

CRS Report for Congress

Russia's 2008 Presidential Succession

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Summary

First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, President Putin's chosen successor and long-time protege, was elected President on March 2, 2008, as expected, with about 70% of the vote. There was little real opposition. Medvedev had previously announced that if elected, he would propose Putin as Prime Minister and Putin has said that he will accept this post. The Putin regime has brought TV and radio under tight state control and virtually eliminated effective political opposition, assuring this "transition." The Kremlin's Unified Russia party had previously swept the parliamentary election (December 2, 2007), winning more than two-thirds of the seats in the Duma.

The Russian Constitution limits the president to no more than two consecutive four-year terms. President Putin's second term ends in May 2008. Uncertainty about the post-Putin succession had dominated and roiled Russian politics for most of 2007, until late in the year, when Putin made clear that he would relinquish the presidency and take the position of prime minister after Medvedev was elected president.

Putin's genuine popularity at home, combined with the near-total control that he and his regime exercise over nearly every aspect of the political scene, guaranteed the electoral outcomes sought by the Kremlin. Major questions remain, however, about the configuration of political power after Medvedev succeeds Putin as president. What will be the balance of power between the President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin? Will a diarchy of power be stable? Will Putin seek to regain the presidency after a Medvedev interregnum which would legalize a third (and fourth) *non-consecutive* term for Putin? The answers to these questions will help determine the course of Russia's political evolution – continuing and consolidating the authoritarianism that Putin has fostered, or moderating that trend. At the same time, Russia's domestic political evolution will likely have a strong influence on its relations with its neighbors, with the EU and NATO, and with the United States. Related CRS reports include CRS Report RL33407, *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*, by Stuart D. Goldman; CRS Report RS22770, *Russia's December 2007 Legislative Election: Outcome and Implications*, by Jim Nichol; and CRS Report RL32662, *Democracy in Russia: Trends and Implications for U.S. Interests*, also by Jim Nichol. This report will be updated as needed.

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Russia's 2008 Presidential Succession

The Succession Question

Transfer of supreme political power in Russia can be a dicey business. Under the tsars, succession to the throne often was accompanied by intrigue and bloodshed. This held true during the communist period as well, although it became less deadly after Stalin. In December 1991, Yeltsin effectively overthrew Gorbachev and dissolved the Soviet Union in a bloodless coup. Eight years later, a politically moribund Yeltsin resigned as President of Russia three months before the end of his term and named Putin Acting President, circumventing the normal electoral process. With this “leg-up,” Putin easily won election in March 2000 and was reelected with no real opposition four years later. Putin’s presidency was a period of relative political stability, but as the end of his second term drew near, the succession question reemerged as a burning issue.

Putin is a very popular leader, enjoying nation-wide public approval ratings in the 70%-80% range during most of his presidency.¹ Pro-Kremlin political parties in the Duma (the lower and by far more powerful chamber of Russia’s bicameral legislature) have long held more than the two-thirds majority required to amend the constitution. The question on everyone’s mind was, would Putin step down at the end of his second term? In 2007, many Russian officials and politicians publically urged Putin to stay on as president. Numerous scenarios appeared in the Russian press, suggesting that Putin might override, amend, or do an end-run around the constitution in order to retain power.²

On September 10, 2007, Putin made a surprise announcement dismissing Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov — whom he had plucked from obscurity to take that post in 2005 — and nominated in his place the even more obscure Victor Zubkov, who had previously headed the Financial Monitoring Service, an arm of the Finance Ministry that investigates money-laundering. Zubkov is 65 years old and has no political power base or constituency of his own — other than Putin’s backing. Putin explained this move as necessary to “prepare the country” for forthcoming elections, which immediately triggered speculation that Zubkov might be Putin’s choice for

¹ In March 2007, Russia's prestigious Levada Center polling agency reported that Putin's popularity rating had reached 82%. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty [hereafter RFE/RL], *Newsline*, March 26, 2007.

² For example: the Duma might amend the constitution, removing the two-consecutive-term limit; Putin might declare a state of emergency and unconstitutionally extend his presidential term; Putin might take the presidency of a newly created Russia-Belarus union; Putin might leave the official political stage and take the helm of Russia’s giant natural gas monopoly, Gazprom; Putin might choose a pliant loyalist to succeed him as president and wield power from behind the scenes.

president in 2008, perhaps as a “place holder,” a mechanism that would allow Putin to retain control and/or return to the presidency after a brief interregnum. This brought the issue of the “Putin succession,” which had been heating up since 2006, to a full boil.

But in Russia’s election cycle, the vote for president (March 2, 2008) was preceded the parliamentary election (December 2, 2007), which was seen as a harbinger of the presidential contest. The Kremlin decided to make the 2007 parliamentary election a referendum on Putin and Putinism. And despite Putin’s apparent genuine popularity, they were determined to take no chances on the outcome. In the run-up to the Duma election, the authorities used myriad official and unofficial levers of power and influence to assure an overwhelming victory for United Russia, the main Kremlin party.³ On October 1, 2007, Putin announced that he would run for parliament at the head of the United Russia ticket, making the outcome doubly certain. The state-controlled media heavily favored United Russia and largely ignored or disparaged the opposition. Opposition party literature was seized and their rallies often shut down or harassed.⁴ Potentially popular opposition candidates were bought off, intimidated, or barred from running on “legal technicalities.” In March 2007, for example, the Supreme Court ruled that Vladimir Ryzhkov’s Republican Party — one of the few remaining liberal democratic parties — must be disbanded because it violated the 2004 law requiring parties to have at least 50,000 members and 45 regional offices.⁵ Russian authorities effectively prevented the main election observing body of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) from sending an observer team, first by limiting their number to 70 (compared to 450 OSCE observers for the previous Duma election) and then delaying issuance of visas until the last minute, thus blocking normal monitoring of the election campaign.⁶

The preordained result of the December 2, 2007 balloting for the Duma was a sweep by United Russia, which reportedly won 64.3% of the popular vote and 315 of the 450 seats — more than the two-thirds majority required to amend the constitution. A second pro-Kremlin party, A Just Russia — widely believed to have been created by Kremlin “political technologists” in 2007 to draw leftist votes away from the Communists⁷ — won 7.74 percent of the vote and 38 seats. The platforms of United Russia and A Just Russia consisted of little more than their slogan, “For Putin!” Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), with 8.14% of the vote, won 40 seats. Despite Zhirinovsky’s buffoonery

³ Robert Coalson, “Putin’s Kremlin Searches For Legitimacy,” FRE/RL, Monday, November 26, 2007.

⁴ RFE/RL, *Newsline*, November 15, 2007.

⁵ *Ibid.*, March 26, 2007.

⁶ *Ibid.*, November 28, 2007.

⁷ One newspaper opined that with the founding of this party, “Russia...[has] become possibly the first country in history with a two-party system in which both parties share the same overriding principle, that the executive is always right.” *Moscow Times*, October 30, 2006.

and reputation for right-wing extremism, the LDPR is also a reliable supporter of Putin in the Duma. Thus, the Kremlin can count on the votes of 393 of the 450 Duma Deputies. The only opposition party in the Duma is the Communist Party, which, according to the official vote count, won 11.57% of the vote and 57 seats. The remaining parties failed to cross the 7% threshold required to win seats in the legislature. The traditional liberal democratic parties, Yabloko and the Union of Rightist Forces, reportedly received 1.59% and 0.96% of the vote, respectively. The official voter turnout was total 63%. (See CRS Report RS22770, *Russia's December 2007 Legislative Election: Outcome and Implications*, by Jim Nichol.)

Despite some allegations of ballot-box stuffing, voter intimidation, and other “irregularities,”⁸ there is little doubt that by dint of Putin’s widespread popularity, an honest vote count would still have given United Russia a resounding victory. The main problem with the election was not the vote count, but the entire process leading up to the balloting. In the words of the deputy head of the OSCE’s Parliamentary Assembly, “the executive branch acted as though it practically elected the parliament itself.”

On December 10, barely a week after the Duma election, Putin announced his choice for president: Dmitri Medvedev. The 42-year-old Medvedev, a long-time Putin protégé, had headed the Presidential Administration before Putin made him First Deputy Prime Minister in 2005. Like Putin and many of the Kremlin inner circle, Medvedev is a native of St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad). But unlike so many of the inner circle, he does not have a background in the security services. His academic training is as a lawyer. He is viewed by many in Russia and the West as one of the most liberal of the generally illiberal cadre surrounding Putin.⁹

One day after his anointment, Medvedev announced that, if elected, he would ask Putin to serve as prime minister. One week later, Putin formally accepted this offer. This carefully choreographed arrangement presumably was meant to assure political continuity for Putin and to dampen political in-fighting among the rival clans within the Putin camp.¹⁰ But it does not clearly define the forthcoming political constellation, nor does it assure political stability. Competing scenarios and rumors abound. One thing that all observers agreed on, however, was that Putin’s selection of Medvedev made the later’s victory in the March 2 presidential election a certainty.

The Presidential Election

Immediately after Putin announced his support for Medvedev as his successor, Russia’s bureaucratic and political elites raced to affirm their loyalty to the chosen

⁸ The embattled North Caucasus regions of Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan reported heroic Soviet-era voter turnout of 99%, 98% and 92% respectively, with United Russia gaining 99% of the vote in Chechnya and Ingushetia and 89% in Dagestan.

⁹ RFE/RL, *Newsline*, December 11, 2007.

¹⁰ Pavel Baev, “Infighting Among Putin’s Siloviki Escalates to a Clan War,” Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, October 11, 2007.

one. The leaders of United Russia, A Just Russia, Civic Force, and the Agrarian Party all agreed to support Medvedev. "Each of the parties, in its own way, is realizing its political program by supporting a single candidate.... [T]his shows how the political system in Russia is maturing, and we now have the chance to make consolidated decisions, despite our differences," enthused Aleksandr Babkin of A Just Russia. Pavel Astakhov, head of the For Putin! movement, called Medvedev "a multifaceted person who suits the interests of completely different political forces and segments of society." Federation Council member Yury Sharandin observed, more pragmatically, that Medvedev would win the March 2 election in the first round because "the popularity of Vladimir Putin will be transferred this time not to an entire party with an enormous number of people, but to one concrete person."¹¹

Putin, apparently concerned that lack of credible opposition might lead to low voter participation, approved a law eliminating the requirement for a minimum 20% voter turnout for an election to the Duma and a 50% turnout for a presidential vote for an election to be valid.

In March 2007, Putin removed Aleksandr Veshnyakov as head of the Central Election Commission (CEC). Veshnyakov, who had served on the Commission since 1994 and been its chairman since 1999, criticized legislation that expands "pretexts for [the authorities] to disqualify candidates they find inconvenient..." and warned that Russia was in danger of becoming a one-party state. The new Chairmen, Vladimir Churov, said that "the principal difference between me and...Veshnyakov is that I am less likely to comment on election legislation and more inclined to get things done."¹²

One of Medvedev's few credible rivals was Mikhail Kasyanov, Putin's relatively liberal Prime Minister from 2000-2005. In 2006, a year after his dismissal, Kasyanov declared that he would form a new political party and run for president in 2008. The Federal Registration Service soon declared that it would not register Kasyanov's Russian Popular Democratic Union party because its registration documents "did not meet technical requirements."¹³ Kasyanov's party was barred from taking part in the Duma election. Russia's election law stipulates that parties not represented in the Duma may not nominate presidential candidates. Independent candidates must in a few weeks time collect the signatures of 2,000,000 supporters to be listed on the ballot – a daunting requirement. After Kasyanov's petitions were submitted, the Central Election Commission ruled that 13% of his 2.4 million signatures were invalid. Kasyanov was barred from participating in the election.¹⁴

Besides the two pro-Kremlin parties that backed Medvedev, only Zhironovsly's LDPR and the Communist Party are represented in the Duma and thus had the automatic right to nominate presidential candidates. The LDPR nominated Zhironovsky and the Communist Party nominated its long-time leader, Gennady

¹¹ RFE/RL, *Newsline*, December 11, 2007.

¹² RFE/RL, *Newsline*, March 14, 27, 2007.

¹³ *Ibid.*, October 23, 2006.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, January 25, 2008.

Zyuganov. One other name appeared on the ballot, Andrei Bogdanov, leader of the Democratic Party. Bogdanov, a former United Russia official, won control of the tiny Democratic Party with Kremlin backing after a leadership struggle with Kasyanov. Although the Democratic Party, usually seen as a Kremlin-backed pseudo-opposition group, won fewer than 90,000 votes nation-wide in the December 2007 Duma election, Bogdanov supporters apparently had little difficulty getting 2 million signatures and their man was certified as a candidate.¹⁵ This guaranteed that if Zyuganov dropped out of the race, as he had threatened, there would be at least the appearance of a contested election.

Russian and foreign observers of the election campaign virtually all noted that news coverage was skewed overwhelmingly in Medvedev's favor. This was especially true of TV news, the principal source of political news for most Russians. All the nation-wide TV networks are owned or controlled by the state. The previous format of "all-Putin, all the time" was shifted to Medvedev.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, Medvedev refused to participate in public debates with any of his rivals. Moscow also imposed the same restrictions on the OSCE's election observers as during the Duma election, with the same result. The OSCE refused to send election observers under the conditions imposed by Moscow. Election commissions in the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Germany all officially informed Moscow that they would not observe the presidential ballot.¹⁷

According to the final report of the CEC, Medvedev won 70.28% of the popular vote, slightly less than Putin's margin in 2004 (71.31%). Communist Party leader Zyuganov came in second with 17.2% of the vote. Zhirinovskiy polled 9.34% and Bogdanov garnered 1.29%. Zhirinovskiy's representative on the CEC stated that the results reflected the will of the people and Zhirinovskiy pledged to support the new president. Zyuganov claimed that election rigging had denied him an extra 5%-10% of the vote.¹⁸

While Russian and western observers understood that the outcome of this election was not really in doubt, there were major questions about what a Medvedev presidency might mean.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, January 15, 2008.

¹⁶ "Study Shows Medvedev Benefits from Massive Media Advantage," RFE/RL, *Newsline*, January 23, 2008; Peter Finn, "Prime Time for Putin's Anointed," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2008.

¹⁷ RFE/RL, *Newsline*, February 5, 20, 2008.

¹⁸ CRS Report RS22831, *Russia's March 2008 Presidential Election: Outcome and Implications*, March 13, 2008, p. 3.

Alternative Scenarios

Some speculate that Putin's obedient Duma majority may amend the constitution, shifting some power from the president to the prime minister. Under the present super-presidential constitution, the prime minister serves at the pleasure of the president and may be dismissed by the president at any time.¹⁹ According to "unnamed Kremlin sources," the Presidential Administration was ordered to prepare a draft constitutional law that would require the president to secure approval of four-fifths of the Duma and two-thirds of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of parliament) in order to dismiss the prime minister.²⁰ This is only one of many changes that would have to be made in order to shift power decisively from the president to the prime minister. It would require a major re-write of the constitution – a move that Putin has specifically said he does not contemplate.²¹

Others suggest that President Medvedev may voluntarily cede substantial power to Prime Minister Putin, allowing the mentor to continue wielding real power. Proponents of this view note that Medvedev's entire political career has been under the direct tutelage of Putin and that the younger man is a totally loyal protégé. But such a "dual power" arrangement is viewed by some observers as inherently unstable. As former Russian presidential spokesman Vyacheslav Kostikov put it, "the problem is who will be number one." Another insider wrote that "the key problem will not be relations between Putin and Medvedev *per se*, but how this diarchy is able to handle the Kremlin inner circle, which is split up into competing factions.... [T]he regime will have another center of influence no less legitimate than Putin, to whom it will be possible to appeal. And for the first time there will be a situation in which Putin's decision may not be the final or decisive one."²²

Another scenario envisions Medvedev resigning after a "decent interval," necessitating a new presidential election in which Putin would be eligible to run, since he would not have served more than two *consecutive* terms. This hinges on Medvedev's total loyalty to Putin. But could Putin count on that with complete certainty? The age-old lesson illustrated in Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* is that power is seductively delicious and difficult to relinquish.

Still others suggest that because Russian political institutions, *per se*, are weak, Putin would be able to retain the status of *de facto* national leader based on his popularity, prestige, and powerful connections with the security services, whose personnel he has placed in key positions throughout the government ministries and bureaucracy, the media, and leading economic enterprises.

¹⁹ Russia's constitution was re-written by Yeltsin in the aftermath of his destruction of the previous, rebellious parliament by cannon fire in October 1993. Yeltsin plucked Putin from relative obscurity in August 1999 to become his fifth prime minister in two years. Zubkov is Putin's third prime minister.

²⁰ *Argumenty nedeli*, No. 51, [Moscow], cited in RFE/RL, *Newsline*, December 20, 2007.

²¹ RFE/RL, *Newsline*, December 18, 2007.

²² Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, December 19, 2007.

Alternatively, Putin might plan on remaining as a powerful prime minister for a year or two while making sure that Medvedev is an able and loyal successor — and be prepared to push Medvedev aside if the younger man proved unsatisfactory. But in this view, if Medvedev proved himself to be a worthy successor in Putin's eyes, Putin would gradually relinquish command of the ship of state, leaving the helm in Medvedev's hands.²³

Possible Implications for U.S. Interests

Russia is not as central to U.S. interests or the U.S. role in the world as was the Soviet Union in the Cold War era. But developments in Russia are still quite important to the United States. Russia remains a nuclear superpower and will play a major role in determining the national security environment in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Russia is also a major economic power with vast oil and gas reserves. The war on terrorism, arms control, efforts to contain WMD proliferation, the future of NATO, and energy security, *inter alia*, may all be affected by developments in Russia. Important specific, immediate issues on the U.S.-Russian agenda include missile defense in Europe, Kosovo, and Iran's nuclear activities.

Some observers believe that the identity of the individual who wields power in the Kremlin after 2008 is not particularly important, because Putin has already succeeded in reestablishing traditional Russian authoritarianism and statism, i.e.: *Putinism* will prevail with or without Putin. Others argue that Russia's post-Soviet political evolution is still a work in progress, that the policies and preferences of Russia's paramount leader can be decisive in setting the nations' course — and its relations with the United States — as was the case when Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to the Kremlin and adopted policies that wrought profound, albeit sometimes unintended, consequences.

The question of whether Medvedev's election victory results in an actual transfer of power is in itself an important issue. If Medvedev replaces Putin as "the decider," the act of honoring the two-consecutive-term constitutional limit itself will strengthen the rule of law in Russia. If, on the other hand, it turns out that Putin succeeds himself in one way or another, that will reinforce the tradition that Russia is ruled not by laws, but by men. It may not necessarily be true that a more democratic Russia will be a more friendly and accommodating partner for the United States. But there is a widespread belief that the more Russia adopts the values of democracy and free markets, the more likely is it to co-exist harmoniously with the industrial democracies of the West — whereas authoritarianism and statism are believed more likely to lead toward militarism and neo-imperialism in what many Russians still think of as the "former Soviet space."

²³ *Ibid.*

There is a broad consensus in the West that Putin, the career KGB/FSB professional,²⁴ purposefully undermined nascent democratic trends that had arisen under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, in favor of statism and centralized authoritarianism. One of the hallmarks of Putin's administration is that he surrounded himself with current and former members of the security services, the so-called *siloviki*.²⁵ Medvedev is one of the few in Putin's inner circle who does not share that background, having initially attained prominence as an outstanding young attorney and law professor.²⁶ Some Russian and western observers view Medvedev as *relatively* liberal, compared to most other senior Kremlin insiders.²⁷ Others dispute this view, arguing that Medvedev could not have attained his current position if he were significantly out of step with Putin's authoritarian tendencies.

As First Deputy Prime Minister, Medvedev was in charge of the Putin administration's four major "national projects," high-profile government initiatives aimed at improving housing, health care, agriculture, and education. In his 2008 presidential campaign, Medvedev has focused on socioeconomic issues such as these, with the positive spin that "this is what I can/will do for you." He notably does not repeat Putin's tactic in the recent Duma election campaign, of shrilly denouncing opponents as "jackals" and agents of sinister outside forces, conspiring to foist some sort of "orange revolution" on Russia. Nor has Medvedev been in the chorus of top Russian officials sharply and ostentatiously criticizing the Bush Administration, U.S. policies, NATO, and the West. It is an open question whether Medvedev, as president, would seek to, or be able to, moderate the tough anti-U.S. rhetoric and,

²⁴ Putin was a Soviet KGB foreign intelligence officer for 16 years. In 1998-1999, he headed Russia's Federal Security Service, the domestic component of the former KGB.

²⁵ From the Russian word *silovik* (force), *siloviki* (plural) are Russian officials and politicians from the security services or military, often the KGB or its successor organizations.

²⁶ Medvedev was a lawyer and law professor in St Petersburg. His political career began when he was brought in as a consultant to the external relations committee of the St. Petersburg mayor's office in the early 1990s. There he established a friendship with Putin, who was also working for the prominent liberal Mayor Anatoly Subchak. Putin eventually attained the status of Subchak's *de facto* deputy mayor, earning a reputation as both an effective administrator and a friend of foreign (western) businesses. Apparently Medvedev, who worked concurrently as a legal consultant to major local businesses, kept up relations with Putin. When Putin became Prime Minister under Yeltsin in August 1999, he brought Medvedev to Moscow as Deputy Head of government administration. When Yeltsin named Putin acting President, Putin made Medvedev one of his deputy chiefs of staff. Medvedev chaired Putin's 2000 election campaign. In 2005, Putin moved Medvedev from the presidential administration to the government, as First Deputy Prime Minister. Reuters, February 24, 2008.

²⁷ Medvedev pointedly rejects the term "sovereign democracy," coined by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's hard-line Deputy Chief of Staff and ideologist-in-chief. The term is used to imply that Russia has its own unique brand of democracy, distinct from, but no less valid than, western "liberal" democracy. Medvedev's 2008 campaign website prominently declares, "Today we are building new institutions based on the fundamental principles of full democracy. This democracy requires no additional definition." [<http://www.medvedev2008.ru/english.htm>].

more importantly, the policies behind that rhetoric. The answer to this question has potentially far-reaching implications for the United States.

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