

SPLIT IN THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL TANDEM PUTIN-MEDVEDEV?

COMMENT BY
Eberhard Schneider*

Abstract

There are signs that the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev is gaining his own profile rather than wishing to remain forever Vladimir Putin's hand-picked successor. The catalyst for this process is the financial and economic crisis. Different individuals and groups surrounding the president and the prime minister play an important role in this process, since they try to ensure that their patrons demonstrate a greater political profile. Putin's dilemma: If he remains in office, he runs the risk of being held responsible by the people for his government's failure to properly address the crisis. This could lead to the loss of his reputation, which could cost him the election victory in the case of his renewed candidacy for the presidency in 2012. If he resigns as prime minister, he would disappear from the public eye, which would make his election as president impossible. This would mean that Medvedev would re-run for the presidency in 2012 and get re-elected for another six-year term in accordance with the latest constitutional amendment.

Keywords: *Russia, Putin, Medvedev, division of power, financial crisis, issues of conflict.*

Introduction

On March 2, 2008 Dmitry Medvedev, then First Deputy Prime Minister, was elected president in the first round of the Russian presidential elections, after being proposed by Putin as a candidate in December 2007. Many wondered why Putin did not change Article 81.3 of the Constitution, which doesn't allow to be elected to more than two terms consecutively. In order to do so, two-thirds of the Duma votes, three-quarters of the Federation Council's votes and two-thirds of regional parliaments' votes would have been required for a constitutional amendment to take place, which Putin would have easily achieved. Most probably, Putin preferred to take a four-year break to recover from the stress of the presidential office and to stand for office once again after four years, which is in accordance with the Constitution. Putin might have wanted to concentrate in the meantime on the chairmanship of the ruling "United Russia" party. Putin decided against a

* **Dr. Eberhard Schneider** is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Siegen, Germany and former Senior Researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Germany. He is also Advisory Board Member of the EU-Russia Centre in Brussels and Editor of the "Russland Intern Aktuell," a German weekly analytical publication dedicated to domestic politics in Russia.

constitutional amendment largely due to trying to avoid being seen as another Alexander Lukashenka (President of Belarus), who changed the Belorussian Constitution in 2004 in order to be allowed to run for the presidency for a third time.

The arrest of some high-ranking officers at Moscow airport Domodedovo on October 1, 2007 – which exposed a long-standing fight amongst the Russian security services – prompted Putin to change his mind. He was concerned that once he retreated from politics the several power groups which he held together would start fighting with one another and that the *siloviki* (people from the secret services, the Ministry of the Interior and the military) following different interests would win at the expense of the other. There was also a risk as to whether his predecessor could govern the *siloviki* or whether they would challenge him.

If Putin did not seek a constitutional amendment, then which other high office could he assume? The choice fell on the office of Prime Minister. Putin was required to carefully assess under which president he could work, since the President of Russia is not only the formal Head of State but also has strong executive powers. He decided that Dmitry Medvedev would be the ideal candidate.

At a press conference on February 14, 2008 Putin said, responding to a question about whether there would be any major differences between him as prospective Prime Minister and President Medvedev, that both he and Medvedev have had a 15-year working relationship through which they have learned to listen and to understand one another. He simply trusts Medvedev. Therefore, “it would not be terrible” if he transferred him the “essential executive powers to govern the country”. If he became Prime Minister, he would not alter his relations with the head of state and he would not be “hostile” towards him or “counterproductive”.

Medvedev and Putin are both from St. Petersburg and are both lawyers by profession. Nevertheless, there are also differences between them such as the 13-year age gap; in other words, half a generation. Putin was born in 1952, whereas Medvedev was born in 1965. Further differences include their socio-economic background. Putin grew up in a working class family and was the son of a factory worker. The family lived in a communal flat (20m²) where they had to share the bathroom and the kitchen with other families. On the other hand, Medvedev grew up in a family of professors. During the Brezhnev years, professors with a high academic grade were well paid and enjoyed a high social standing.

Division of Power between President and Prime Minister

According to the Constitution, the Russian President is responsible for foreign policy. He defines “the basic domestic and foreign policy guidelines” (Article 80.3), decides on foreign policy (Article 86) and is the commander-in-chief.

On the other hand, according to the Constitution, the Prime Minister is responsible for the “implementation of foreign policy of the Russian Federation” (Article 114.1). This means that Putin cannot contradict foreign policy as defined by the President without the consent of the Foreign Minister. He can nonetheless remain the authority over the implementation of foreign policy because the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is an integral part of the government

despite its subordination to the President. According to the Constitution, the portfolio of the government includes the economy, financial policy, culture, education, science, health and environment. Regarding foreign and defence policy, as well as national security, the government is only responsible for the implementation of policy set by the President.

During an interview on December 24, 2008 Medvedev explained – following a question on the extent of cooperation between the President and the Prime Minister – that both he and Putin exchange policy ideas on a regular basis. They not only discuss economic issues but also political ones. Medvedev described their teamwork as “comfortable”. On the question concerning the war in Georgia, Medvedev emphasised that as commander-in-chief he alone made the decision to begin the operation.

Medvedev’s “Battalion”

On which elite groups and other power bases can Medvedev rely? The following table will attempt to identify several state, political and economic structures that the President and the Prime Minister rely upon. However, it should be noted that the extent to which these players influence Medvedev and Putin is schematic and not completely verifiable.

	<i>Closer to Medvedev</i>	<i>Closer to Putin</i>
Parliament	Federation Council	State Duma
Chairman	Federation Council: Sergey Mironov	State Duma: Boris Gryzlov
Government	Justice Minister: Alexander Kononov (directly subordinate to the President, loyal to Medvedev)	All other ministers (excluding Foreign Minister Lavrov)
Presidential Administration	Head of administration department: Constantin Tishchenko	All the others
Foreign Policy	Foreign Minister: Sergei Lavrov (directly subordinate to the President)	Deputy Head of the Apparatus of the Government: Yuri Ushakov
Security Policy	Security Council (President is the Chairman)	Secretary of the Security Council: Nikolai Patrushev
Investigative bodies	Chief State Prosecutor: Yuri Tshajka	Head of Investigative Committee: Alexander Bastrykin
Political Parties	“Just Russia”	“United Russia”
Economy	Small to medium-sized enterprises	Large-scale industry, raw material industry
Trade Associations	Association of small and medium-sized enterprises “Opora Rossi” (Stanchion of Russia)	“Russian Association of Entrepreneurs and Manufacturers” and “Delovaya Rossiya” (“Business Russia”)
Elite Groups	Lawyers/ Judges	Siloviki

<i>Secret Services</i>		FSB
<i>Political Key Issues</i>	Fight against corruption	
<i>Socio-economic Base</i>	Middle-class	

Given the above-mentioned distribution of power bases between Medvedev and Putin, it can be concluded that Medvedev has several power bases at his disposal. His “battalion” can be found above all in the judiciary, not only because several members of the judiciary were former students of his such as the Chairman of the Higher Arbitration Court Anton Ivanov. Improving the rule of law in Russia, which Medvedev had consistently highlighted during his presidential campaign, would democratize the entire political system sustainably. Moreover, Russia’s deficient legal system has frequently been subject to Western criticism of the Kremlin regime.

Issues of Conflict

Putin and Medvedev have diverging opinions on three different policy issues: foreign policy, domestic affairs and economic policy.

Foreign Policy

By creating new institutions Putin tried to ensure certain access to foreign policy-making. Moreover, he occasionally engaged in foreign policy debates which are constitutionally Medvedev’s domain.

Institutions

Putin created his own “foreign minister” within the government in the form of Deputy Head of the Apparatus of the Government Yuri Ushakov, who is responsible for the “implementation of foreign policy”. Until 2008 he was Russia’s ambassador to the US and he is known for his harsh anti-Western rhetoric. In May 2008 Putin announced new changes in Russia’s CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) policy by creating a “Federal Agency for CIS affairs”. Thus, the CIS policy was taken out of the Foreign Ministry’s day-to-day responsibilities, although the new agency remains formally a structure subordinate to the Ministry, and should work in tandem with it. By creating the Federal Agency Putin makes it inadvertently clear that the CIS states do not represent a “normal” abroad for him and are not considered by him as states independent from Russia.

Activities

Prior to his inauguration as President, Medvedev announced in April 2008 that his first visit overseas would be to Paris, since France was going to take over the rotating EU Presidency on July 1, 2008. However, Putin forestalled Medvedev’s planned visit and paid a visit to Paris in May 2008. Medvedev took revenge on Putin’s visit by convening a constitutive meeting of the Security Council – of which Putin is a member – on May 31, 2008, whilst Putin was visiting Paris.

On November 24, 2008 Putin gave a speech at an international human rights conference

held in St. Petersburg. The Parliamentary Assembly of the CIS and the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) organized the conference to mark the 140th anniversary of the St. Petersburg Declaration of 1868, which was initiated then by Russia to ban the use of certain weapons in war. In his speech, Putin commented on several foreign policy issues, which fall under the President's powers. He took up the proposal of Medvedev concerning the creation of a Pan-European Security Pact which the latter had already presented in Berlin on June 5, 2008 and specified at the World Policy Conference held in Evian, France, on October 8, 2008. At the conference in St. Petersburg, Putin elaborated on Medvedev's third "no", i.e. from "no development of military alliances that would threaten the security of Parties" to "no development and expansion of military alliances at the expense of other Parties". Putin's reformulation of Medvedev's third "no" illustrates more clearly the meaning of the statement: to prevent NATO accession for Georgia and particularly for Ukraine, since in Putin's eyes such an accession would take place at the expense of Russia which still regards the latter two states as its exclusive sphere of influence.

Domestic Affairs

At the beginning of June 2008 Medvedev stopped a media bill put forward by Robert Schlegel, a member of the State Duma from the "United Russia" party, through a letter to the Chairman of the State Duma Boris Gryzlov. The bill aimed at allowing local officials to close down newspapers and television stations without a court order, if a libel case was brought by a person against the said newspaper or television station.

In his first State of the Nation speech before the Federation Assembly which includes the Federation Council and the State Duma on November 5, 2008 Medvedev announced a ten-point plan implicitly aiming at lifting some of the anti-democratic restrictions introduced incrementally by Putin during his presidency:

1. The 7% threshold which political parties must overcome in order to gain seats in the State Duma should be reduced;
2. The appointment of candidates for the office of regional governor should be the prerogative of the parties that obtain the majority of votes in regional elections;
3. The rule which obliges the political parties to provide a deposit to the electoral commission before they are allowed to campaign should be repealed. Moreover, the existing minimum requirement of signatures needed to register a party for participation at the elections should be decreased;
4. Only people who were elected in their respective municipalities should be allowed to become Senators in the Federation Council;
5. The minimum number of party members required for registration of a political party should also be reduced;
6. Key positions within the political parties should rotate;
7. Representative bodies of local self-governments should have the power to control the heads of municipalities more effectively and, if necessary, to depose them from office;
8. "Public Chambers" made up of representatives of civil society rather than politicians, and NGOs should permanently be involved in the law-making process on issues regarding individual freedoms, health and property;
9. Political parties represented in the parliament should be guaranteed the right to report on their activities in the mass media; and

10. Freedom of speech should be ensured through technological innovation, specifically through the Internet and digital television.

Furthermore, the President introduced a new law compelling the Prime Minister to provide an annual report to the State Duma, which will then be discussed by parliamentarians. Putin fulfilled this obligation for the first time on April 6, 2009.

At the end of January 2009 Medvedev intervened in the drafting of a bill introduced by the government in December 2008 to the State Duma. The bill was designed to extend the definition of state secrets in the criminal code and criminal procedure (Article 151). If the bill had passed, the FSB (Federal Security Service) would have been permitted to suspect any citizen who is in contact with foreigners of espionage and treason.

At a meeting with the leadership of the “United Russia” party at the presidential residence of Barvikha near Moscow on April 8, 2009, Medvedev, emphasising his bipartisanship, warned that decisions made by the president cannot be prejudged. The Chairman of the State Duma and deputy leader of the party Boris Gryzlov attended the meeting instead of party chairman Putin. A new rule lies behind this warning, which stipulates that the largest political faction in the regional parliament should recommend a candidate for the office of regional governor to the president. Medvedev however underlined that “the final decision in these matters will not be taken by the party but by the President of the Russian Federation, and there should be no confusion about this.”

Economic Policy

At the end of October 2008 Medvedev created a “Council for the Development of the Financial Markets of the Russian Federation under the auspices of the President of the Russian Federation” and allocated the portfolio of financial policy to his array of powers, though financial policy is not the responsibility of the president. The Council was not created by the Prime Minister and it did not get allocated to the Prime Minister, even though financial policy in conjunction with economic policy is the main responsibility of the government. Putin is not a member of the Council.

The Council is chaired by First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, who is also the head of the Anti-Crisis Committee of the government. Shuvalov is regarded in the government as the “technical” prime minister, while Putin is seen as the “strategic” prime minister, which implies that concrete economic issues are not of much interest for Putin. Members of the Council include Medvedev’s consultant on economic affairs Arkadij Dvorkovich, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, Minister for Economic Development and Trade Elvira Naibullina, Chairman of the Central Bank Sergei Ignatjev, Chairman of the High Court of Arbitration Anton Ivanov and Chairmen of the Finance Committees of both chambers of the parliament, Minister for the Interior Rashid Nurgaliyev and the Head of the FSB Alexander Bortnikov. The very fact that both the Minister for the Interior and the Head of the FSB are members of the Council illustrate Medvedev’s thinking that living standards will decrease drastically as a result of the financial and economic crisis with the potential outcome of demonstrations, whereby security measures need to be taken.

Putin was fuelled with anger in January 2009 after he received an analysis on the economic

situation in Russia provided by the President's experts, which he considered as an intrusion by the President to his government responsibilities. Medvedev accused the government, not Putin himself, of a too slow implementation of the financial stimulus plan, which had cost \$200 billion to date.

In an interview with the Bulgarian national television on January 30, 2009 Medvedev praised his good relationship with Putin. He said that "this however does not mean that the President must turn a blind eye to existing problems". Any criticism exposing existing problems in meetings with the government and ministers is "absolutely normal".

In Medvedev's speech at a meeting of the chairmanship of the State Council in Irkutsk on February 20, 2009, which was attended by regional governors, businessmen, CEOs and the government, he announced that the financial crisis had not reached its peak yet, and that the Russian economy needed to undergo fundamental reforms in order to meet the challenges of the following 7 to 15 years. He criticised the regions and companies for not providing enough information on the financial situation. He said that "we work too slowly and negligently given it is a crisis". Russia's economic problems are due to "our negligence to work swiftly and efficiently" rather than macroeconomic problems or difficulties in the world's financial system.

At the 6th Economic Forum in February 2009 Medvedev's economic advisor Arkadij Dvorkovich criticised indirectly the government the members of which were participating at the forum for being insufficiently prepared to deal with the financial crisis. According to him, "preparedness of both the authorities and society to overcome a long crisis period is very small". At an economic gathering at Moscow on March 4, 2009 Medvedev demanded that the government make policies more comprehensible to the public.

Conclusion: Putin's Dilemma

"Kompanija", a weekly magazine owned by Russian entrepreneurs, claimed on February 23, 2009 that the Medvedev-Putin partnership will soon break down. In principle, President Dmitry Medvedev could let Putin go; Putin however does not have this option. If Putin cannot manage the consequences of the financial and economic crisis, Medvedev will have to find a replacement in order to maintain public support for his presidency. Recently, there have been signs that Medvedev is gaining prestige, the catalyst of which has been the financial and economic crisis, which serves as an indication that he does not wish to remain Putin's hand-picked successor.

In this context, the role of the individuals and elite groups surrounding the president and the prime minister should not to be overlooked. Even if Medvedev and Putin hardly would wish to get involved in a personal confrontation, those surrounding them will probably try to ensure that their patrons demonstrate a higher profile, even if it might entail some confrontational elements.

Putin faces a dilemma: if he stays in office, he runs the risk of being held responsible for the government's lack of response to the negative consequences of the financial crisis which could possibly derail his ambition to run for the presidency in 2012. In addition, it is obvious that Putin cannot reconcile two different economic concepts in his cabinet.

Shuvalov wants to increase the government spending to master the crisis. His opponent is the Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Kudrin, who opts for a strict fiscal discipline and a policy of resource accumulation.

If Putin resigns from public life, he will also disappear from the public eye, making his re-election in 2012 impossible. Moreover, if Putin seriously considered to step down and concentrate on his leadership of “United Russia” party, he has undoubtedly missed the right moment to do so, since that moment was last October amidst the unfolding of the international financial crisis. If he decided to resign now, the public would assume that if a “strong man” like Putin cannot cope with the crisis, then no one can. Since Putin is still regarded as *the* strong politician, the psychological impact of his resignation would only exacerbate the crisis.

The financial and economic crisis is expected to last for another three years, and it is unlikely for Putin to steer clear of its implications; thus his chances of a victory in the 2012 presidential elections are slim. In such an event, Putin may decide not to run for office. It could also mean that Medvedev could re-run for presidency and get re-elected and allowed to govern, this time for six years in accordance with the recent constitutional amendments.