difficult to predict whom he will choose.

I have a second question: What has Medvedev actually accomplished during his three years in office? The most he can do as president is make a lot of promises. Last week, he promised that ministers would resign from the boards of directors of large state corporations, and immediately everyone began discussing his brave, liberal approach to chip away at Putin's elite and his vertical power structure. But let's compare this "brave" decision to similar attempts in the past three years. The truth of the matter is that Medvedev hasn't made a single significant change as president.

Has Medvedev fulfilled even one of his promises? He promised to solve the case of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. He promised to get to the bottom of the scandal involving LUKoil vice president Anatoly Barkov, who was speeding in a car that killed two women. Neither Barkov nor his driver has been charged with a crime. Medvedev promised to prosecute the people responsible for the vicious beating of journalist Oleg Kashin. But the main suspects in the case — Khimki Mayor Vladimir Strelchenko and Federal Agency for Youth Affairs head Vasily Yakemenko — have not been charged or even dismissed from their jobs.

Medvedev promises to fight corruption and defend freedom so zealously that he seems more like an opposition leader than Figure No. 2 in the very political machine that is chiefly responsible for that corruption and lack of freedom.

Yes, Putin and Medvedev are sometimes at odds. But as political commentator and writer Dmitry Bykov so aptly put it, this disagreement is really between a man and his shadow. Or, put another way, it is between a man and his shoelaces. The shoelaces feel offended that they are always so low to the ground and so meaningless to the man, and the man dislikes that his shoelaces are so bold as to even think that they are anything more than paltry pieces of string.

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/04/05/putins-shadow-and-shoelaces-a6124>