



# BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)  
Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz ● Artur Gradziuk ● Piotr Kościński  
Roderick Parkes ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Beata Wojna

## Russia: Who after Medvedev?

Piotr Kościński

*According to Russian media, before the end of the year Dmitry Medvedev will resign and a new prime minister will be appointed. If this happens, the reason would be President Vladimir Putin's desire to improve his support, which has dropped of late. The choice of new prime minister would indicate whether Putin intends to continue current policy, internally and externally, or plans to make some changes. A prime minister associated with the military and intelligence services could lead to a straining of relations with its neighbours, including the European Union, which may require an adequate EU response.*

**The Political Situation.** Public support for Putin has declined, according to a Levada Center survey in which 55% of respondents indicated they had a favourable opinion of him compared to April 2008's record-breaking 80%. Only 35% believe that he is an "ideal head of state" (46% disagree with that statement). As many as 55% of Russians want the president who will be elected in 2018 to be someone completely different, and only 22% would choose Putin for another term. Support for the ruling United Russia party has also drastically declined—in May only 24% of respondents said they would vote for it.

The main reason for this decline in confidence in Putin is the worsening economic situation. Part of society also agrees that Putin, who is now president for the third time, primarily represents the interests of the bureaucracy and oligarchs. To a lesser extent, these attitudes are affected by the actions of the anti-Putin opposition, which has little support in the society. However, the president has to deal continuously with actions by his political opponents, which is not beneficial to his image.

In order to improve his position, Putin is trying to show that his plans and actions have been appropriate but suffered from a lack of implementation throughout the government. The obvious consequence of this may be the removal from office of the most inefficient ministers, including the prime minister, who organises the work of the government.

According to the Russian constitution, the president determines the main directions in both domestic and foreign policy. Therefore, the successor to Medvedev should not expect to work independently, regardless of who it will be. A government reshuffle does not imply systemic changes and will not improve the efficiency of the Russian government.

**The Replacement Government.** Medvedev would be dismissed due to the slowdown in economic growth, and most of all for failing to meet Putin's pre-election promises. These consisted of many different proposals, for example, the creation of a website for the collection of signatures of citizens on various social initiatives (if the idea is endorsed by 100,000 people, the government would have to at least consider the request, similar to the famous U.S. White House website); reduce waiting times in queues at government offices to 15 minutes (currently about one hour); and specific economic and social issues, such as free land for large families or speeding up construction of roads and railways in the Far East.

Putin has for long time increasingly sharply criticised the government. He stressed that the efforts of public officials to ensure better living conditions for Russians has not produced results. He also announced that those who act insufficiently, should leave. On 7 May, he urgently asked ministers to develop concrete plans for the achievement of his objectives, set during the presidential inauguration in May 2012, noting that he had not yet received them. A month later, he stated that the government's plans he eventually received were poor.

Although his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, denied that Putin's criticism would lead to personnel changes, repeated presidential attacks on the government cannot end otherwise. In May, Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov resigned, and Peskov said it was associated with not fulfilling Putin's demands. Recently, particularly harsh criticism was directed against three ministers involved in the public sphere: labour minister Maxim Topilin, health minister Veronica Skvortsova; and education minister Dmitry Livanov.

**Kudrin—a Second Medvedev.** The best chance to take over as head of government is Alexei Kudrin. He was finance minister in the years 2000–2011 and during his tenure Russia repaid most of its foreign debt from the 1990s. *Euromoney* magazine declared him the “Minister of Finance of 2010,” but Medvedev dismissed him as their relations deteriorated. He is currently the dean of the faculty of free arts and sciences at St. Petersburg State University.

According to media reports, Putin has allegedly offered Kudrin different positions—as his economic adviser or even president of the Central Bank—with no effect. The former finance minister has sharply criticized the government, but never Putin. He publicly supported some of the actions of the opposition, but has recently distanced himself from them.

In the event that the head of the government would be Kudrin or someone with similar views as him, the economy would change very little. In fact, his views are not far from those presented by Medvedev—free market and liberal (even if he loudly criticized the cabinet's economic policy). Kudrin might try to carry out—at least to a limited extent—the modernisation of the country, understood primarily as economic reforms and the transformation of Russia from a country based almost exclusively on raw materials to a country with a modern economy. In the political sphere we should not expect anything new either. Perhaps Kudrin may seek to somehow calm the fight between the government and the opposition.

**The “Hawk” Sechin.** According to Russian media, another potential candidate for prime minister (though less likely) is Igor Sechin, who knows Putin from their time together in the administration of St. Petersburg and is considered the leader of the “hardliners” faction—composed of former and current employees of the secret services and military (“siloviki”). The well-known imprisoned oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who is an opponent of the Kremlin, believes that Sechin is who destroyed him and caused his imprisonment. In the years 1999–2008, Sechin was deputy head of Putin's administration, and in 2008–2012 served as deputy prime minister. He is the head of Russian oil giant Rosneft.

Recently, Sechin won another battle to maintain control over Rosneft: the state will remain the main shareholder of the company. He is now struggling with Gazprom to overcome its monopoly on profits from gas exports—and it is possible that he will succeed. It would very much strengthen his position. Although referred to as a Russian political “hawk”—a supporter of strengthening the state's role in the politics and the economy—he is also effective in international business. Rosneft works closely with British Petroleum.

Sechin could play a role in domestic politics opposite to that of Kudrin. As a “hawk,” it would be natural for him to strengthen activities against the opposition or even against a whole part of civil society. In the economy, though, no one should expect big changes. Sechin, judging from his past actions, would rather strengthen the structure of the state to maintain its main source of income from raw materials and keep the country highly centralised.

Putin may also consider others: Igor Shuvalov, who is now first deputy prime minister; Dmitry Rogozin, a deputy prime minister and former representative of Russia to NATO; or Vladimir Yakunin, the head of Russian Railways (RZD).

**Conclusions.** If a new prime minister whose views would be close to these of Medvedev is appointed, Russia's foreign policy should not change in any significant way. Kudrin would largely continue the operations of the current government and is not expected to seek to improve relations with the European Union, including Poland. But if the prime minister's job is taken by Sechin or another “hardline” politician, it could mean an increase in the importance of the army and security services in Russia, and may lead to an acceleration in armament and even to the use of arguments of force in its dialogue with neighbours, especially vulnerable ones (if this were the will of Putin).

Even though a formal change in prime minister would not change the direction of Russian foreign policy, the nomination of a specific person would reveal the likely direction of President Putin on many issues. Therefore, the increasing number of media rumours about a possible re-shaping of the Russian government have to be carefully watched.

If there are signs that Russian foreign policy might take a sharp turn, it would require a reformulation of the activities of the European Union, including Poland, to respond effectively—and above all, to develop a coherent EU policy towards Russia.

Of course, if Putin senses there needs to be a change in government to switch policies or simply for propaganda reasons, he may again swap prime ministers. Each candidate for this office is aware that his role is limited and temporary. Russia's foreign partners know that Putin's partner in government acts only as the executor of his orders, thus responsibility for his acts or omissions will in the long run be borne personally by Putin.