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REP Roundtable Summary

The Tandem: Where Next?

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When Dmitry Medvedev came to power, of the 75 key officials he 'appointed', 73 were Putin's people, and two were Medvedev's own supporters. After three and a half years, there have been no changes. So far, all key posts have been taken by Putin's loyalists. Medvedev has made important changes, such as amending the Russian constitution, extending the presidential term to six years, and the parliamentary term to five. Despite an absolutist regime, there are two centres of power – the Kremlin and the White House. It would have been logical if the president had taken some powers away from the Prime Minister. The tandem is a temporary phenomenon that has nothing to do with the state structure; it occurred due to the personalities of people in power.

Medvedev has conducted many experiments and he has made important changes in the regional elite. 38% of the regional elites have been replaced. Many of Medvedev's reforms are not popular with bureaucrats. The retirement age of civil servants has been reduced to 60, and a fight against corruption was announced. These steps have dented the positions of a number of civil servants.

There have been changes in the representation of power agencies in the cabinet. Comparing the government in January 2008 and today, the number of *siloviki* has been reduced from 45% to 22%. It is worth noting that a higher percentage of those, 36.6%, have remained in Medvedev's presidential circle. Medvedev has not been free to apply reforms as he sees fit. Reforms were based on a tacit agreement with Putin. Putin's jurisdiction applies to the economy, the key power ministries, and the United Russia Party, which has controlled the reshuffles in the federal centre and the regions.

The tandem is probably in its last year of existence. It will gradually fizzle out. Split power is not typical for the Russian political system and carries a number of risks. It is all well and good when two chums run the country jointly, but what if they fall out? The Prime Minister could lose power and influence overnight. In Russia, politics dictates the outcome of events and defines who has access to resources. Does the existence of a power tandem mean that Putin is ready to let go of power, or is Medvedev just filling Putin's shoes until he can be re-elected? If Medvedev remains president for the next six years, it will indicate that Putin is letting go of real power. If Putin leaves his return to 2018, he will be 66 and will not have enough time to achieve his goals.

Fragmentation of the elite has already begun and it will continue. Even though Medvedev is sometimes called a "general without an army", people will start following his banner soon. There has been talk of creating a pro-Medvedev

party. Since Medvedev is viewed as more liberal than Putin, it would be to the right of United Russia. It seems that both Putin and Medvedev are vying for the presidency, but they cannot both put their names forward as they are from the same party and the party can only put forward one candidate. If Russia had traditional democratic mechanisms, such as primaries, this issue would be resolved fairly. However, the decision will be taken behind closed doors. It is possible to predict that Putin will come back, but it will be a new Putin. The old Putin cannot come back as it would lead to a number of risks. We are witnessing Arab revolutions; many in Russia would not like to see incumbents stay at the helm of power. Therefore, we will probably witness the rebranding of Putin as an ideologist of “tough liberalism”.

Questions and Discussion

It was noted that the terms “reformist” and “liberal” are often used interchangeably, but while liberals are interested in widening the sphere of liberties and choices, reformists might be interested in constraining them. For the purposes of this debate, liberalisation in the economy is taken to mean development of a free market and private property. In politics, liberalisation denotes separation of power, containment of absolute power and granting of equal rights.

A participant noted that in terms of fighting corruption, a lot was said but little has been done in Russia. The speaker replied that 15,000 cases have been opened against corrupt officials. There are two types of corruption in Russia: bribes and so-called ‘latent corruption’ – legal sources of enrichment for civil servants. For example, an appointment of a civil servant to a board of directors of a large company. Recently, there has been an official backlash against latent corruption.

Medvedev’s recent statements have pointed in the opposite direction; he said Sechin should leave the board of Rosneft, not his official position. In 2003, Putin started appointing his supporters to important positions in key state companies. They were not given the most visible, headlining jobs, but became second or third in the line of command. The pattern was for these people to be appointed to a civil service role first and to company boards afterwards. Sechin is a high-profile figure, but there are other similar cases. People like Gleb Nikitin or Lyubov Pridanova are not widely known, yet they both sit on over twenty boards of directors. They worked with Putin in city hall in St Petersburg. Over the past couple of years, a number of these people have retreated from the limelight to a more comfortable position. Medvedev’s

statements referred to the highly visible cases, but even if people like Khristenko resign, many will stay in the shadows.

How far ahead is the Russian leadership planning? Every election campaign is a crisis for the Russian regime, because it does not have a well oiled mechanism for the transition of power.

There are two ways forward: either Putin and Medvedev will alternate in power, or someone else will take over the presidency. But this someone will part of their team. This is not a royal dynasty, but an oligarchy moving step by step along its chosen path. To let things develop at their own pace would be dangerous for the leadership in terms of personal security.

A participant asked whether granting freedom from prosecution would help induce Putin and Medvedev to let go of power. The speaker replied that the question boils down to granting protection to people who step down. If Putin returns to the Kremlin, it is likely that Medvedev will become Prime Minister. Until Russia becomes a democracy, losing power will remain equivalent to losing freedom and sometimes endangering one's life.

The next question was about the chances of civil society getting a foothold in the political machine in the next election. The speaker replied that civil society in Russia is very active. But any attempts to fast forward the democratisation process would lead to destabilisation, based on the vastness of the country. The leadership sees democratic governance as a way forward for Russia, but it also sees the pitfalls. Russian leaders believe that if there was a free election tomorrow, a great portion of the electorate would vote for the communists and an autocratic regime would emerge in Russia overnight.

Were the non-democratic nationalists a significant opposition force? The speaker replied that nationalists were a substantial threat. That is why Russia does not have a nationalist party. There was an attempt to create one in 2003. The party was called Rodina, headed by Dmitry Rogozin. It was very successful, which is why everything was done to shut it down.

A participant asked about the possibility of the emergence of a pro-Medvedev political party. What allies would Medvedev have? United Russia was originally conceived as a centrist party. It currently lacks manageable opposition on the right. If a pro-Medvedev party materialises, it will probably be based on the *Pravoye Delo* party headed by Georgiy Bovt. Some believe that the party would be supported by Anatoly Chubais, who is close to Alexander Voloshin and Natalia Timokova. There is a rumour that Igor Shuvalov, a very influential figure, might head the party.

Could a third presidential candidate emerge in 2012? The speaker replied that there is not enough time for a third candidate to emerge. Medvedev had been groomed as a successor for a long time; he was appointed first Vice President in 2005. The only possible candidate from among top civil servants is Sergei Sobyenin. However, he was recently quoted as saying that he needed time, so the leadership may be preparing him for the 2018 election, not the upcoming one.

A member of the audience asked whether the power ministries will let Putin rebrand himself as a “tough liberal”. Will he be claiming Medvedev’s support? It is wrong to think that Putin takes his strength from the power ministries. At the beginning, his team consisted of both *siloviki* and liberals. The liberals are a key part in the government. The turn to liberalism under Medvedev was likely Putin’s initiative. It is important to note that Putin had the freedom to choose his successor, and he chose the most liberal candidate.

Given that liberal candidates might gain the support of only about 20%-30% of the electorate, what is the rationale behind Putin’s rebranding? The Kremlin authorities think they know better than the Russian people which way Russia should go. They are in favour of managed and manageable democracy, i.e. elections should not be too fair. The authorities believe that people do not understand that Russia needs liberal modernisation and they want to make them understand this. There is a strategy of slow but inevitable development along the lines of democratisation. Modernisation is not just a buzzword for Medvedev, it is a *sine qua non*.

A participant commented that Putin was an economic liberal when he became president, but then became a statist. The speaker responded that Putin has been slowly but consistently moving towards liberalism. His plan is to privatise strategic enterprises and improve the investment environment in Russia. He may want to move in way similar to the current situation in France. He may even adopt a more bellicose foreign policy in order to improve his image at home.

It was noted that oligarchy is one of the least stable forms of government. There is some logic behind the rebranding, but would Putin be in a position to truly liberalise the state? A number of his supporters would lose power and wealth. The speaker replied that it would be possible for Putin’s people to convert their political capital into economic benefits. If they chose to resign now, they would be free to keep their assets and carry on.

As seen in the Middle East and North Africa, popular discontent can remain below the surface for a long time, and then burst out. Is the Russian

leadership worried about the discontent among the Russian population, for example, the online initiatives against corruption? The speaker replied that everyone in Russia feels the pressure building. There is a great chasm between the rosy picture fed to the mainstream media and the real story bubbling on the internet. The real danger for the current leadership does not come from the opposition of old, represented by Boris Nemtsov. Their biggest worry at the moment is a blogger called Alexei Navalny, who publishes real life cases of corruption and abuse of power. Navalny won the 'virtual presidential election' held in December 2010. For some time, the authorities pretended he did not exist, but he has become too popular to be ignored. A special unit is investigating Navalny at the moment, trying to find who is financing him. The authorities would have people believe he is funded by Israel or the US. Many of Navalny's posts are directed against Putin; some journalists came up with a theory that he is funded by Medvedev, to undermine Putin. Navalny's blog is not just vicious; it is a call for action. If the authorities do not respond, they will discredit themselves. United Russia should take appropriate measures against its members that have been exposed. However, it was noted that the Putin-Medvedev tandem's approval ratings remain high. As of 5 April 2011, their rating had been dropping steadily for eight weeks. There is a dip in March in every year, but it never lasts more than four weeks. Nevertheless, the drop is very small, from 73% to 69%.