

Russia: Transition To A Medvedev Presidency?

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Key Points

- * Vladimir Putin dominates the Russian political system. His position is unassailable.
- * The system of “managed democracy” is becoming more authoritarian.
- * Putin is unlikely to be a third term president. He will probably step down in 2008.
- * The personnel reshuffle of November 2005 may mark the first moves in anointing a successor. The two new deputy prime ministers are both possible presidential contenders: Sergey Ivanov and Dmitry Medvedev.
- * Medvedev may now be first choice because of his background in Gazprom, as Russia’s importance as an energy supplier grows. Putin may well replace him as head of Gazprom. Gazprom is the key to controlling Russia.
- * An orange revolution is unlikely. The Putin leadership does not face the problems of the Kuchma leadership in Ukraine in 2004. The most likely opponent to the Kremlin in the 2008 election is former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov.
- * The electorate is likely to opt for the Kremlin candidate. The Kremlin is unlikely to allow itself to be defeated under any circumstances.

Putin's Domination of The Political System

Vladimir Putin dominates the political system. His position is unassailable. The Duma and Federation Council are largely docile. He enjoys the support of a large and well-organised party, Yedinaya Rossiya (which has 307 out of 450 Duma seats), and the main opposition, the communist CPRF poses no real threat. Control over regional governors has been enhanced by the 2004 decision to end their elections, and instead have them appointed by the president (then to be confirmed by the regional legislature). The merging of several regions has also enhanced the centre's control, thus significantly reversing the centrifugal tendencies of the 1990s. The oligarchs have been tamed, along with the electronic media. The signing by Putin in January 2006 of a new law regulating non-governmental and non-commercial organisations is seen by liberal critics of the leadership as an attempt by the state to tighten its control over these organisations.

Putin's domination of the political system fully embodies the super-presidentialism established by the 1993 constitution, and he faces no real threat to his position from either within or without the ruling establishment. By analogy Putin has no Gordon Brown problem; neither does he have a David Cameron problem. The system of managed democracy is likely to remain, although some consider it more appropriate to consider the system to be one of creeping authoritarianism. This would certainly be the view taken by Putin's economic adviser, Andrey Illarionov, who resigned in December 2005 in protest at what he sees as growing authoritarian tendencies in the Russian leadership. He stated:

Over the past three years we have conducted nominations at the year's end for, for example, the law of the year or the decision of the year which expanded the extent of economic freedom in the country. In the past two years these nominations effectively became vacuous. It was difficult, if not effectively impossible, to identify a decision which did not reduce, but enhanced economic freedoms, indeed political freedoms, too. Although these were not in the least always decisions made in terms of legislation, nevertheless there has been a decline in both freedom of action and freedom of expression, the freedom to debate issues of utmost importance for the country, these opportunities here have reduced and continue to decline now.

Talking about qualitative changes, one cannot of course fail to mention the qualitative change in the measure of political freedom as determined not in the opinion of some political figure, analyst or observer, but according to a methodology devised by the Freedom House organization and in use for a long time now with some 150 countries of the world or, more precisely, applied to 150 countries, to measure political freedom. They have been doing this for a third of a century now. And this year, 2005, the political freedom index for Russia, which has been falling steadily year by year recently, crossed the critical mark. From a partially free country, which it was in previous years, Russia has moved into the not free category.¹

Will Putin Be A Third Term President?

In terms of high politics, the big issue that is likely to dominate increasingly over the next two years will be whether Putin will try to stay in power for a third term, even though the constitution limits him to two consecutive terms. It would seem the possible options are:

- Alter the constitution to run for a third term (this assumes that the establishment will not allow itself to be defeated under any circumstances)

- Use some emergency (genuine or manufactured) as a pretext not to hold elections and remain in power
- Appoint a loyal successor to the premiership who will run as the establishment candidate in 2008 (this also assumes that the establishment will not allow itself to be defeated under any circumstances)
- Alter the constitution to downgrade the power of the presidency and enhance the power of the prime minister and become prime minister (this assumes, probably correctly, that the Duma will back him).

In order to avoid creating too much upheaval for the system, it is likely that Putin will opt for the third option, (although running for a third term should not be ruled out) and anoint a successor, who will contest the 2008 presidential election. It may be that his favoured successor will be appointed as prime minister a few months before the election, as Putin himself was by Yel'tsin in August 1999. It is impossible to envisage the current prime minister, Mikhail Fradkov, as Putin's desired heir. The personnel appointments made in November 2005 may mark the first moves by Putin toward choosing his successor. The president appointed two of his long-time associates as deputy prime ministers: Sergey Ivanov and Dmitry Medvedev. Either man is well placed to be promoted to the prime ministership in the run up to the next presidential election. By promoting these two men, Putin may well be trying them out in order to assess their suitability for the presidency.

Sergey Ivanov

Sergey Ivanov combines his new post of deputy prime minister with his existing post of defence minister. Sergey Ivanov is only 4 months younger than Vladimir Putin. He was born on 31 January 1953, like Putin, in Leningrad. At the beginning of the 1970s Ivanov enrolled at Leningrad University to study English and Swedish. He graduated in 1975 and a year later completed a counter-intelligence course in Minsk. He was then given a job in the Leningrad KGB, where he served in the same subunit with Vladimir Putin. Ivanov graduated from the Intelligence School near Moscow in 1982 and was sent to Helsinki. His career in the Scandinavian and UK Department of the 1st Chief Directorate of the KGB was interrupted in 1985 by the defection of Oleg Gordievskiy. Ivanov had to return to Moscow, was retrained and sent to Kenya. When in 1991 the KGB was disbanded he continued working for the SVR. He became a deputy head of the European Desk and later headed the Foreign Intelligence Service, Prognosis and Strategic Planning Department. In August 1999 he became a deputy director of the Federal Security Service and in November 1999 Secretary of the Russian Security Council. He was appointed defence minister in March 2001.²

Dmitry Medvedev

Dmitry Medvedev was born 14 September 1965 in Leningrad. Formerly Vladimir Putin's chief of staff, he is also on the Gazprom board of directors, a post he has held since 2000. Medvedev graduated from Leningrad State University in 1987 with a law degree and in 1990 got a PhD with a specialization in private law. In 1990 he worked in Leningrad Municipal Soviet of People's Deputies. Between 1991 and 1999 he worked as a docent in Saint-Petersburg State University. At the same time Medvedev worked as a legal expert for the mayor and municipal administration. In November 1999 he became one of several St. Petersburgers brought by Vladimir Putin to top government positions in Moscow. In December of the same year he was appointed deputy head of the presidential administration. Dmitry Medvedev became one of the politicians closest to Putin. During the 2000 elections he was head of the presidential election campaign

headquarters. From 2000 to 2001, Medvedev was chair of Gazprom's board of directors. He was then deputy chair from 2001 to 2002. In June 2002, Medvedev became chair of Gazprom board of directors for a second time, a post he has held since that time. In October 2003, he replaced Alexander Voloshin as head of the presidential administration.³

Other possible presidential successors are: Sergey Shoygu, the minister of emergency situations; Dmitry Kozak, the current presidential plenipotentiary representative to the Southern Federal District; Vladislav Surkov, deputy head of the presidential administration and presidential aide. However, Ivanov and Medvedev are currently seen as the most likely successors. Ivanov has been touted as a possible presidential successor since 2000, when Putin became president. His background in the power structures, given Putin's emphasis on them in his leadership, plus his Leningrad origins, have led many to argue that Putin would see him as a possible successor. However the Chelyabinsk dedovshchina scandal that surfaced in February 2006 has been extremely damaging to him.

Medvedev is, by contrast, a latecomer to the list of possible presidential contenders. It was only his November 2005 promotion to the post of deputy prime minister that placed him on the list of potential successors to Putin. Medvedev may well be a logical choice for Putin. The energy sector (particularly gas) has become an increasingly important part of the Russian economy (and foreign policy, as Russia's significance as an energy supplier to other countries grows),⁴ and has the political weight to match. It could be argued that Gazprom is the key to controlling modern Russia. Gazprom's acquisition of oil companies naturally increases its importance, and the overseas expansion of Gazprom and Lukoil naturally increases Russia's influence.⁵ As chairman of Gazprom, Medvedev is in many ways a logical choice. In addition, his background in the presidential administration gives him a deep practical knowledge of the bureaucracy, centre-regional relations, and the business sector. It is quite possible that he and Putin may do a job swap, with Putin becoming the chairman of Gazprom, and Medvedev becoming the Kremlin's presidential candidate in 2008.⁶

A Medvedev leadership would probably simply amount to a continuation of the broad policy lines pursued by Putin since 2000. The main direction of economic policy would continue, and the Kremlin leadership would continue to maintain a hegemonic position in the political system, not permitting elections to result in the removal of favoured presidential candidates from office, or to undermine the pro-Kremlin majority in the Duma. If the Putin leadership since 2000 has been dominated by a mixture of St.Petersburgers and *siloviki*, then a post-2008 Medvedev leadership is likely to be a mixture of St.Petersburgers and *siloviki*, plus key players in the energy sector. The new head of the presidential administration, Sergey Sobyenin, is the former governor of the oil rich Tyumen district. In January 2001, he was elected head of the Tyumen region, one of Russia's largest oil-producing regions. In that election, Sobyenin reportedly had the support of LUKoil and Gazprom. In comments printed in the 15 November 2005 edition of Vedomosti, sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya said that Sobyenin was considered LUKoil head Vagit Alekperov's person, but in his former capacity of speaker of Khanty-Mansiisk's regional parliament he was able to balance the interests of more than one "oil general" in the district.⁷ The energy lobby is thus likely to form an important part of the post-2008 Russian leadership.

Both Ivanov and Medvedev are very close to Putin, but it is not known how close they are to each other. There is a big age gap between them, so they cannot be regarded as being of the same generation. They are both likely to be part of the post-Putin leadership. Whether Ivanov would serve in a Medvedev presidency or vice-versa would probably depend on what position was offered. The loser could emerge as a dangerous rival to the other if he felt disaffected.

An Orange Revolution?

It is not impossible, but unlikely. The Putin leadership does not face the legitimacy crises that plagued the Kuchma leadership in Ukraine in 2004 and the Shevardnadze leadership in Georgia in 2003. Even if it did, and the Kremlin candidate was only to win the presidential election in 2008 by rigging the vote, it is difficult to imagine the combination of mass protests, foreign and NGO pressure forcing a re-run as happened in Ukraine in 2004. The current Russian leadership would have to undergo a massive downturn in popularity over the next two years, and public opinion would have to be galvanised from its current apathy on a significant scale for an orange revolution to be possible.

The former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov seems the most likely challenger to the Kremlin from the democratic camp, and the most likely leader of an orange revolution, should such a scenario occur. He says he intends to run for the presidency in 2008. In July 2005, a Yedinaya Rossiya deputy, Aleksandr Khinshteyn, claimed that Kasyanov purchased a state *dacha* for a low price. He provided evidence to the Prosecutor-General's Office which confirmed that a criminal case has been opened against Kasyanov. This may well be an attempt to hinder Kasyanov's attempts to run for the presidency. However, he has not been deterred from doing so, and became leader of the Democratic Party in December 2005, although this has resulted in a split, as some other leading democratic figures resent what they see as his taking over the leadership of the democratic camp without consulting others.

Kasyanov first became critical of the Putin leadership in 2003, when he expressed his disagreement with the decision to arrest then Yukos boss Mikhail Khodorkovskiy. He regards the Putin leadership as veering towards totalitarianism, and has criticised its restrictions of civil liberties and press freedom, the abolition of elected regional governors, and the subjection of the judiciary to the executive. He says there is no civil society, and no dialogue between society and the state. He also accuses the Putin leadership of permitting the state to play too large a role in the economy, and of hindering structural reform.⁸

Further legal moves against Kasyanov or his entourage should not be ruled out, if he remains the main challenger to the Kremlin in the run up to the 2008 presidential election. The Duma elections due in December 2007 will provide some indication of the political mood in Russia and also of the extent to which the Kremlin is determined to manage the electoral process. It is again highly likely that Yedinaya Rossiya will dominate the Duma after that election. The law on Duma elections passed in April 2005 stipulates that all 450 seats are to be elected on the basis of proportional representation. Parties must receive over 7 per cent of the vote to be represented in the Duma; this will strengthen the position of large parties such as Yedinaya Rossiya. The Kremlin's domination of the political system will thus be further enhanced.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems quite possible that Dmitry Medvedev will replace Putin as president in 2008, with the energy lobby forming a key part of the administration, as Russia becomes ever more important as an energy producer. If Medvedev does become president, then it would be a remarkable transition, given that Putin would have effectively anointed him as successor two and half years in advance of the 2008 presidential election. However it should be noted that much could go wrong for either Medvedev or Ivanov over the next two years, which would force Putin to look for another contender, or to think about staying in power himself beyond 2008.

Endnotes

- ¹ Interview, Ekho Moskvyy Radio, 29 December 2005, from BBC Monitoring Select 29 December 2005.
- ² Gordon Bennett, S.B.Ivanov, the new Russian Defence Minister, CSRC Occasional Brief 81, 30 March 2001.
- ³ See Wikipedia entry on Dmitry Medvedev http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dmitry_Medvedev
- ⁴ See the article in Alexey Krashakov, 'Russia redraws the energy map of the world,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 16-17 December 2005, which gives a detailed breakdown of Russia's energy relations with other countries.
- ⁵ Russia is now the USA's eighth biggest supplier of energy. Putin stated in February 2006 that Russia hopes, in a few years, to become the third or fourth biggest supplier of fuels to the United States. He was talking with US Secretary of the Treasury John Snow on 11 February 2006. ITAR-TASS, 11 February 2006, from BBC Monitoring Select 11 February 2006.
- ⁶ See the article by Peter Lavelle, 'UT's "Operation Successor 2008" Project: Is Dmitry Medvedev the one?' <http://www.untimely-thoughts.com/index.html?art=1996> The head of Gazprom will arguably be the second most important person in the Russian Federation.
- ⁷ Olga Kryshchanovskaya, 'Cadres: the ice moves', *Vedomosti*, 15 November 2005.
- ⁸ See his introduction to *A Blueprint for Russia*, edited by Jennifer Moll, Foreign Policy Centre, August 2005. This can be downloaded from <http://fpc.org.uk/publications/russia-blueprint>

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Jennifer Moll ed., *Blueprint for Russia*, Foreign Policy Centre:
<http://fpc.org.uk/publications/russia-blueprint>

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Liliya Shevtsova, *Russia: Running in Place* (in Russian only), Carnegie Center, Moscow: <http://www.carnegie.ru/en/pubs/briefings/73707.htm>

Dmitry Trenin, *Reading Russia Right*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:
<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17619&prog=zru>

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