

An Elegant Solution to the Medvedev-Putin Problem

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“An excessive concentration of power is indeed a dangerous thing: it has happened in this country many times and as a rule it has either led to stagnation or to civil war. We must not allow that. Attempts to build up power to fit a certain individual are dangerous. If they do not cause trouble today you must not doubt that they will cause great problems for the country and for the individual in the not-too-distant future. We must think about this and remember the lessons of history.”

Remarks by President Medvedev during an official visit to the city of Kostoma, 13 May 2011¹

Russia is now absorbed in the burning question of who will stand for President in 2012. Kremlinologists at home and abroad are desperately trying to read the meaning of indirect remarks and hints from the President and Prime Minister. All is speculation. But Medvedev’s statement is about as clear as one can be. It should not be Putin.

Putin has himself on various occasions assured public opinion that, whatever the decision, it would be arrived at by the two of them in agreement together. This seems intended to reassure people that political uncertainty and instability will be avoided. But it would also be the most basic denial of democratic choice for the people.

The two men have for most of their duumvirate observed impressive discipline in their division of labour and abstaining, in large part, from issuing contradictory statements. Putin has been running the government. Medvedev has been doing foreign affairs and, while interested in domestic affairs, has largely steered clear of second-guessing the Prime Minister. The state television’s news programmes have been absolutely impeccable, always covering what each of the two men did that day; indeed never is there a day when one of them did something important while the other did nothing newsworthy. But there have been times when differences could be suspected and more recently differences have become more explicit, and a competition between alternative political concepts has emerged.

Putin stands for his re-establishment of the vertical power at home and restoring respect for Russia as a great power internationally. Medvedev positions himself as moderniser, democrat and ardent advocate of the rule of law. The differences could be summarised in terms of political slogans – ‘continuity versus change’, or ‘power versus values’ – applicable in both domestic and foreign policies.

¹ “Medvedev warns about excessive power”, *Financial Times*, 14-15 May 2011 (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ca9f1d34-7d99-11e0-b418-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1NMPvKSdg>).

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Medvedev's modernisation agenda is a fusion of the domestic and external, echoing the tradition developed by Peter the Great. In domestic economic policy, Putin has tended to restore the power of the state in major enterprises, placing his ex-KGB lieutenants in many key positions. Medvedev has recently acted in precisely the opposite direction with a decree that government office holders should not combine their functions with positions on the board of state-controlled enterprises. Vice Prime Minister Sechin was obliged to resign from the board of Rosneft and Finance Minister Kudrin from the board of the partly privatised VTB bank. This move symbolised an intent to modernise Russia's corporate governance methods, to separate business from government interests more clearly and to combat corruption at the highest level. It was also marking the need for renewal of the Russian elite, moving on from a system dominated by a clique of former KGB officers.

But the domestic political agenda goes far wider and deeper. Medvedev has made the rule of law one of his hallmark initiatives. Yet as the Khodorkovsky case has shown, the President has been unable to free the judiciary from the political preferences of the Prime Minister. "In which dusty cellar did they dig up the poisonous Stalinist spider who wrote this drivel?" said Khodorkovsky on May 24th at the Moscow court after hearing the judge's conclusions leading to the rejection of his appeal over the second sentence on extending his imprisonment to 13 years.²

A semi-independent view of the political agenda favoured by Medvedev can be read in documents published by the Institute for Contemporary Development, directed by Igor Jurgens. Their most recent 460-page report is entitled *Agenda 2012*, and is explicitly aiming at the presidential election.³ It is a wide-ranging strategy, all quite reasonable to Western eyes. These documents are presented as normal think tank products, intended to feed the politician's need for programme detail. Democracy and the rule of law are integral parts of *Agenda 2012*, and of Medvedev's discourse. Putin meanwhile is making speeches essentially along the lines that drastic changes of course are not needed, after de-democratising the selection of regional governors, and now warning against "radical economic experiments".

In the foreign policy domain, differences could be suspected already in 2008 over the war with Georgia. While an external security affair for which the President is boss, it was Putin who arrived first on the scene in Vladikavkaz to direct the Russian invasion of South Ossetia and Georgia proper. But very recently there has been explicit disagreement over Libya. Russia abstained over the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which amounted to acquiescence to the French-British intent to intervene militarily. When Putin then denounced this as a "crusade", Medvedev slapped him down, calling his remarks "unacceptable". Putin then had to remark that the President had indeed responsibility for foreign policy. Less dramatically Medvedev has been in the forefront of diplomacy with the EU to develop a 'Modernisation Partnership'. His analysis is that Russia is not on course to achieve its strategic modernization objective, and to do better requires closer cooperation with Europe and the West, and this in turn requires a certain convergence in foreign policy stances.

These differences are perfectly normal politics. But still they add up to a matter of strategic political choice for the nation, and indeed legitimate choice over both the programme and the person.

This leads back to the question who should make this choice. It would be condescending if not insulting for the Russian people for Medvedev and Putin to settle the matter in a private conversation, after which one of them announces that he will back the other. The ideal

² "Khodokorsky ridicules Mevedev's law reforms as appeal rejected", *Financial Times*, 25 May 2011.

³ See <http://vikno.eu/eng/politics/politics/igor-jurgens-has-urged-medvedev-and-putin-to-hurry.html>

solution would surely be for both Medvedev and Putin to stand for President. It would mark a huge step forward in the maturing of Russian democracy. It would also represent smooth political development and stability, since both men are experienced and skilled in the exercise of government. It would avoid a risky plunge into the unknown. It would be a strikingly elegant political move, which would have a hugely positive impact of Russia's international reputation, and become a source of pride for the Russian people – 'we agreeably surprised ourselves'. If the people preferred Putin after a fair and open campaign, so be it. The reverse, for example an announcement that the two men had agreed that Putin would stand again, would be a huge step backwards. Putin for another decade, chosen by Putin and not the people, would put him into the same league as the now-discredited Arab authoritarianism. As the Arab world goes forward, will Russia go into reverse?