



Russia: scenarios opened up by today's meagre choice

Submitted by Dmitri Furman on 14th May 2008

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This new reign of two Tsars will be unstable. But whatever happens, a democratic future is inevitable.

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We have no idea why Putin chose to step down from the presidency. Nor do we know why he nominated Medvedev as President and became Prime Minister and chair of the [United Russia Party](#) [7]. Indeed, a whole series of his actions before that are almost incomprehensible. They were like the moves of a conjurer or a con artist playing the 'shell game.' Why did he set up a contest between Medvedev and Ivanov? Why replace Fradkov with Zubkov?

Whatever his motivation, these decisions have created a new, unstable situation in Russia. However good the relationship between Putin and Medvedev, it is always difficult psychologically for a former subordinate to become his former boss's boss, and vice versa. It is also going to be hard for the officials working with Putin and Medvedev, as is always the case when it is not clear who is the real boss. Powerful forces will be working to resolve a situation which is uncomfortable for all concerned.

Logically, there can only be two outcomes. The first is that Medvedev will become a real President, a 'lord and master', like his predecessor. In this scenario, Putin will, in due course, either be forced to step down, or do so voluntarily (and perhaps this is what they have devised). The second outcome is that Medvedev will agree to act as a pawn for the four years Putin needs to comply with the constitution, which for some reason is very important to him. Real power will remain in Putin's hands, who will return to the post of President after four years and calmly rule for another eight.

Between these two alternatives a whole spectrum of minor variations and compromise outcomes opens up. Putin may step down, for example, but only after Medvedev's first term. He may stop being Prime Minister but consolidate his position as chair of the United Russia Party, and so on.

It is impossible to guess which of these outcomes will actually be realized. This depends on a thousand factors of which we know nothing. They are unpredictable, depending as they do on completely random events. Cue future novelists, film directors and historians with a taste for the romantic-detective...

We must ask ourselves, however, whether the instability of the situation is actually important. It may not be. It obviously is for our two bosses, their family members and immediate circle. But is it significant for the country? Does our President's surname matter, if the system remains unchanged and things continue as before? In my opinion the different outcomes are significant for the country. For they will affect the timing, character and repercussions of two unavoidable events.

The transition to democracy

One is the breaking of the chain of Presidents who nominate each other or themselves. This will



mark the end of the semi-dynasty nominated by Yeltsin. The other is the transition from an imitation democracy to a real one, one with genuine political choice.

Both are bound to happen. The current presidential semi-dynasty simply cannot go on for ever. It cannot even last for long. The transition to genuine democracy - the norm of the contemporary world - is inevitable. It is a necessary element of modern developed society. Objectively, the development of all countries which have not yet become genuine democracies leads in this direction.

The question is therefore not *whether* our semi-dynasty will go on, or end. It is not whether Russia will become a real democracy before the end of the world, or whether it will go on putting up with an imitation democracy. No, it is a matter of *when* these events happen. Will these developments happen at the same time? Will the present quasi-dynasty come to an end at the same time as Russia's transition to a genuine democracy? What form will these events take? How will it happen?

The transition may happen sooner or later. It may involve catastrophic political crisis and chaos, or it may be relatively 'soft', though it cannot be completely crisis-free. It may involve an immediate transition to genuine democracy. Or, although this is unlikely, it may lead, after a period of chaos, to a new imitation system which will further delay the inevitable transition to democracy. Obviously, the more chaotic the fall of the imitation system, the less chance of an immediate transition to a real democratic system: the softer the fall, the surer the transition to democracy. The crises that lie ahead will take their toll, though how great a toll we do not know. Russia may emerge from these crises as a country which is more or less great, though not a superpower. Or it may sink into insignificance.

Of course, we hope that the cost is as small as possible; that the dynasty comes to an end sooner rather than later. Most importantly, we hope that the transition to genuine democracy happens straight away. However, if a new imitation system did arise from the chaos, Russia might emerge from these crises as a country with a population of 50 million scattered across the far east and Siberia, rather than one of 100 million which will join the EU and NATO (or whatever organisations replace them) and play a significant, though not dominant, role in them.

The significance of today's 'meagre' choices is determined by whether their possible outcomes could influence the outcome of these really 'great' future alternatives. At the moment these choices do not appear to matter much. If Putin, for example, had named Ivanov rather than Medvedev as his successor would this have made the 'good' version more probable or the 'bad'?

The odds against positive change

In general, the way things have evolved since 1991 has made the 'good' version progressively less likely. We have 'safely' bypassed the possibility of a soft 'coloured' revolution, and adopted a harsh system more like Uzbekistan, where the end will certainly be catastrophic.

The legal opposition which might have come to power in a relatively organised way, as in Ukraine, has practically disappeared in Russia. Almost all the channels by which society might have expressed protest in an orderly fashion have been walled up. The valves in the boiler through which steam should escape are shut. Those in power have less and less feedback from society. Like the Soviet rulers, today's leaders watch television channels which they control, and read newspapers which they have handed over to people they trust. We are living out a watered-down version of what happened under Soviet power. At the end of this round a new version of the Soviet collapse awaits us.

An element of hope

However, Putin's decision to step down from the post of President has introduced a few new elements into the system. It has made it a touch more 'legal' and flexible. He has created a precedent by submitting the highest figure in the state to the constitution. There is certainly no parallel for this. It has the effect of introducing the society to constitutional norms. The system becomes slightly softer, more legal. The ruling power is no longer regarded as sacred. People relate to it with less reverence, since they understand that the president will eventually leave, whether in



four or eight years. Something like a real division of power has started to emerge. All of this makes a 'good' variant more plausible. Or it least it cushions us from the very worst.

Yet Putin retains significant power. We effectively have two Tsars. How are the different outcomes of this unstable situation likely to affect the great alternatives of the future? If real power remains in Putin's hands, if Medvedev is reduced to a symbolic figure, this will minimise the positive significance of Putin's submission to the Constitution. It may even move us a step closer to a more personalised and less legal, harsher system.

By contrast, if Medvedev becomes a real head of government, albeit restricted to two terms, this would in itself, regardless of his 'liberal tendencies', encourage the emergence of a regime which has some formal constitutional norms, and in which power is not personalised.

How different are these outcomes likely to be? If Putin hangs onto power, the situation will be somewhat like the purely personalised and harsh regime of the [Somoza clan in Nicaragua](#) [8]. Here, other members of the clan were periodically appointed as president, with the evident intention of reassuring the USA. If Medvedev becomes a genuine leader, the situation will be more like the regime of the [Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico](#) [9]. Here, presidents did name their successors. But they were strictly limited in their period of office. Both of regimes were imitation democracies. However, the first, harsher and more repressive, ended badly, while the second was resolved more softly and painlessly.

The best way forward

The best variant, as I see it, is neither of these. What we must hope for is that this unstable situation will last as long as possible. For then Putin and Medvedev will between them create some sort of political alternative. We will get used to the division of power, and the differences between them. However unlikely it may be, we must also hope for the very split in the elite which Putin and the ruling coterie have so far done their best to avoid.

The only chance of real elections - between Ivanov and Medvedev - has been and gone this year. Of course it would have been a pseudo-election between two similar members of the same team. But still it would have been a choice. It would have led to the appearance of different political groupings, real competition. Putin may even have had such a scenario in mind. But it would surely have been too radical a decision for him. Still, we should not rule out the possibility of this happening in future.

Putin's decision to step down from the presidency tells us something important: he and some of his circle understand that we have gone beyond the point where a 'soft' end to our quasi-dynasty and a transition to democracy is possible. It tells us that those in power are looking for some way to get off a moving staircase which is carrying us towards a deep and painful crisis. We can only hope that their search is crowned with improbable, yet possible, success.

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