

The presidential election in Russia, and its consequences for Russia and the world

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A presidential election took place in Russia on 2 March; Dmitry Medvedev is the undeniable winner with 70,21% of the votes. The remaining candidates – Gennady Zyuganov, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Andrey Bogdanov – seem to have acted as ‘extras’ to make the election seem minimally pluralistic. The election itself proved to be a plebiscite, wherein Russian voters were supposed to approve Putin’s successor, who had already been chosen by the Kremlin.

With Dmitry Medvedev as president, it may be expected that the essential features of Putin’s system will be preserved. The activities of Putin in Russian domestic and foreign policy are likely to continue. Some correction is possible in economic policy, the reason being the evolution of the ruling elite’s economic interests, as they are in the process of acquiring successive assets.

“Putin’s system” shows quite a significant potential of stability: the transfer of power has been carried out efficiently, and Medvedev’s rule brings perspectives of continuation in the key policy spheres. However, in the future this system may be prone to destabilisation, due to possible personal conflicts that may arise from the coexistence of two centres of power, the president and the Prime Minister.

1. A plebiscite with no real alternatives

As expected, Dmitry Medvedev won by a landslide, receiving 70.2% of the votes (with 99.6% of all votes counted). The Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov received 17.8%, the nationalist-chauvinist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – 9.4%, and the fringe right-wing politician Andrey Bogdanov – 1.3%. According to a communiqué from the Central Election Commission, the elections saw a strong turnout of 69.6% of registered voters, thus exceeding the turnout during the parliamentary elections in December 2007 (63%) and the presidential elections in 2004, when Putin was re-elected (64.3%)

The presidential election in Russia **formally maintain democratic attributes** (general election, secret ballot, several candidates), while in fact they have **evolved into a procedure with no real alternatives, and a result that had been arranged in advance**. Vladimir Putin’s successor, who was chosen within the Kremlin, was predestined to win from the start, while the remaining candidates seem to have worked as extras in order to imitate a pluralistic election.

The Russian authorities have acquired control over all significant aspects of the election, including organisation, administrative and financial issues. However, the crucial instrument of influence is its long-time control over the media. This allowed the Kremlin to practically monopolise the message sent to society. In this sense, instead of a falsification of the election, we may in fact speak of a **'falsification of the mind'**: Russian society has been convinced that it owes its stability and relative prosperity to President Putin and his circle, to whom no reasonable alternative in the political scene exists. This conviction is widespread in society, which causes Vladimir Putin and his successor Medvedev to enjoy genuine social support.

2. Medvedev – the man of the system

Dmitry Medvedev ran for president on a platform advocating modernisation and liberalisation of the economy as well as a democratisation of Russian politics and the civic sphere. His main proposals concerned liberalisation and deregulation of the economy, support for innovative solutions and new technologies, as well as appeals for democratisation of Russian public life; expanding personal freedoms, providing for the independence of the judiciary and media, among other issues.

However, when Medvedev's 'modernisation' programme is compared to the actions he has taken during his public career, it becomes hard to consider him a politician who might be capable of making a 'liberal breakthrough' in Russia. Most of his rhetoric is in fact aimed at **creating an image of a liberal and democrat**, primarily presented for the benefit of a Western audience.

An analysis of Medvedev's actions taken since the early 1990s up to now leads to a conclusion that he is a **loyal 'man of the system' who will exercise power primarily in the interest of the ruling elite**. Medvedev has been a member of the informal decision-making circle in the Kremlin, where former KGB officers prevail (although Medvedev himself was not

associated with the secret services). Since 1990 he has been a close colleague of Vladimir Putin, while remaining in the background. Medvedev has always acted as Putin's loyal comrade; the media have suggested that in the 1990s Medvedev provided legal assistance to Putin, who was then a clerk in the St Petersburg mayor's office; the latter had been accused of making controversial business deals with foreign states. After Putin became president in 2000, Medvedev was appointed deputy head, and then head

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of the Presidential Administration (the most influential political body in Russia) and chairman of Gazprom's board of directors. In 2005 Medvedev was transferred to the government and appointed deputy Prime Minister. In **none of these important positions did Medvedev act as an independent player**, and was rather seen as an efficient implementer of President Putin's orders. Despite his liberal and democratic image, he never publicly reacted to the restrictions the Kremlin was imposing on independent political and civil organisations.

3. The consequences of the change in the Kremlin; selected reforms in the elites' own interest

The most probable scenario is that in the early stage of his rule, the 'man of the system' Medvedev is likely to carry on with the processes initiated by Vladimir Putin and to wield power in the interest of the current ruling elite. However, it may be the changing interests of that same elite that may lead to the implementation of some of Medvedev's economic postulates.

In the past 8 years the ruling elite has acquired control over huge assets (mainly state-owned). In the immediate future many of these assets may be partially privatised, and the elites will be interested in creating favourable economic conditions for these enterprises. The owners and beneficiaries of these assets will welcome **the reduction of the tax burden** – in this context, Medvedev's call for introduction of a uniform, possibly low VAT rate has every chance to succeed. His appeal to **reduce export duties** for crude oil and oil products, and to switch to roubles in export transactions (instead of US dollars) may be in the interest of the oil sector, where the Kremlin has significantly strengthened its positions in recent years. The elite may also welcome Medvedev's proposals to **support innovative solutions** (especially the corporation for nanotechnologies, which is controlled by the 'Kremlin people'), to strengthen the banking system, to protect private property and to support Russian business's expansion abroad. These changes are likely to be **implemented in a selective and fragmentary manner to match the interests of large enterprises**, controlled by the Kremlin elites, especially in the fossil fuels sector, arms industry and new technologies sector.

4. Consequences for foreign policy

In the foreign policy sphere, **a continuation of Putin's 'hard line' policy** should be expected. This may be suggested by at least three factors: Medvedev's initial declarations concerning foreign policy, the situation on the global energy markets, which is favourable to Moscow, and the mentality of Russia's ruling elite.

In his first statement on foreign policy in February, Medvedev declared that **Moscow was not planning to make any concessions concerning matters it regarded as crucial to Russian interests, and would carry on with the 'hard line' policy towards the West**. Medvedev also stressed that Moscow would not put up with Western interference into Russian affairs. Another signal of Russia's foreign policy permanence was Medvedev's pre-election visit to Belgrade and Budapest on 25 February. This was supposed to demonstrate that the future president has already become involved in matters of geopolitical and geoeconomic importance (such as the transportation routes for Russian gas to Europe, and Russia's influence in the Balkans).

The boom on world energy markets is another factor that is likely to foster Russia's **'assertive' foreign policy**. The huge revenues brought in by the fossil fuels' export have considerably strengthened Russia's financial situation and its position on the international arena. With such considerable financial resources at hand, together with Europe's

APPENDIX

Biography of Dmitry Medvedev

Born in 1965 in Leningrad, Medvedev graduated from the Law Faculty of the Leningrad University in 1987. In 1990, he was awarded a PhD in law, specialising in civil law. Between 1990 and 1999 (with some intermissions) he worked as a university lecturer. In 1990, he became a member of the election staff for Anatoly Sobchak, a candidate for the mayor of Leningrad. When Sobchak won, Medvedev was appointed his advisor (1990-1995) and served as an expert in the Committee for International Affairs in the St. Petersburg administration (Vladimir Putin chaired the Committee between 1991 and 1996). Medvedev combined his work in the St. Petersburg administration with business activity, co-owning and co-operating with several companies.

On 31 December 1999, he was appointed deputy chief of the Presidential Administration (by acting president Vladimir Putin), and then head of Putin's election staff. Between October 2003 and June 2005, he was head of the Presidential Administration.

In June 2000, Medvedev was nominated as chairman of the Gazprom board of directors, a post he has occupied ever since (with an intermission between June 2001 and June 2002 when he was deputy chief of the board of directors). Since November 2003, he has been a permanent member of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. In June 2005 Medvedev was appointed deputy Prime Minister in charge of national welfare projects, and in November 2005, first deputy prime minister.

dependence on its energy resources, Russia is able to pursue a more assertive and often aggressive foreign policy. The prospects that high oil and gas prices will be maintained will allow Russia to continue this assertive policy. Moreover, energy resources will remain one of its main instruments in the process of building economic and political influence in Europe and the FSU region.

As Russia's economic potential has grown, the elite has become **increasingly convinced that Russia is reviving as a global superpower**. They see Russia as a strong, modern and self-sufficient state, able to reduce its dependence on the West and at the same time to tighten the West's dependence on Russian energy resources. Increasingly more often appeals are heard for Russia to resume its due position on the international arena. In this context, most of Russia's ruling class are in favour of **pursuing a 'hard-line' policy towards the West and implementing Russia's interests**, both geopolitical and geoeconomic.

In 2005, Medvedev started to receive promotion in the media as a possible candidate to succeed Vladimir Putin, and became the frontrunner in presidential polls. He has been presented by the Russian media as a pro-Western politician belonging to the liberal wing of the Kremlin (a counterbalance to the 'silovik' candidate Sergey Ivanov).

Medvedev has been married since 1989 and has a son (born in 1996).

Compiled by Wojciech Konończuk

5. The election's consequences for the system of power

During Putin's rule the Kremlin significantly tightened its grip on political life. Over time this has led to the creation of a **controlled mechanism for keeping and transferring political power**. This control was demonstrated both by the parliamentary elections, that brought an absolute pro-Kremlin majority in the Duma, and the presidential election, when Putin's successor, chosen by the elites, received the legitimisation of Russian voters without any hindrance.

In so far as the preservation of Vladimir Putin's system of power is the most likely scenario, the **risk of personal** conflicts should be taken into account. The source of these conflicts might be the new president's policy; therefore the question of how the two key centres of power, President Medvedev and PM Putin, are going to coexist in the long run becomes crucial.

The way the 'transfer of power' has been carried out may suggest that in the short term, **this coexistence will be based on cooperation and attaining common objectives**. Putin's decision to name Medvedev his successor seemed to be largely a matter of the former's personal choice. Ever since Medvedev was named, Putin has ostentatiously promoted and supported him; both politicians have declared their mutual trust and intention to cooperate. Medvedev has repeatedly expressed his high esteem for Putin's 'accomplishments', and has stressed that he will carry on with Putin's policies. Indeed, in the short term Medvedev seems fated to be a continuator, as initially his position in the political system will not be very strong, and will not allow him to make instant independent decisions (concerning his staff,

etc.). After the election, Putin is most likely to play the decisive role. Putin seems to have been preparing for that in the months prior to the election – he has consistently strengthened his position, placing himself in the position of a 'national leader' and a strategist who defines long-term policies for Russia's development.

Initially, the future system of power will be based on president Medvedev's and PM Putin's cooperation; in the longer run, however, we might witness the new president's emancipation.

In the longer run, however, balanced and undisturbed cooperation between the two centres of power may prove difficult to sustain. The possible origin of a future conflict may lie within the constitution and laws defining the political system; they unambiguously point to the president as the key political leader who is in charge of the government and PM.

The very status of the president may at some point encourage the person holding this office (loyal as he might be towards the former leader) to adopt a more autonomous policy, at least when it comes to personal nominations and building his own economic clout. Moreover, Medvedev's position has already been strengthened by his landslide victory in the elections. Another crucial factor that may trigger the new president's emancipation in the future may be lobbying by the elites, especially those who found themselves in the background during Putin's rule; these persons may try to build up their own position through the new president. If Medvedev decides to emancipate, a counteraction may be expected on Putin's part, as he will be likely to defend his position. Such a struggle for power (with the probable involvement of the secret services) may in the future bring about a certain degree of destabilisation within the ruling elite in Russia.

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