

RUSSIA: NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE AUTOCRACY

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In Russia, as in the United States, 2008 will be a presidential election year, and in both countries the favorite pastime of the chattering classes is second-guessing the presidential succession.

For that diminishing group of observers who believe in the possibility of authentic liberal democracy in Russia, the presidential election in 2008 offers a rare – and slim – chance for some movement toward a more open and responsive political regime. There are precious few other grounds for optimism in the Russian political scene. Most Western governments seem to have given up on the idea of a democratic Russia: their primary concern is its reliability as a source of energy supplies.

The main theme of the past year was the reported efforts of some in Putin's entourage (such as Deputy Chief of Staff Igor Sechin) to persuade or maneuver the president into staying on for a third term. Such a development became less likely with each successive statement from Putin that he intended to follow the constitution and step down. For example, in his October televised public call-in, Putin reiterated that he cannot permit Russia's fate to depend on only one person.

If Putin follows through on his word, he will do Russia a great service: it will be the first time in Russia's 1,000-year history that the country will have experienced a peaceful and constitutional leadership transition. (Boris Yeltsin was the first Russian leader to voluntarily step down, in 1999, but he did so while waging an all-out war in Chechnya.)

TRACKING THE CANDIDATES

It seems likely that Putin will try to replicate his own accession to the presidency: a smooth transition in which the various factions of the elite consolidate around a leader who does not pose an obvious threat to any of them, who is acceptable to the general public, and who can represent Russia in the international community.

The leading Kremlin candidate right now is First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. A Levada Center poll released in November showed Medvedev pulling 38 percent support and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov 23 percent in a presidential election. According to journalist Lyudmila Romanova, Medvedev is the only potential candidate whose staff is being allowed to effectively run a public campaign, orchestrating favorable media coverage. Medvedev was appointed the head of the "national projects" – schemes to spend some of Russia's surplus oil revenues on health care, education, housing, and agriculture. Thus he is the official most closely associated (after Putin himself, of course) with the steady rise in economic growth and living standards that Russia has experienced over the past seven years.

Medvedev's prominence is confirmed by the findings of Medialogia, a company that tracks the number of times politicians are mentioned in national and regional media. Medvedev got 2,051 mentions in television news broadcasts in 2006, nearly as many as Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and well ahead of Duma speaker Boris Gрызlov and Economy Minister German Gref, each mentioned about 1,400 times. One striking result was that was Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov was second-most visible after Putin himself, with 3,361 mentions: a reminder of the central role that Moscow plays in Russian political life. Luzhkov is

not a candidate for the presidency, but his visibility may give him some opportunity to influence the outcome.

Sergei Ivanov actually scored more mentions than Medvedev. He has been particularly visible in the media in the past month or so, connected with a surge in defense procurement spending. But the Russian military has been associated with a torrent of bad news over recent years, from sunken submarines and failed missile tests to tortured recruits. The image of Ivanov was also dented by the May 2005 auto accident in which his 28-year-old son, Alexander, killed a pedestrian. (No charges were filed in the case.) It would be risky for the Kremlin to promote Ivanov as the next president, and Putin is decidedly risk-averse. With Ivanov's star waning, the *siloviki* (security faction) in the Kremlin are thought to be favoring Gryzlov. But it is hard to see any real chance for an outsider such as Gryzlov, who lacks direct experience in building a coalition of allies inside the Kremlin corridors of power.

ONE PARTY, ONE PRESIDENT

It seems likely that the successor will be named by September in order to give the Kremlin's party, United Russia, a focus for the Duma elections that will take place in December. A United Russia victory in those elections would give the successor a smooth ride to victory in the presidential election in March 2008. The ideal scenario for Putin would be to create a bandwagon effect, getting the factions of the political elite to fall into line when they see that it is in their interests to rally behind the appointed successor and to avoid antagonizing Putin. Still, some commentators continue to predict that the transition will fail, and Russia will slip back into political chaos.

United Russia's position as the ruling "party of power" seems secure. The latest Levada poll found 48 percent of respondents saying they will vote for United Russia, 22 percent for the Communist Party, and 10 percent for Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party. Other parties fall below the 7 percent threshold for entering the Duma, including the Just Russia party, headed by Federation Council head Sergei Mironov. Just Russia was cobbled together by the Kremlin in October, the last in a line of vain efforts to create a loyal opposition party for voters who are dissatisfied with the governing party. The main function of Just Russia is to provide a check on United Russia, not to be a serious alternative.

Even though Russian politics is now much more stable than it was eight years ago, when Putin emerged, no one can rule out a possible return to the open faction-fighting of the late 1990s. There have been some important institutional changes, most notably the reassertion of Kremlin control over television and the creation of a one-party system. And seven years of strong economic growth has solidified public support for the regime. Few take seriously the possibility of a popular "color revolution" in Russia: but taking no chances, the government has taken steps to stamp out such a development, such as tighter controls over foreign support for nongovernmental organizations.

Nevertheless, the glasnost era of the late 1980s showed that a monolithic political regime can change very quickly if the political elite is divided. Also, the number of oligarchs has tripled since 1999: there are now 33 individuals with more than \$1 billion of assets. They represent an important source of latent pluralism in the Russian political system. With such resources at their disposal, it would be easy for them to mount a serious political challenge to the Kremlin, if they saw the need to do so.

The stability that Putin has engineered during his term in office seems too good to be true. Many

observers inside and outside the country caution that one should expect the unexpected. All the same, after 15 years of "transition," the vague possibility of a political crisis in 2008 is thin gruel for advocates of democracy.