

The Russian Presidential Election 2008: Unfolding the Russian paradoxes

The Russian Presidential election of 2008, held on March 2, 2008 resulted in the election of Dmitry Medvedev as the third President of Russia. Mr. Medvedev received 70.3% of the vote, defeated candidates from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and the Democratic Party of Russia. The very fact of this election is of outmost importance, since it marks the first time in 1000 years of Russian history that a Russian leader, relatively young, in good health and enjoying enormous popularity, who could have easily and legally changed the constitution, has stepped down because he obeys the law and wants Russia to be treated as a civilized European nation.

Western observers have criticized the election as neither free nor fair but said its outcome broadly reflected the will of the people. This paradoxical conclusion can be unfolded further and further along the Russian matryoshka-like model. Dmitry Medvedev, the best possible candidate for the 2008 presidential election, who was introduced by Vladimir Putin as his successor in a way that cannot be assessed as fully democratic, would have never won the election without Putin's support. Why? It would be very tempting to explain the fact that "the best possible candidate" would not have been elected by the Russian population in a free and fair election with the inherent leanings of Russians towards authoritarianism in line with the recent saying of president Bush "it is impossible to reprogram Russian DNA which is centralized authority'. But the reality is much more complex. The predominant sentiments of the ordinary Russians who in the 90s lived through two coups d'état, two wars and two defaults today are marked by a mix of the post- Versailles syndrome (the humiliation of the 1990s) and the post-Weimar syndrome (the fear of falling back into misery at the stage of coming out of the crisis). Put it simply, the Russians enjoy the relative stability and improved living conditions they have now and they are fearful that radical changes may reverse the situation. Nonetheless, they have

supported Medvedev who is broadly perceived as a reformer and whose policy can lead to radical changes. Another paradoxical conclusion which has, however, a very simple explanation: they elected Dmitry Medvedev because Vladimir Putin whom they trust backed him.

Unfolding the Russian paradoxes further, it would be expedient to raise another question. Why president Putin who is regarded by many Western observers as an authoritarian leader, has chosen of his entourage Dmitry Medvedev as a candidate for presidential elections? The most common answer to this question is that Vladimir Putin has been guided by his personal interests, above all to maintain the status quo. He knows Medvedev for many years. Medvedev is personally loyal to Putin and he is not an independent figure, which means that the reins of power will remain in Putin's hands. But this answer doesn't explain why Putin has chosen the most liberal politician as his successor since there is no shortage of loyal conservatives in Putin's entourage and for "an authoritarian leader" it would be natural to rely on his like-minded.

It is all the more so, since many views and statements of Medvedev differ from those of Vladimir Putin. Medvedev is known as one of the critics of the so-called sovereign democracy concept, formulated by Vyacheslav Surkov, the deputy chief and prime ideologue of President Vladimir Putin's administration. Medvedev explained that "sovereignty" and "democracy" belong to different philosophical categories and that they should not be combined. In his public speeches Medvedev has emphasized freedom and justice as the main ideals for Russia, civil dignity, social responsibility, investing in human capital through the health and social spheres, and overcoming Russia's legal nihilism. He put forward four areas in particular as planks of his program: investment, strengthening democratic institutions, revamping infrastructure, and encouraging innovation, having introduced himself as a reformer. His foreign policy statements often contrast with Putin's rhetoric. On relations with the West, Medvedev emphasizes co-operation rather than the differences over issues such as Kosovo and the

proposed US missile defense shield in Eastern Europe. "Unlike other Kremlin insiders, (Medvedev) doesn't stem from the secret service, which was an organ of repression in the Soviet Union. He isn't locked into the mindset of a command economy. And he has so far refrained from aggressive rhetoric towards Europe and the US."¹

Putin has accepted him as such because there is a growing understanding at least in some of the Kremlin corridors that the present economic and political course leads nowhere, that the model of the economy based on exports of raw materials is a model of an authoritarian political system. This is the model of a system which implies growing stratification of society and constituent regions, the all-permeating corruption of government, underemployment of the population, drain of intellectual capital and skilled human resources, very strained budget resources (for a country that vast), etc. Even president Putin himself in his last press conference, which was dedicated mostly to the achievements of his presidency, has recognized three main failures: (1) to switch from an oil-dependent economy to a high-tech economy; (2) to establish a high-functioning state apparatus; and (3) to clamp down significantly on corruption.²

The skeptics in Russia and in the West say that one should not rely on Medvedev's rhetoric whose only goal is to change the image of Russia dented by the controlled democracy and curtailment of democratic trends in the Russia post-Soviet evolution. But it won't be possible to change the image of Russia without changing its policy. Gorbachev started perestroika without any grand design. He wanted to change the image of the USSR but the logic of even superficial changes pushed him further and further which resulted at the end of the day in New Political Thinking and a real break through in the USSR-West relations. Unlike Gorbachev, Medvedev has his grand design and clear vision of what should be done.

¹ German business daily **Financial Times Deutschland**<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,23336974-12813,00.html>

² english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/02-02-2006/75035-putin-0 - 33k -

Looking back in time one cannot but recognize that Yeltsin historic mission was to destroy the USSR and its legacy, while Putin's task was to stabilize the impoverished country which was falling apart. Both leaders performed their missions with heavy losses. Yeltsin "went too far and brought the state to social and economic collapse. Putin met the widespread need for stability the country felt after Yeltsin, bringing about an end to major violence in the post-Soviet space and withdrawing Russian troops from abroad. One of his major accomplishments was to keep the authorities from intruding heavily in people's daily lives, which counted for a great deal among the Russian people, who generally distrust the authorities. Although he curtailed democratic institutions and norms, Putin left the country open and allowed Russians to go abroad at will. Yet for all that, Putin went too far as well -- from stability to stagnation."³ Now Medvedev's mission is to do away with the stagnation and radically reform the country.

Will he be able to perform this mission? It would be senseless if not counterproductive to give now pessimistic and apocalyptic forecasts without providing the newly elected president for an opportunity to perform his mission. Western analysts have often pointed out that "Russians are never happy", that "they always complain" and that "they are always dissatisfied with the West". Today the same can be said about the West, which is never happy with Russia. Recently there were concerns that Putin would remain for the third term. It didn't happen but immediately there emerged new concerns about his successor who will be chosen from the conservative part of the Kremlin team. It didn't happen. Now the West is worried about Medvedev's role as "Putin's puppet" and "a rubber stamp" to Putin's agenda.

No doubt, president Medvedev will be faced with many problems, first and foremost with the challenge of resistance of the huge Russian bureaucracy. To rely on it would mean to become a hostage to its interests; to completely

³ www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=1099&prog=zru - 50k -

ignore it would mean that none of Medvedev's decisions will be implemented. Here lies another paradox of the Russian reality: to become independent from the state bureaucracy and informal influences of the Putin era, Medvedev will have to rely on Putin's support unless and until he creates his own constituency and power base. Statements of some political analysts like Andrei Piontkovsky that "Medvedev is chemically conditioned to obey Mr. Putin", and that "the artificial construction of two czars creates a real factor of instability"⁴ look contradictory. If Medvedev is doomed to obey Putin it would mean that there will be only one czar. Beyond this, it would be wrong to underestimate the magic magnitude of a presidential post for the Russian political elite. The very case of president Putin who started his presidency as Yeltsin successor is very telling from this point of view. The real threat is different: in Russia the primary responsibility always rests with President and if the Medvedev leadership is unable to resolve the problems facing the nation, there will be a crisis of power. Under this scenario it would not be clear who, if Medvedev is ousted, would become president. Not necessarily Vladimir Putin.

The success of Medvedev's presidency will depend not only on his ability and skills to build a reliable power base in order to address the most urgent problems of the Russian society but on the policy of Russia's Western partners, above all European Union, which should take into account both the alternatives that are realistically possible in Russia and the impacts of own (often wrong) actions on the political in-fighting in Russia. Democracy cannot be imposed from the outside on unprepared society; it should be a product of consistent domestic evolution which requires a benign international environment. A new post –PCA treaty between Russia and EU - if it is a real treaty but not just a new symbolic gesture - could provide president Medvedev with a solid foreign policy foundation and make the European choice of Russia irreversible.

⁴ <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/03/02/europe/russia.php>