

Medvedev Defends Plan for Putin Return

September 29, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

Russian voters will ultimately decide who leads the country, President Dmitry Medvedev said in comments broadcast on Friday, defending a plan for a job swap designed to put Prime Minister Vladimir Putin back in the Kremlin next year.

Medvedev's remarks appeared intended to placate many Russians who feel their voices count for little in a political system dominated by Putin and his ruling United Russia party for more than a decade.

"The choice is made by the people, and these are not empty words — that's absolutely the way it is," Medvedev said in an interview with Russia's three leading television channels.

"Any political figure can fail in an election, as can his political force. ... Nobody is insured against anything," Medvedev said. "What predetermination?"

Last weekend he and Putin revealed their plan to switch roles, with Putin running for a six-year term as president in a March 2012 vote and Medvedev taking his place as prime minister.

The announcement came after years of mixed signals about which of them would run. Putin

was president from 2000–2008 and his loyal protégé was steered into the Kremlin when Putin faced a bar on a third straight term.

Both leaders said they had agreed on the plan years ago.

"Only people, only our citizens can place the final accents by voting for a given person or political force or rejecting it." Medvedev said. "That is democracy." Medvedev's comments were released hours before the full interview.

The presidential vote follows three months after a Dec. 4 parliamentary election in which United Russia hopes to maintain its constitutional two-thirds majority in the 450-seat State Duma, the lower house.

A July survey by independent pollster Levada found that a majority of Russians believed the Duma election would be an "imitation" contest and the distribution of seats determined by the authorities.

While opinion polls show Putin's public approval ratings hovering around a six-year low, they are still at levels that most Western politicians would envy.

His popularity and sway over state media and political levers nationwide mean he is virtually assured of election. The two-term limit means he could potentially serve until 2024.

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