

Modernisation and a new political game in Russia?

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President Medvedev continually affirms that he has no intention of standing in an election against the current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during the next presidential elections, which are scheduled for December 2012.¹ When the current president took office in 2008, it was indeed widely expected that former President Putin would take back the reins by 2012, at the latest. He could consequently stay in office until 2024, if he wins the second election too. The change in the constitution in December 2008 to extend the presidential term to six years was widely seen as a strengthening of the future president; at the time expected to be Putin. Against all expectations, however, it is Medvedev who is increasingly distinguishing himself from his former mentor by proposing an independent political project for the country. His political project, having at its heart the ‘modernisation’ of Russia, might lead to a political competition between the two leaders for popular support in the near future.

Whilst Vladimir Putin has never ruled out running for president in 2012, Medvedev has been more reticent on that subject. Concerning a possible competition between the two leaders of the country, Putin stated in May 2009 that: “We will reach an agreement because we are of the same blood and of the same political outlook.” As for Medvedev, ever since he came to power he has excluded a power struggle in Russia, in a similar consensual spirit, because: “It would be bad for the country.” However, all the recent talk about modernisation that followed the president’s article “Go Russia”² from September 2009 as well as the 2009 State of the Nation³ address could lead to a shift in the political balance within the country and the popularity of the two respective leaders. Whether or not this was intended by President Medvedev might be left to speculation – but its echo amongst Russians is in any case remarkable.

Since 2008, the Medvedev/Putin ‘tandem’ has ruled the country jointly, with no major divisions appearing, at least on the surface. Nevertheless, the presidential rhetoric of modernisation has increasingly demarcated Medvedev from Putin. The modernisation agenda according to Medvedev is diverse and includes not only the Russian economy – which admittedly figures very prominently – but goes beyond that by touching upon topics such as the military, foreign policy, society and, to some extent, even the political system and the environment. Whereas Putin continues to understand modernisation mainly in technological and industrial terms, Medvedev does not cease to highlight the need for Russia to develop a modern, responsible and

¹ See the Moscow Times at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/print/news/article/medvedev-undecided-about-2nd-term/411617.html>

² See the Kremlin archives at: http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2009/09/10/1534_type104017_221527.shtml (accessed 3 August 2010).

³ See the Kremlin archives at: http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2009/11/12/1321_type70029type82912_222702.shtml (accessed 3 August 2010).

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educated society, capable of dealing with the needs of a democratic system and the economic challenges of the 21 century.

The two documents that set the start for the current modernisation debate within Russia are remarkable for the plain-speaking style in which they pinpoint the problems in Russia today. Medvedev affirms, for example, that the re-emergence of a strong state has been accompanied by an increase in the level of corruption, or underlines the importance of the development of a 'civil society' and the growth of 'civic consciousness' – both of which are only possible in a political system that leaves a certain degree of freedom to and protection of its citizens. One may expect a modern Russian society to be pluralistic, complex and diverse – allowing the peaceful expression of political differences. Medvedev acknowledges the impossibility of trying to command such a society and asserts the “need to cooperate with it”. Demographic problems and the state of the health-care system are mentioned as other priorities on the presidential agenda.

Modernisation of foreign policy and extended international cooperation, in particular with the EU, also takes a prominent place in the presidential rhetoric. In a speech on 12 July 2010 at a meeting with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives in international organisations⁴ Medvedev affirmed that:

We must be more effective in our use of foreign policy instruments specifically for pursuing domestic objectives, for modernising our country, its economy, its social life and, to some degree, its political system, in order to resolve various challenges facing our society.

In this same speech the president also referred explicitly to the challenge for Russia to:

strengthen democratic and civil society institutions in Russia ...overall, it is in the interests of Russian democracy for as many nations as possible to follow democratic standards in their domestic policy.

Medvedev's approach to modernisation is a holistic one; putting the accent on bottom-up initiatives rather than orchestrating large-scale projects from above. The launch of the biggest privatisation programme since the 90s illustrates this, despite criticisms expressed on that subject of Moscow's plans to retain 51% of most of the companies. Medvedev's political strategy differs significantly from that seen under Putin's presidency. The former president does not sing from the same modernisation hymn-sheet, in particular when it comes to its non-economic dimension.

The modernisation agenda indeed seems a necessity if Russia wants to avoid turning ever more deeply into a raw material supplier. In fact, the modernisation agenda also seems to appeal to Russians themselves. The August 2010 poll of the independent Levada Centre confirmed the growing popularity of President Medvedev. Furthermore, Russian citizens have the impression that the president benefits from an increasing freedom to implement his own policies, escaping the control of Prime Minister Putin.⁵

On the other hand, the extent to which President Medvedev is isolated with his modernisation agenda amongst the Russia elite remains unclear. Prime Minister Putin is somewhat reserved on the topic, so it might be concluded that Medvedev is fighting a lonesome battle, given the absence of a consensus among the elite of the country. The strengthening of the grassroots level, which is intended by the president and an aim of bilateral relations with some EU member states (such as Germany or Finland), as well as the EU as such might be a subtle way of avoiding conflict at the highest political level, and yet make the modernisation agenda become reality. If a political agreement is impossible the only way for Medvedev to push his project forward is by getting backing from initiatives that come from the Russians themselves.

The next presidential elections might see the emergence of genuine political competition if Medvedev (survives and) succeeds in persuading Russian citizens that he offers a real alternative in the management of the country. When Russians are asked about whom they actually prefer, given the choice between Medvedev and Putin, the two candidates score fairly similarly, as the Levada Centre polls confirm. If President Medvedev manages to push forward the ambitious modernisation agenda against all odds, and if Russian citizens do perceive the benefits of the wind of change blowing in their country, popular opinion could lead to a political constellation that was unexpected only a few months ago. It cannot be excluded that 2012 will be a decisive year for the political culture of Russia. If the competitors stick to the rules of the competition, the next round of the political game should prove very interesting, not just for Russia but for the rest of the world.

⁴ See: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/610> (accessed 3 August 2010).

⁵ See Levada Centre article: <http://www.levada.ru/press/2010080201.html> (accessed 3 August 2010).