

Kudrin Says Job Swap Not Decided in 2007

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Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, who has offered to mediate talks between the Kremlin and the opposition, said he did not believe that Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev agreed four years ago to switch jobs in 2012.

Kudrin, speaking in a far-ranging interview on Channel One state television late Monday, said President Medvedev had repeatedly indicated in words and actions that he would like to run for a second presidential term.

"I saw a certain interest on Medvedev's part to remain as president. He emphasized this many times," Kudrin said.

"I think that this affected his work, decisions and actions. It was my understanding that the decision [whether Medvedev would run] was likely to be made a bit later," he said.

Prime Minister Putin and Medvedev announced that they intended to swap jobs at a United Russia convention in September, with Putin running in the March 4 election and Medvedev heading the Cabinet if he won. Medvedev said the two had discussed the "deeply thought-out decision ... back when we first formed a friendly alliance" in 2007 — leading to public speculation that the job swap had been in the cards for four years.

Kudrin said the fact that the decision was made without any public discussion was unlikely to have been "the last straw" that caused last month's large protest rallies.

In a speech during a Dec. 24 rally against alleged fraud in the State Duma elections, Kudrin called for dialogue between the Kremlin and the opposition and said he was ready to mediate the talks.

He said in the televised interview that he had approached Putin and other government officials four times to push for the dialogue and that the government has only started responding to protesters' demands in the last couple of weeks.

The rallies appear to have accelerated the reform of the country's political system, prompting Medvedev to draft bills easing the registration of new political parties and the reintroduction of gubernatorial elections.

"I think that this is a good and serious step forward," Kudrin said.

He also said Medvedev should call for an early Duma vote as part of the reforms, thereby "softly distancing" himself from a direct acknowledgement that the elections were flawed.

Another indication of change, Kudrin said, is the recent appointment of Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's former first deputy chief of staff, to the Cabinet, where he will oversee modernization.

The appointment, widely considered a response to the anti-government protests, is a "milestone event" that marks the beginning of a new epoch in the country's political life, Kudrin said.

Recent meetings by Putin and Medvedev with the editors of the country's independent media are also "shy, indirect elements of the dialogue," Kudrin said.

"I welcome the fact that it is starting without my participation," he said.

Kudrin, who was ousted as finance minister after criticizing Medvedev around the time of the job-swap announcement, said he had declined offers by Medvedev and Putin to head the Central Bank.

"I see other tasks for myself," he said, adding that he liked working "beyond the framework of the executive branch of power."

While describing himself as a democrat and right-centrist, Kudrin declined to head the Right Cause party — a proposal that Kudrin said he received from Medvedev last year — saying it was an "artificial project" created by the Kremlin.

But he said former party leader Mikhail Prokhorov might be independent of the Kremlin. "Perhaps," he said. "I'm judging by what he said" in an interview with Channel One in June.

Meanwhile, Kudrin rejected the idea that he was a Kremlin stooge and Putin's secret weapon in the opposition camp.

"Those who know me know that I'm an independent and obstinate person and like to tell the truth," he said.

He said he hadn't decided whether to vote in the presidential election.

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