

Putin Joins Elite Club of Presidents-for-Life-istan

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The most striking thing about the ruling tandem's succession decision is not that they had settled on this arrangement four years ago and have been merely faking it ever since, but the incredibly arrogant way that it has been presented to the Russian public.

The Kremlin has bungled the rollout of this history-changing decision in a way that would have generated understanding and public support, if not jubilation, for its opponents.

No viable rationale for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin was put forward, other than that he is slightly more popular than Medvedev.

There are signs that the tandem's decision did not go down well, encountering indifference and resignation, but also ridicule and even resistance. It has been laughed at in the media and torn apart in the Russian blogosphere. It has unleashed a wave of pessimism among the educated and well-off urban middle class. It clearly failed to generate much enthusiasm, even

among Putin's loyalists.

Yet there were other major public communication blunders. Medvedev's rushed interview with the general directors of the three top television networks failed to provide convincing arguments in favor of his stepping down, while emotionally he came across as shrill and bitter over the indignity he has just suffered. Medvedev sounded defensive and politically tone-deaf, arguing lamely that the 2012 election results are not preordained.

With most Russians feeling uneasy at the prospect of their country turning into another "President-for-Life-istan," Putin took the time to describe in Izvestia an appealing future for the country in a "Eurasian Union" with such "for-lifers" as Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon.

Then, at the Russia Calling investment forum last week, Putin explained the succession decision by the need to avoid disruptive change and ensure political stability, while hinting that there were those who pushed for too much change during Medvedev's presidency. This amounted to a stunning admission of failure to build a stable political system during all the years of Putin's rule.

And on Saturday, presidential aide Arkady Dvorkovich hinted that Medvedev may return as president in 2024 to "finish his reforms." This statement made a bad situation look even more pathetic and grotesque.

Fortunately for the tandem, it is blessed with a country that does not really feel it is owed an explanation.

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