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Russian Succession: Putin Prime Minister, Medvedev President

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Dmitry Medvedev's endorsement as a presidential candidate by four pro-Putin political parties and by Vladimir Putin himself ends months of rumors in Moscow. Medvedev's appeal to Putin, asking him to serve as a prime minister after the March presidential elections, confirms not only that Putin will play a pivotal role in Russian politics after he steps down but that he will remain the number one politician in Russia for years to come.

Putin is most likely to be a "super prime minister," with responsibilities over foreign, security, and defense policy. It is possible that after the March elections, Medvedev will transfer control of all or some of these branches to Prime Minister Putin.

Medvedev, a Putin protégé, is perceived as a weak bureaucratic player and will require Prime Minister Putin's support as he consolidates power in the brutal world of Russia's politics and oligarchic struggles. In contrast to Putin and other KGB veterans, Medvedev is soft-spoken and bookish. Having been focused on domestic politics and policy, Medvedev lacks experience in foreign policy and national security and may depend on Putin's advice and support in these areas.

Who Is Medvedev? Dmitry Medvedev, 42, first deputy prime minister and Putin's former chief of staff, is the son of a Leningrad (St. Petersburg) professor. He has been a corporate lawyer and a law professor. In 1989, he joined the team of the late St. Petersburg pro-democracy mayor (and law professor) Anatoly Sobchak, at the height of Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika reforms. Sobchak

was Putin's mentor. When elected, Medvedev will be the youngest Soviet or Russian leader since the 28-year-old Nicholas II's accession to the throne in 1896.

Putin has deliberately chosen as a successor a person he can rely on and trust, while he remains the number one Russian politician. He has worked with Medvedev for the last 17 years, starting in the St. Petersburg city hall, where Putin was the deputy mayor in charge of foreign relations and Medvedev a legal advisor. The two struck a fast friendship and partnership, and Medvedev served as Putin's campaign manager in his Kremlin-orchestrated presidential bid in 2000.

Medvedev became the chairman of Russian energy giant Gazprom and presidential administration chief in 2003—but many insiders say that Putin was still calling the shots in Gazprom. In 2005, Medvedev moved from the Kremlin into Putin's cabinet, where he supervised "national projects," including health, education, housing, food production, and demography. The projects are funded from Russia's energy windfall profits.

Medvedev is known for his classical liberal rhetoric in an era of increasingly harsh nationalist, anti-

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Western, and anti-democratic pronouncements. For example, he has openly admitted that Russia is facing the problems of excessive dependence on natural resource exports, corruption, and a declining population.

Despite being the chairman of the second-largest state-owned corporation in the world, he appears to criticize the Kremlin's preferred economic model of state-held companies, preferring private ownership. He said in a recent interview that the state should get involved in economy "only where it was needed." He recently said that "Gazprom will not be able to 'digest' all of Russia's energy resources... and thank God for that. Otherwise Gazprom would become the ministry of energy, and we have been trying to pedal away from this...."

Medvedev also said that laws limiting foreigners' access to Russia's "strategic" economic sectors, such as energy and natural resources, should be "clear, [and] balanced, and answer practical issues." So far, however, draft legislation on strategic sectors has been murky, and the Duma has delayed the vote.

Medvedev has expressed rhetorical support for a multi-party system based on large, stable parties, while decrying the chaos of the 1990s in Russia. He rejected the usual Russian adjectives when speaking of democracy, such as "controlled" or "sovereign." Yet, he is a part of the administration that cracked down on Yukos Oil Company, kicked Royal Dutch Shell from a lucrative Sakhalin energy project, bought up and shut up almost all opposition media, and conducted the most unfair and unfree elections in Russia since 1991. Mr. Medvedev will have a hard time proving his democratic credentials by opposing the *siloviki*, divesting the state from media control, and allowing unhindered political activities—an almost impossible task.

Guarantees of Succession. Just as Putin secured the late President Boris Yeltsin's retirement by granting him a pardon from prosecution and guaranteeing his and his family's safety and security, Medvedev is doing the same to win Putin's endorsement. But there is more: He also guarantees Putin's future political role for years to come by giving him the prime ministership. After the March presidential elections, Putin will stay on the scene as prime minister and the hailed "National Leader," a new and

undefined position. This means that Russia is moving further away from constitutional democracy and the rule of law.

The Medvedev appointment also means that Putin and Medvedev have cut a deal with the powerful *siloviki* ("men of power"), which includes the secret police generals who supervise the security services and the armed forces. These men wanted Putin to stay as president in order to keep their powerful posts at the top of the national bureaucracy and lucrative positions as the heads of state-owned energy and arms-trading companies. They also are the main power behind Russia's anti-American and anti-Western policy. Their influence is not likely to vanish, as Putin remains prime minister and shares many of their anti-American positions and Medvedev will depend on their support.

Energy Geopolitics. Medvedev is the chairman of Gazprom, the state-owned energy giant with market capitalization of \$345 billion, which supplies over 30 percent of Europe's gas needs. Russia has announced that its strategic goal is to reach capitalization of \$1 trillion in seven to ten years, making Gazprom the largest company on Earth. Russia will not be able to accomplish this by permanently alienating its energy customers in Europe and elsewhere, so Russia's confrontational foreign policy will be somewhat limited by the nature of its energy exports. Yet Medvedev announced that Russia will not sell subsidized gas to its neighbors and presided over the cut-offs of gas supply to Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus.

The New Broom. The rule of thumb is that each regime in Russia is very different from its predecessor. There are discontinuities in each. Thus, Gorbachev's reign was different than Brezhnev's, Yeltsin's was different than Gorbachev's, and Putin's rule is different than Yeltsin's. Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin all "campaign" as the antitheses of their predecessors. Medvedev, on the other hand, is Putin's "official" heir and will find it impossible to shed his boss's control and vision even if he wants to.

First, there are personal promises to keep, especially as far as Putin's prime ministership and other personnel issues are concerned and especially in the first presidential term. Second, Medvedev, lacking a KGB, military, or other security service background,

may have a hard time establishing his control over the levers of power and, therefore, need Putin's continued support.

But even if Medvedev ever, for some reason, stands on his own two feet, he must remember that public opinion in Russia and the USSR has always been unenthusiastic—to say the least—toward weak leaders: Nicholas II, Georgii Malenkov, Nikita Khrushchev, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Boris Yeltsin all are viewed with disdain by the majority of Russians, while “strong leaders” such as Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Alexander II and III, Putin, and even the monstrous Joseph Stalin and bumbling Brezhnev are viewed by many in a positive light. To succeed, Medvedev will need to show his mettle.

U.S.–Russian Agenda Cannot Be Delayed. The Medvedev–Putin transition should not slow down the work on the complex U.S.–Russian agenda. It requires that the two countries return to business after the dust of transition settles in the two countries in early 2009 or even before.

U.S.–Russian relations today are at an all-time low. The bilateral agenda includes the fight against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, U.S.

anti-ballistic missile deployment in Europe, restraining Iran's nuclear program, energy security, building democratic institutions in Russia, and many other issues.

The Bush Administration should give the Putin–Medvedev administration at least a 100-day grace period after Medvedev's inauguration—until September 2008—to sort out the transition. In the meantime, the U.S. should lay the groundwork for engaging Russia on important issues, for the benefit of the next U.S. President. Specifically, the U.S. should press forward with the next round of sanctions on Iran in the U.N. Security Council, where the Russian vote is crucial, and continue discussions over the Kosovo independence and negotiations on deployment of the missile defense interceptors in Europe.

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