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**At Presidency’s 11th Hour, Medvedev Proposes Systemic Change**

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MOSCOW — It finally happened: President [Dmitri A. Medvedev](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/dmitri_a_medvedev/index.html?inline=nyt-per), the man who was supposed to embody the aspirations of young middle-class Russians, has outlined a concrete and substantive agenda for political change. In his last state of the nation speech before leaving office, Mr. Medvedev recommended returning to the direct election of governors, removing officials’ wives and children from the leadership of lucrative corporations, and creating a public television station protected from the Kremlin’s manipulation, among other changes.

If carried out, the proposals would be a step toward dismantling the highly centralized government built over 10 years by his mentor, [Vladimir V. Putin](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/p/vladimir_v_putin/index.html?inline=nyt-per).

It is a strange twist that these ideas are being embraced only now, when the Kremlin is under pressure from an upstart protest movement, which has planned another huge demonstration on Saturday. Mr. Medvedev’s proposals come at the tail end of his presidency, long after the capital’s liberals had swallowed their disappointment and given up on the notion that Mr. Putin’s system would be altered.

“If these reforms had been initiated three years ago, this would be a completely different situation,” said the television host Vladimir V. Pozner, who said he had been lobbying for the creation of a public television station for seven years. “It would not be a dangerous situation. But now, people realize these guys are running scared, and they’re talking about this because they’re afraid.”

The Kremlin was clearly on guard against the notion that Mr. Medvedev’s proposals were concessions to [the protesters who gathered on Dec. 10](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/world/europe/thousands-protest-in-moscow-russia-in-defiance-of-putin.html) at Bolotnaya Square. A little more than an hour after Mr. Medvedev finished speaking, Sergei Naryshkin, newly appointed as speaker of the lower house of Parliament, specifically addressed this question.

“Some people are saying these proposals emerged under pressure of Bolotnaya, but this is not so,” said Mr. Naryshkin, who until recently was Mr. Medvedev’s chief of staff. “I can say that these ideas were being prepared back in the summer and were actively discussed at the level of the president and the prime minister.”

The changes Mr. Medvedev outlined on Thursday have been sought for many years by the capital’s liberal establishment. They would roll back steps Mr. Putin took a decade ago, when he began gutting the institutions that served as a counterweight to the presidency.

He put the country’s three influential television networks under state control, in two cases by driving their billionaire owners out of the country and opening criminal cases against them. He strengthened his control over [Russia](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/russiaandtheformersovietunion/index.html?inline=nyt-geo)’s vast territory by eliminating the election of governors in favor of direct appointments, ensuring the loyalty of regional kingpins. He raised the threshold for political parties to get into Parliament, guaranteeing a small and docile spectrum of public politicians.

Mr. Medvedev said his proposals were inspired by popular discontent with the political system. “I’d like to say that I hear all those who are speaking about the necessity of change,” Mr. Medvedev said. “I understand them. All active citizens must be given every legal opportunity to participate in political life.”

He did not, however, address recent [accusations of fraud in the December parliamentary elections](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/06/world/europe/russian-parliamentary-elections-criticized-by-west.html), which have built rapidly into a challenge to the legitimacy of the entire government. And he reiterated Mr. Putin’s suggestion that the protests were being instigated by enemies of Russia, both foreign and domestic.

“The right of people to express themselves through all legal avenues is guaranteed,” Mr. Medvedev said. “But attempts to manipulate citizens of Russia, to deceive them, to inflame social tensions is unacceptable. We will not allow provocateurs and extremists to drag society into its adventures. And we will not permit interference in our affairs by outside forces.”

Even if they are put in place, the changes come too late to apply to the two momentous election cycles — December’s parliamentary elections and March’s presidential contest — that determine the makeup of the government for the next five years. Three veteran opposition leaders posted their own demands on the Web site of the Ekho Moskvy radio station, including delaying the presidential elections until May and allowing a large spectrum of opposition candidates to take part.

Others questioned whether Mr. Medvedev had the clout to ensure that his proposals would not be shelved or diluted. His presidency has been long on liberal proclamations and short on concrete change.

His promise to bring back the direct election of governors comes a few days after Mr. Putin outlined a watered-down version of the same step, in which nominees would face a popular vote only after receiving the president’s approval.

Though Mr. Medvedev probably hopes to be remembered as a reformer, he has been guided throughout by his loyalty to Mr. Putin and a “character that does not permit bold steps,” said Dmitri V. Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Mr. Trenin called Thursday’s speech “too little, too late.”

“He doesn’t have the personal capacity to follow through,” Mr. Trenin said. “In that sense, people would say he is a tragic figure; other people would say he is a pitiful figure. I think he realizes he might have missed his chance as president.”

The proposals provoked nervousness within United Russia, the governing party of Mr. Putin, for which public support has dropped sharply in recent months.

Andrei Vorobyov, vice speaker of the lower house of Parliament, said Mr. Medvedev’s plan to streamline the introduction of new political parties would risk the hasty creation of parties by oligarchs to seize power. He suggested that new parties be required to “earn their reputation,” perhaps by barring them from elections unless they had existed for three years.

Mr. Pozner, the television host, said even government critics should acknowledge that the proposals would be positive.

He recalled a private meeting seven years ago during which he argued with Mr. Putin for the creation of a public television station like the British Broadcasting Corporation. He said Mr. Putin doubted that a government-financed station could maintain editorial independence.

“He said, ‘Well, you’re a very nice man, but you’re very naïve,’ and that was the end of it,” Mr. Pozner said. He said the idea had never even been raised before the parliamentary assembly until Thursday, and reflected the state of mind of leaders who were, above all, pragmatists.

“The situation has changed very rapidly — I would even say radically — over a very short period of time, I would say beginning on Sept. 24,” when [Mr. Putin revealed plans to regain the presidency](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/world/europe/medvedev-says-putin-will-seek-russian-presidency-in-2012.html), Mr. Pozner said. “I think these proposals reflect the changes that, in their minds, are necessary for them to stay in power.”