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**The Russian Presidential
Succession**

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Key Points

- * It is currently impossible to say whether Dmitry Medvedev will be the de facto junior partner of Vladimir Putin or will be a fully independent president after the presidential election in March 2008.
- * Medvedev could step down after a decent interval and fresh presidential elections could take place, with Vladimir Putin as a candidate.
- * Putin may be prime minister for a short time in order to oversee a smooth leadership transition, and then step aside.
- * A fully independent Medvedev may find it difficult to manage the various competing factions in the Russian leadership.
- * The energy lobby will become an ever-increasing aspect of Russian politics, and the energy factor will become an ever more important aspect of Russian foreign policy.

The Russian Presidential Succession

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"My successor will have to negotiate with me how we divide power." – Vladimir Putin, September 2007.¹

There has been much speculation about when Vladimir Putin decided that Dmitry Medvedev was the most suitable candidate to succeed him as president. Some say that the decision was only made after the Duma elections in early December 2007, and that Putin had been undecided about the succession for many months. His own public position had not been entirely consistent. In May 2006 Putin said he would back a candidate in the March 2008 presidential election, but not force his choice upon anyone.² This was arguably contradicted by his statement of February 2007 that he would not nominate a successor.³ Strictly speaking the president cannot nominate a successor. However whoever Putin decides to back as a candidate is effectively his successor.

Interestingly, in July 2007 it was Dmitry Medvedev who stated that Putin might announce support for a candidate in the autumn.⁴ It might be that he then knew more than he was letting on. The St. Petersburg governor Valentina Matvienko claimed in September that she knew who would be the next president of Russia, although it is impossible to be certain that this statement was accurate.⁵ She also stated in October 2007 that Putin might become prime minister after stepping down as president.⁶

Dmitry Medvedev and Sergey Ivanov had been seen as the most likely contenders for the post-Putin presidency since November 2005. Ivanov was probably regarded by many as the favourite, so Putin's decision in favour of Medvedev on 10 December 2007 may therefore have come as a slight surprise to many observers.⁷

It has been suggested that Putin may have chosen Medvedev as the latter would probably be pliable, and therefore an effective means by which Putin could ensure continuity of the general policy line taken by him. Both Medvedev and Putin have talked about the need to continue the policies pursued since 2000, and maintain the same governing team.⁸ This is why Medvedev has suggested that Putin become prime minister if Medvedev is elected president. There is a general consensus among the political elite that Putin has been a successful leader, and some feel that he should, in some sense, remain as leader after the presidential election.⁹

There are several possible scenarios:

- Medvedev is president in name only, whilst Putin holds the real power, although the pretence is maintained that Medvedev is in charge. Putin then runs for president again in 2012.
- Medvedev steps down after a few months, citing a pre-text, such as health grounds, and fresh presidential elections take place. In such a situation the

constitution requires that the prime minister (i.e. Vladimir Putin) becomes acting president, and new presidential elections take place within three months. Putin is thus re-elected president without the constitution being violated.

- Putin is prime minister for a short period only, acting as a sort of pilot, to allow a smooth transition to a new leadership.
- The constitution is changed, enhancing the power of the prime minister, and reducing that of the president.
- Putin does not become prime minister at all. The current suggestion that he will become prime minister is simply a ploy to boost support for Medvedev in the presidential election campaign.

It is unlikely that the constitution will be changed to reduce the power of the president and increase that of the prime minister.¹⁰ In November 2007, Medvedev ruled out the idea of changing the constitution, and stated that “only if there is a strong presidency can a country like Russia survive on the world map”.¹¹ One possible constitutional change might be extending the presidential term from its current four years to at least five, and possibly more.¹²

It is likely that the first few months of the Medvedev presidency at least will be a Medvedev-Putin diarchy. It is currently impossible to predict where the real power will lie in the relationship. That Medvedev may well be pliable cannot be ruled out, but it also cannot be ruled out that he will assert himself, and that the real power will lie with him.

MEDVEDEV ASSERTIVE

If he is able to establish his own authority as president then the emergence over time of a distinctive Medvedev policy line cannot be ruled out, although Medvedev is likely to face a fierce challenge from the *siloviki* in the Russian leadership.

As first deputy prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev was in charge of overseeing the four national projects, (education, agriculture, housing and health care).¹³ In December 2007, Medvedev stated that these projects will be continued under the next president. This could see a presidency that is more focused on these welfare issues than has been the case hitherto.

Medvedev is chairman of Gazprom, and in view of Russia’s increased importance as an exporter of natural gas, the energy lobby has become much more significant since 2000. A Medvedev presidency would be indicative of the growing power of this lobby, as the energy sector assumes an ever greater role in the national economy, and in foreign policy.¹⁴

It is unlikely that Medvedev will feel sufficiently confident to relax the leadership’s grip on power, particularly with Putin as prime minister, even if he is inclined to do so. Putin’s continued presence in the Kremlin would probably be an effective means of containing competition between various factions in the Russian leadership. It remains to be seen whether Medvedev would have sufficient authority to contain such competition, particularly from the *siloviki*, and the pro-Putin youth movements such as Nashi and Molodaya Gvardiya. If not, then he could face a serious challenge to his position as president, and possibly become the victim of a coup, constitutional or otherwise.¹⁵

MEDVEDEV PLIABLE

This would be a *de facto* third term for Vladimir Putin. Medvedev would merely be a cipher. By remaining effectively in power, Putin would be able to control competition between the various Kremlin factions. It is difficult to see such a situation lasting for the full length of the presidential term. It is more likely that Medvedev would step down after a decent interval, and fresh elections would take place, with Putin as the Kremlin candidate. It is possible that the constitution would be amended before Medvedev stepped down, in order to extend the length of the presidential term. As stated above, the role of the energy sector in the Russian political system and foreign policy will grow in importance, irrespective of whether Medvedev is a puppet or not.

CONCLUSIONS

If a genuine Medvedev leadership emerges, in which he has real authority, then the economic policy of the leadership is likely to remain largely unchanged. The dominance of the *siloviki* in the economy is one that would be difficult to remove or diminish even if Medvedev had the desire to do so.¹⁶ He appears to favour a liberal economic model, and is against state involvement in the economy for its own sake. However statism is likely to remain a prominent feature of the Kremlin's economic strategy.

It is currently impossible to say whether he would attempt any political liberalisation. Reportedly, he was originally not in favour of the decision to arrest and prosecute former Yukos boss Mikhail Khodorkovsky.¹⁷ He has also allegedly criticised the concept of "sovereign democracy" developed by the deputy head of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, in 2006.¹⁸

The USSR/Russia in the twentieth century alternated between periods of relative liberalisation and authoritarianism. After a period of relative authoritarianism under Putin, it is possible that a genuinely independent Medvedev leadership (if such emerges) might move in a more liberal direction. He stated at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2007 that "we are well aware that there's one simple reason why no non-democratic state has ever become prosperous: freedom is better than non-freedom".¹⁹ This is not to say that Medvedev is likely to introduce a far-reaching democratisation of the political system, but some of the controls imposed by the state since 2000 may be relaxed. A fully independent Medvedev may find himself in conflict with the deputy head of the president administration, Igor Sechin, who has close ties with Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev and Minister of Justice Vladimir Ustinov.

A Medvedev foreign policy is unlikely to change from the broad foreign policy orientation of Russia in 2007. Moscow will pursue a limited partnership with the USA, whilst remaining critical of many aspects of US foreign policy, such as the US decision to station missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. Russia will oppose Kosovan independence, and any hardening of the US line towards Iran. Moscow will continue to use the energy weapon as a means of consolidating its influence in the former Soviet space. This may over the course of the next few years also extend to the states of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly when they come to negotiate new gas supply agreements with Gazprom.

The above is based on the assumption that Medvedev does eventually become a fully independent leader. However, it is likely that for at least the first few months, if not longer, he will be the *de facto* junior partner of Putin. If this is the case, then the political system will remain authoritarian. Authoritarian tendencies became more pronounced in 2007, where the rights of opposition movements to stage protest marches were increasingly restricted.²⁰ In addition, some opposition politicians were arrested in the run up to the Duma elections of December 2007, and the conduct of Pro-Putin youth movements such Nashi and Molodaya Gvardiya was regarded as aggressive and intimidating by liberal opponents of Putin. These features of the political system are likely to remain if real power remains with Putin.

DMITRY MEDVEDEV'S NETWORK.²¹**LENINGRAD LAW FACULTY CONNECTIONS**

Anton Ivanov. Medvedev secured him the nomination to the presidency of the supreme court of arbitrage in early 2005. He became a director of Gazprom-media in June 2004.

Nikolay Vinnichenko, chief bailiff, director of the federal bailiffs service of Russia since October 2004. Acts as a link between Medvedev and the director of the Federal anti-narcotic service, **Viktor Cherkesov**.

Vinnichenko is close to **Alexander Konovalov**, the presidential plenipotentiary representative in the Volga federal district who is also said to be promised a ministerial post.

Konstantin Chuychenko, director of Gazprom since 2002. Since 2004, Chuychenko has been one of the three administrators of the Swiss firm, RosUkrEnerg. Chuychenko held a position in the KGB from 1989-1992. He reportedly studied at the Andropov foreign intelligence academy.

Two members of the constitutional court, **Sergey Mavrin** and **Sergey Kazantsev**, were appointed thanks to support by Dmitry Medvedev, who was their student in the Leningrad law faculty.

Medvedev has good relations with:

Vladimir Krotov, the presidential representative to the constitutional court.

Yuri Petrov, the head of the federal state property fund (RFFI).

GAZPROM CONNECTIONS

Alisher Usmanov, the boss of GazpromInvestHolding

Yury Kovalchuk, the director of the Rossia bank who holds 49.9% of Gazprombank through the "Leader" investment firm, and whose son, Boris, has worked with Medvedev since March 2006.

Olga Pavlova, Gazprom director.

Ilya Eliseev, deputy head of Gazprombank.

Vladimir Alisov, head of the legal department of Gazpromregiongaz.

SILOVIK CONNECTIONS

Yevgenny Murov, the director of the federal protection service (FSO)

Viktor Zolotov, the head of Vladimir Putin's personal guard.

Yevgenny Shkolov, a former colleague of Vladimir Putin's at the KGB "residence" in Dresden in the mid-1980s. Deputy interior minister since November 2007.

Procurator-General **Yury Chayka**, and one of his deputies, **Alexander Gutsan**.

Sergey Stepashin, the head of the Audit Chamber.

Igor Zavrzhnov, deputy head of the federal customs service.

GOVERNMENT CONNECTIONS

Dmitry Kozak, regional development minister.

Alexey Kudrin, deputy prime minister and finance minister.

Elvira Nabiullina, minister of economic development.

Tatyana Golikova, minister of social affairs.

Igor Shuvalov, presidential aide on economic issues and G8 sherpa.

Arkady Dvorkovich, head of the Russian presidential experts' directorate.

Igor Sechin, deputy head of the presidential administration, is said to be an enemy of Medvedev. Sechin has good relations with Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev and Minister of Justice Vladimir Ustinov.

Endnotes

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- ⁴ See the interview with Dmitry Medvedev by Maksim Glikin and Irina Reznik in *Vedomosti*, 5 July 2007.
- ⁵ Daniil Borisov, Aleksandr Deryabin, 'A Secret which Matvienko knows,' *NG REGIONY*, no.14, 3 September 2007.
- ⁶ ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, in Russian 0748 gmt 15 October 2007. From BBCM. In March 2005, Federation Council speaker Sergey Mironov spoke of the possibility of Putin becoming prime minister in 2008 and running again for president in 2012. See the interview with Mironov by Maksim Glikin, 'Mironov finds work for Putin,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17 March 2005.
- ⁷ ARAG identified Dmitry Medvedev as the most likely successor to Putin in February 2006. See Mark A. Smith, 'Russia: Transition To A Medvedev Presidency?' Conflict Studies Research Centre, UK Defence Academy 06/07, February 2006.
- ⁸ See Dmitry Medvedev's comments Channel One TV, Moscow, in Russian 1100 gmt 11 December 2007. From BBCM.
- ⁹ See the article by Yedinaya Rossiya leader and Duma speaker Boris Gryzlov, 'Putin will remain the leader of Russia,' *Rossiskaya Gazeta* 17 October 2007, plus comments by Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, in Russian 0831 gmt 2 December 2007. From BBCM.
- ¹⁰ There was some speculation about this at least as far back as 2005. See Aleksandra Samarina, 'Surkov is against a parliamentary republic,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 30 March 2005.
- ¹¹ ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, in Russian 1340 gmt 12 November 2007. From BBCM.
- ¹² For the Sergey Mironov statement see Vesti TV news channel, Moscow, in Russian 0730 gmt 30 March 2007 (from BBCM); Vladimir Putin Interview with Newspaper Journalists from G8 Member Countries, 4 June 2007 http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/06/04/2149_type82916_132716.shtml
- ¹³ For information on the national projects, see <http://www.rost.ru/>
- ¹⁴ See Peter Lavelle, 'Untimely Thought's "Operation Successor 2008" Project: Is Dmitry Medvedev the one?' <http://www.untimely-thoughts.com/index.html?art=1996>
- ¹⁵ Liliya Shevtsova, 'The Power Paralysis,' *Moscow Times*, 24 December 2007, Issue # 3813. <http://www.carnegie.ru/en/pubs/media/77402.htm>
- ¹⁶ For analysis of the role of the *siloviki* in contemporary Russia, see: Ian Bremmer and Samuel Charap, 'The Siloviki in Putin's Russia: Who They Are and What They Want,' *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, no.1. Winter 2007. http://www.twq.com/07winter/docs/07winter_bremmer.pdf; Daniel Treisman, 'Putin's Silovarchs.' *Orbis*, Winter 2007. <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/treisman/siloct06.pdf>
- ¹⁷ Robert Service, 'Putin's Picks', *Time*, 12 December 2007 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901071224-1693765,00.html>
- ¹⁸ Aleksandra Samarina, 'Medvedev again disputes with Surkov,' *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 30 January 2007.
- ¹⁹ Service, *op cit*.
- ²⁰ See Lilia Shevtsova, *Russia: Lost in Transition – the Yeltsin and Putin legacies*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007 for an overview of Putin's move to intensified authoritarianism in 2007.
- ²¹ This information is taken from 'Dmitry Medvedev: myth and reality on Vladimir Putin's "heir"', *Russia-Intelligence*, no.68, 20 December 2007. <http://www.russiaprofile.org/page.php?pageid=CDI+Russia+Profile+List&articleid=a1198253006>

Want to Know More ...?

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