

## Ex-president Putin: To stay and leave at the same time

Written by Eric Walberg

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The handover of power in Russia is confounding one and all. Eric Walberg looks into the crystal ball 6/3/8 -- As expected, the Russian presidential elections went smoothly, with Dmitri Medvedev reaping a comfortable 70 per cent of the vote, with a robust turnout of 70 per cent, virtually tied with President Vladimir Putin's 71 per cent in 2004. The Communists garnered a surprising 18 per cent, despite what both they and foreign observers claimed were clear violations of procedure in some districts. However, even the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe concluded it reflected the will of the people.

"Together we can continue the course set by President Putin. Together we'll go further. Together we'll win," Medvedev, dressed in jeans and a black leather jacket, told a crowd who braved driving sleet to cheer him after the tally. Medvedev did not campaign and refused to take part in televised debates. However, no one questions his right to move into Russia's powerful presidential seat, despite his tender 42 years and the fact that he has never been elected before.

Frustrated Western commentators denounced the elections. Italy's La Stampa referred to "a democracy that many consider mutilated, even destroyed." With the remarkable turnaround of Russia's fortunes under Putin, they have reverted to the arcane science of Kremlinology, dismissing Russian public life; instead, sifting through bits of media fluff -- who's sitting next to whom at meetings, etc -- to try to gaze into Russia's political future. While this can be amusing, it's not necessary in order to see the broad outlines of what is happening.

In his eight years at the helm, Putin reversed Russia's decline and is deservedly admired and respected. At the same time, the robber-baron plutocracy he inherited did not magically reform itself, but seems to have settled in to a quasi-state-run group of competing power centres -- "clans" is a word casually thrown around in the Western media, with Putin supposedly keeping the lid on their desires to expand their influence. Remarkably, to the extent that this scenario indeed reflects the reality, Putin himself has not staked out a personal economic empire, unlike his ne'er-do-well predecessor Boris Yeltsin.

Though the latter is universally reviled now, much as is his own predecessor Mikhail Gorbachev, Yeltsin is at least given credit for plucking the incorruptible ex-KGB agent Putin from obscurity and letting him clean up some of the mess he created, though Putin was forced to agree to leave Yeltsin and his cronies alone, which he did.

Now the tables have turned somewhat. Putin could easily retire as did Yeltsin and bask in his deserved fame. He could easily have agreed to calls to amend the constitution to allow him to continue indefinitely as president. Instead, he chose to pass the torch to a young liberal lawyer

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with no background in the security forces, and to take on the much less prestigious, much harder task of prime minister. It's the PM who takes the heat when the economy screws up. He can be dismissed along with the cabinet by the president.

But what is so enigmatic about this? Russia now has some law and order, some stability, some credibility as a bulwark against Western imperial pressures. Time to move on. All indications are that Putin will continue to be an important political force, quite possibly taking on the delicate but important task of taming the siloviki (referring to the security forces) who are trying to consolidate their economic power with the new, equally clean president backing him up.

The Western view is that Medvedev is merely a puppet that Putin will manipulate and discard if he doesn't prove up to the task, a weak and hopefully harmless compromise candidate who will ensure that the privileges of Russia's political clans are preserved and kept under control. That this is in the Russian tradition of the dictator and his circle choosing someone who will not rock the boat.

In fact, none of his predecessors were shrinking violets, even the cautious Brezhnev, who pushed aside his patrons and effectively destroyed the system he inherited by trying not to rock the boat too much. But Medvedev is no Brezhnev. It is very unlikely that he's a Gorbachev either. The nightmare that perestroika resulted in is all too fresh in Russians' minds. Nor is there the same desperate need to radically change the system as there was with Stalin or Khrushchev.

The political landscape eight years on has already changed radically from the days of Yeltsin. Not only are the Westernisers cowed, but the Communists are now the loyal, if slightly put-out, opposition -- a complete reversal of the legacy that Yeltsin bequeathed Putin. Yes, Russia has effectively reverted to a one-party state, though unlike the Communist days, there is lots of room for criticism. Like its Soviet predecessor, Russia has a vital role to play in the world as the brave voice that will speak out against US imperialism. These realities are Putin's most enduring legacy. It is unlikely that Medvedev will discard them. Furthermore, he has staked out his intentions to engage the private sector, as opposed to his rival Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov's desire to establish new state-run corporations.

As for Putin, it seems that he is getting ready to roll up his sleeves and tackle the troubling stranglehold that economic elites still have on Russian life. He is certainly the inspiration for Medvedev's announcement that government officials should not hold positions on boards of

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companies. "Truly independent directors should replace them," Medvedev has made clear. Which means he will himself resign as chairman of Gazprom and surely insist that Kremlin Personnel Manager Viktor Ivanov resign as chairman of Almaz-Anbtej, Minister of Education Andrei Fursenko as chairman of Ronsnanotekh, and Kremlin aide Sergei Chemezov as chairman of Rosoboronexport, all protégés of Putin. The recent arrest of the notorious mafia kingpin Semyon Mogilevich is also a hopeful sign of things to come. Putin already created an investigative commission to operate in parallel with the prosecutor-general's office to try to balance these groups, chaired by Aleksandr Bastrykin.

Last October in Kommersant, head of Federal Drug Control Service Viktor Cherkesov called for a ceasefire among warring siloviki, warning that state corporatism, credited with saving Russia, would collapse if the infighting continued. Analyst Alexander Golts explains, "they stood together as long as they were robbing others of their assets. But after dividing the spoils, they realised that they can only expand their wealth by robbing one another."

That all this is public knowledge shows that no one is deemed untouchable. Can Medvedev/Putin call a truce among the warring Kremlin factions, and strengthen judicial independence? Or is the intent to pursue the "sovereign democracy" which now seems to be the norm, establishing an acceptable pax putina within the economic elite, a kind of neo-tsarism?

This is clearly uncharted territory. Everyone agrees that the future of the political (and, by implication, bureaucratic) diarchy will keep Russians, indeed the world, guessing which of the two has more political clout. It is quite possible that Medvedev will continue to take directions from Putin. Boris Kagarlitsky, director of the Institution for Globalisation Studies and Social Movements in Moscow, worries, "will the bureaucratic machine be efficient now that neither the law nor the internal administrative regulations say how it must function?" Kagarlitsky argues that the transformation of the president into the PM could paralyse the presidential administration and the cabinet of ministers, that this move is a blunder, a dangerous game -- to leave and stay at the same time.

Is this a replay of the legendary Russian tragedy of Boris Godunov, regent to Tsarevich Feodor, or a heroic and brilliant strategy to continue Russia's return to health? Perhaps it will be clearer by this summer, when Russia sends a delegation to the Group of Eight meeting in Japan. Will Putin attend, or Medvedev, or both?

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