



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Who Leads Russia?

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Ever since Dmitri Medvedev's nomination to succeed Vladimir Putin as president of Russia, followed by his election and now his inauguration, Kremlin watchers, both Russian and Western, have been discussing the so-called "Putin-Medvedev tandem" and asking who will really lead Russia. Is the duumvirate stable? Will it degenerate into squabbling among the Kremlin clans behind the scenes?

The pundits have identified four plausible scenarios. One is that President Medvedev will indeed have the principal power, including the possibility of ousting Mr. Putin as prime minister, or marginalizing him, since the Russian political system has been "super-presidential," i.e., strongly centered in the presidency, since the adoption of the new Constitution by Boris Yeltsin in 1993. The second is that the system will remain centered around Prime Minister Putin through informal power mechanisms that have much more weight in this system than do the formal powers granted by the Constitution; this is the scenario I consider most likely. A third is that the United Russia Party will emerge as dominant in this situation, able to make or break presidents through the electoral process. A fourth is that the whole country, or at least the government, will fall apart because of feuding among the followers of the president and the prime minister who will be unable to decide on the fair division of spoils that come with holding power in this country that covers one-sixth of the earth's land mass.

Because the corridors of power are so completely impenetrable to outsiders, no one knows what will happen. Still, Putin and his advisers' actions in the months leading up to the election and then inauguration of Dmitri Medvedev as president of the Russian Federation show some answers.

Putin's Trajectory

In many ways Vladimir Putin has been the most transparent of Russian leaders since he came to office. Immediately upon his ascension to formal power as president in spring 2000, he spoke of a "power vertical," which he then proceeded unapologetically to construct. He proposed two years ago that he might become prime minister. On

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A Putin of the Conventional Wisdom

October 2, 2007, at the Congress of United Russia, Putin called the notion that he might head the government “completely realistic.”¹

There have, however, been ambiguities and contradictions throughout his two terms as president, including, most recently, with the issue of succession. Beginning in the fall of 2007, Kremlin officials and leaders in the United Russia began consistently calling on Putin to remain a “national leader” in order to ensure the continuity of current policies. Yet at the same time there was no official clarification as to what exactly this might entail.

Recently there also has been a profound marshalling of historical symbolism that seems to increase with every turn of the story. While systematically downplaying what they are doing, Vladimir Putin and his handlers have gone to surprising lengths to marshal symbolism straight from the pages of Russian history.

Specifically, I argue that the solution in which Dmitri Medvedev would be elected president in 2008 and he would then in turn name Vladimir Putin as his prime minister was evolving steadily behind the scenes in ways that were not always transparent to outside observers and that support the hypothesis that Medvedev is likely to be more of a figurehead than a real president.

Because Putin famously loves surprises, he (and his handlers) did not let the public know who was going to be named heir apparent to the presidency until December 10, 2007. An element of surprise and anxious waiting had become by now in the Putin presidency an element de rigueur, keeping politicians and the public guessing. Who would succeed Putin, everyone was asking. Many were convinced that Putin would truly step down because he stated so often that he would do so.

Yet my own reading of the situation was that precisely his adamant, repeated insistence that he would step down in 2008 began to sound hollow even in 2005-06. Methought the gentleman did protest too much.

In the context of what became known as the “2008 question” (would he or wouldn’t he serve a third term?), Putin was claiming that he hoped there would be “continuity on policy regardless of who was in power.”² He insisted that he did not want public speakers to speculate on the succession or even to use the phrase “third term.”³

Yet, of course, that was exactly what Kremlin watchers loved to do—speculate on what the president was going to do once his constitutionally mandated term of office was up. There was a whole cottage industry in both Russia and the U.S. devoted to the what-will-he-do-now question.

The Putin Plan

As early as 2001, Sergei Mironov, head of the Just Russia Party (a minor pro-Kremlin political party), already was saying two terms wouldn’t be enough; Putin should be elected to a third term. Mironov first said this, in fact, the day after he was elected as chairman of the Russian Federation Council, the upper house of parliament, showing his tremendous loyalty (or should we say sycophancy) toward the president. He then went on to repeat this argument verbatim virtually every year after that.⁴ After Putin’s reelection in 2004, several other federal and especially regional lawmakers also began to make noises about a constitutional amendment that would allow a third term.⁵ The volume of these noises increased markedly after Putin appropriated the right to appoint the governors in the wake of the Beslan crisis of September 2004. Now, even the most seemingly independent of governors (Mintimer Shaimiev, for example, in Tatarstan) began praising Putin and discussing the need for a third term. Their own self-interest dictated that they praise the sitting president who could decide their fates so unilaterally.

In spring 2007, United Russia Party officials began speaking of a “Putin Plan” as if such a plan really existed and as if it contained genuine content. By late September 2007, President Putin had even formally approved the “plan,” claiming characteristically that it was not he who had made up the plan but rather the United Russia party.⁶

But what was the “plan” made of? Only quotes and slogans from the president’s addresses to the federal assembly. “The greatness of Russia” hardly constitutes a “plan.” Invoking Russian “civilization” also does not make a plan.

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The person most vocally committed to the Putin Plan has been Boris Gryzlov, speaker of the Parliament and head of the United Russia Party. Gryzlov in May 2007 began to speak not only of the Putin Plan but also of Putin as “national leader” [*natsional’nyi lider*] for Russia. Because Putin was the national leader of Russia, the Putin Plan could work, he claimed. And, of course, because of the success of the Putin Plan, Putin must remain the national leader of the country. In other words, his logic was absolutely circular and tautological.

For Russians, he said, “Vladimir Putin is the absolute national leader.” In October 2007 he added, “I think that it is not necessary to hold a concrete post in order to be a leader.”⁷

At about the same time at the United Russia Congress a number of people stood up, in purely Soviet fashion, to beg Putin to stay in politics. One was a woman weaver named Elena Lapshina who was introduced to express “the hopes of the simple people”: “I see so many big bosses and just smart people at this congress. I appeal to all of you—let’s think of something together so that Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin will remain the president of Russia after 2008 as well.”⁸

On the eve of the United Russia Party Congress on November 6, 2007, the party website published an article by Abdul-Khakim Sultygov, Putin’s envoy for human rights to Chechnya and later United Russia’s specialist on nationality affairs. Now the party was developing an ingenious (though discursively empty) and highly symbolic way out of the 2008 dilemma. According to the “Putin Plan,” the party would strive to make Putin a “National Leader.” Then an imagined “Citizens’ Council of the Russian Nation” would create a “Pact of Civil Unity,” which would necessitate the return of Putin to national leadership. Although Sultygov was the nominal author of this webpage, commentators have agreed that it bears all the hallmarks of Vladislav Surkov, the chief ideologist in the Kremlin. Once again Putin and the Kremlin denied any involvement. These were said to be Sultygov’s own ideas.

Here the party’s and the Kremlin’s goal was clearly to create two equations: Putin equals national leader and United Russia equals party of power. For a historian this is fascinating because, of course, that was exactly what Vladimir Ilich Lenin did in the years leading up to and right after 1917. The Social Democratic Party equals the party of power; plus Lenin equals the embodiment/the personification of the revolution.⁹

Beyond “the Troubles”

By the fall of 2007 the party and especially the president had created another important equation: Putin does not equal Yeltsin; in short, the complete repudiation of the immediately preceding period. Not only had Putin replaced Yeltsin, showing himself to be vigorous, decisive, muscular, sober, but also the whole period of the 1990s was now being portrayed as the “Time of Troubles” (an analogy with the Time of Troubles that Russia experienced from 1598-1613). The 1990s were depicted as a Time of Troubles in terms of the vast political and social upheavals of the decade, the financial insecurities, and the constantly changing political figures at the top. But it was also a time of troubles because the boyars were ruling instead of the tsar (in the 17th century Time of Troubles this was a period of the seven boyars; in the 1990s this was the rule of the seven bankers, or *semibankirshchina*). The solution that began to be voiced in 2007 was the call for a

national leader, who would rule in conjunction with the people without the intermediaries of the bad boyars, just as Mikhail Romanov had been elected tsar of all the Russias in 1613.

On November 29, 2007, on the eve of the December 2 Duma elections, when Putin’s new approach to the elections and to power was unfolding, he spoke in his annual address of the forces of evil that he believed were trying to reshape plans for Russia’s development, change the political course supported by the Russian people, and “return to the times of humiliation, dependence, and dissolution” that followed the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Many were coming to believe that such a Time of Troubles would require a strong leader for Russia’s salvation.

On December 2, 2007, the United Russia won overwhelmingly in the Duma elections. This was vigorously trumpeted as a victory for Putin. On December 10, the four parties affiliated with the government (United Russia, Just Russia, the Agrarian Party of Russia, and the Civic Force Party) proposed Dmitri Medvedev as the next president in a highly choreographed event that several Russian commentators referred to as a “show.” Leaders of the four parties came out and proposed to President Vladimir Putin that the next president should be Dmitri Medvedev, then his deputy prime minister. According to journalists present at the time, Putin turned to his younger colleague and asked: “Dmitri Anatol’evich, did they speak with you about this?” “Yes,” answered Medvedev; “there were preliminary consultations about this. They were very positive. We will continue this conversation today and tomorrow.”

Putin then commented, “Together we can form a solid power in the Russian Federation after the March 2008 elections.”¹¹ In other words, Putin was not handing over the reins of government to his younger colleague. Rather he was planning to rule with him, by his side. Putin was also very clear to say that he would not hang Medvedev’s picture on his wall. Ostensibly this was because he knew him so well. In reality, it was a pointed statement that Medvedev would look up to him, not the other way round.

A week later Medvedev confirmed that they would be working together when he announced that, if he was elected, he would name Putin as his prime minister.

The Dual Monarchy

Commentators immediately jumped on this relationship between Medvedev and Putin, arguing that Russia has never known a successful “dual power.” Yet that view ignores the productive and long-lived dual monarchy that lasted from 1619-1633 when Mikhail Romanov ruled in conjunction with his father Philaret.

The parallels today to this earlier regime are striking. In 1613, at the end of the civil war which had engulfed Russia and which became known as the Time of Troubles, the Assembly of All the Land (the Zemskii Sobor) chose Mikhail Romanov as their new tsar. Mikhail, only sixteen years old and not in good health, was said to be “weak in the legs.” In 1619 when he returned from exile, his father Philaret, who had been forcibly tonsured as a monk during the years of upheaval, was made head of the Russian Orthodox Church rather than co-tsar. Yet from that moment until his death in 1633 he routinely used the title “Great Sovereign” (a title traditionally referred to the tsar) and co-signed the majority of official state documents, especially those relating to foreign policy.

The idea of a dual monarchy under Putin and Medvedev, I submit, has long been in production (as they would say in a movie studio).

On March 23, 2005, Vladimir Putin visited the city of Kostroma, a visit that was recorded and aired on the Russian television program, "Russkii vzgliad" (the Russian view), a weekly talk show designed (in its own formulation) "for those who love Russia." The timing of the visit was the fifth anniversary of Putin's inauguration as president and also the saint's day associated with the celebration of the Kostroma icon of the Virgin Mary. That icon, in turn, was the one used to bless Mikhail Romanov on his coronation in 1613. The narrator of the television program, even claimed that the recent Russian Time of Troubles (the Yeltsin years) had lasted just as many years as the original Time of Troubles in the early 17th century. In the television show President Putin stood for a long moment before the Kostroma icon, with head silently bowed. The Kostroma bishop spoke of an unnamed saint's prophesy of the resurrection of Russia.

One might consider all this a coincidence were it not for the fact that Putin himself had called for the joint meeting of the presidium of the State Council and the President's Council on Art and Culture to meet in Kostroma on that date. It was also his choice to visit the icons from 1613.

Sometime in fall 2007 the presidential elections were scheduled to take place on March 2, 2008. That date also just happens to be the anniversary of the announcement of the election of Mikhail Romanov in 1613.¹⁴

The Medvedev-Putin parallel to Mikhail-Philaret has many virtues for the Kremlin today. The younger "son" figure (Medvedev has often said that Putin is like a father figure to him and he is 14 years younger) will rule officially, while the older father figure will rule in practice. Both Putin and the monk Philaret were barred from ruling officially (Putin because of the limit of two terms, Philaret because he had been tonsured during the Time of Troubles). Ostensibly the father figures would occupy the apparently less significant position (head of the Church, head of the governmental administration), yet through charisma and connections Philaret was able to rule in practice, as undoubtedly will Putin. (Amazingly, it even turns out that Putin is probably related to Philaret and Mikhail Romanov since his ancestors were peasants on the estates of Philaret's brother Ivan Nikitich.¹⁵)

In the period leading up to the March 2 elections, many analysts and journalists expressed concern that if Putin did not remain in power, the bureaucrats would begin fighting amongst themselves over the spoils of government.¹⁶ This, too, was part of the public relations campaign: to show that "the people" (unspecified, of course) are afraid that without Putin, the country will sink into civil war and anarchy. This fear, of course, has deep historical roots, dating back at least to the famous Lay of Igor's Host, the work of literature most often cited as teaching the dangers of a divided ruling house.¹⁷

This fall and winter (2007-08) Putin supporters brought forward another historical chestnut in support of their candidate. If Putin did not remain the national leader, Russia would fall behind the "civilized world." It would once again become "backward."¹⁸

Why, ultimately, did Putin make such a big deal of not running for president for a third term?

I think a key part of the answer is that he himself did not know exactly what he was going to do. As in Soviet times, it was convenient to allow a little bit of discussion in the pages of the press and in the Internet so as to garner more ideas and options.

I also think that it suited Putin's notion of having a union between president and people that the people should call for his reelection, the people should appear to ask him to remain in office as national leader.

This, of course, satisfied a condition of the classic cult of personality, especially as expressed in the Soviet era, namely that the Soviet leader should appear modest, should be called to office but not seek it himself.

But I think this also had deeper roots in the tsarist notion of a union between tsar and people. The tsar could represent the people because he was one of them, because he knew them better than his advisers did.

It also satisfied the agenda of United Russia which sought to be the one party of power. In order to uphold that status the party needed to be the one to appear to put forth the national leader. He was their leader; they were his party. Rather than developing a serious ideology, it was easier to assume that the very name of Vladimir Putin would have resonance in the country and bring voters to the polls.

The question on everyone's minds today is whether this union of president and prime minister, Medvedev and Putin, can hold. My guess is that it can. In the months leading up to his election and then inauguration Medvedev was consistently given the lesser role in front of the cameras, and he accepted that role. On February 14, 2008, when Putin held a conversation with journalists in Moscow that lasted a record four hours and 40 minutes, Medvedev was in Siberia proposing a return to giving an award for families with many children. On other occasions when Putin was pronouncing on national strategy, Medvedev was in Kaliningrad opening a maternity hospital. The gender symbolism here was not accidental. Putin consistently put Medvedev in charge of the "national projects"—health, education, housing and agriculture—all secondary, even one might say, "female," spheres of activity.

Putin, in the meantime, has said that the prime minister is responsible for the government, the economy, foreign relations, and the military. In the last few days since being named prime minister he has already named seven deputy prime ministers, including his most recent prime minister, Viktor Zubkov, who now will serve as his first deputy prime minister. By moving many of his key advisers from the Kremlin (where the president rules) to the White House, where the prime minister sits, Putin is clearly declaring to the world who will be the true boss. Dmitri Medvedev may be president of the country (a position which the Constitution says should be dominant), but the real power, both formal and informal, will be in the hands of Vladimir Putin. Ultimately, in Russia today as in Soviet times, personality (and personal control) is more important than the institution or formal definition of power in the presidency.

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nbhuch (NHUCH@mit.edu, 617.253.1965)

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As long as Medvedev does not create any trouble (which it is not in his interests to do), Putin can benefit from having an apparently “liberal” face to attract foreign investment. Presidential elections can be held every four years with new presidents coming to power. Medvedev can even be reelected.¹⁹ Putin meanwhile can remain in power indefinitely either in his capacity as head of United Russia or in his capacity as prime minister. Should there be a misstep on Medvedev’s part, however, and the relationship become unsatisfactory, there is no reason that Putin cannot be reelected to the presidency. The Constitution stipulates merely that he cannot hold two consecutive terms. If the country were to be plunged into some kind of “crisis” (even one that was transparently manufactured), elections could be held speedily and Putin, the elder statesman, would be returned to power as president.

For all these reasons, it seems likely that Putin will continue to be the dominant figure in the duumvirate. The question of Medvedev’s selection, then election and inauguration appears to have been carefully organized so that he would be the junior partner and Putin would dominate, regardless of the formal institutional domination of the presidency over the prime ministership. During the inauguration Putin entered the Kremlin hall first before Medvedev. Putin gave a speech before Medvedev’s, and it was just as long. Then finally Putin walked down the stairs outside the Kremlin to review the presidential troops alongside Medvedev. At every step in the ceremonies that day Putin was ahead of Medvedev and waiting for him.

footnotes

- 1 Georgii Il'ichev, “Medvedev snachala vydvinul Putina, a potom ego podderzhal,” *Izvestiia*, December 12, 2007, <http://dlib.eastview.com.ezp2.harvard.edu/searchresults/article.jsp?art=18&id=13097612>.
- 2 Albert B. Evans, Jr., “Power and Ideology: Vladimir Putin and the Russian Political System,” *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1902, January 2008.
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- 11 Natal’ia Melikova, “Triumf Liberalov,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 266, December 11, 2007; <http://dlib.eastview.com.ezp2.harvard.edu/searchresults/article.jsp?art=4&id=13092505>.
- 12 “Russkii vzgliad: ezhenedel’nee tok-shoy,” http://www.3channel.ru/rus_view. “Putin and Mikhail Romanov,” *Informatsionno-analiticheskii tsentr Sova*, March 27, 2005; <http://osada.sova-center.ru/ideology/4E78773/52E8A11>.
- 13 Of course, it needs to be noted that historians disagree about the length of the Time of Troubles, dating it variously from 1584 (the death of Ivan IV) or 1598 (the death of his son Fedor) or 1605 when Boris Godunov and the first False Dmitri triumphantly entered Moscow. Typically, though, the 17th century Time of Troubles is said to have last 15 years, whereas Yeltsin’s rule only lasted from 1991-1999.
- 14 The actual date was Feb. 21, 1613, but that would correspond to March 2 or 3 in the calendar today, given the change in calendars since then.
- 15 Vladimir Mogil’nikov, “Rod Putinykh nachalsia s bobyliia Iakima Nikitina,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda*, July 18, 2002; <http://dlib.eastview.com.ezp2.harvard.edu/searchresults/article.jsp?art=0&id=4223733>.
- 16 Vitalii Ivanov, “Putin – eto nadolgo,” *Izvestiia*, October 29, 2007; <http://dlib.eastview.com.ezp2.harvard.edu/searchresults/article.jsp?art=2&id=12820104>, accessed on January 11, 2008.
- 17 Even if, as historian Edward Keenan argues, the Igor Tale is a forgery, nonetheless it has had symbolic preeminence as a narrative since at least the 18th century. The threat of a divided country and a divided leadership has been dredged up throughout Russian history. Even during perestroika ordinary Russians expressed fears of a possible split in the country and a descent into civil war.
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- 19 After all, in Soviet times Mikhail Kalinin was the nominal head of the Soviet government from 1919-1946 under both Lenin and Stalin, yet no one had any doubts who was the true leader of the country.



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