The Medvedev presidency

Graeme Gill

Throughout much of the second half of Vladimir Putin’s second presidential term (2004–8), there was considerable discussion about whether he would stand down as president, seek another term in violation of the constitutional provision allowing only two consecutive terms, or change the Constitution to allow him to stand for office once again. Despite his frequent assertions that he would abide strictly by the Constitution, many encouraged him to seek a third term. But Putin stood firm, and on 2 March 2008 his successor, Dmitry Medvedev, was elected as president. Medvedev was not required to go to a run-off election, winning 70.3 per cent of the vote in the first round. His popularity may seem remarkable for someone who at 42 was still quite young and had spent so little time in the public arena, but he was doubtless buoyed by his association with the very popular Putin. Medvedev had worked with Putin in St Petersburg when the latter had been working for the city’s reformist mayor Anatoly Sobchak, and he had run Putin’s 2000 election campaign. He had been brought to Moscow by Putin when Putin became prime minister, with Medvedev becoming deputy head and then from 2003 to 2005 head of the presidential administration. In 2005 he became first deputy prime minister, with responsibility for the national priority projects that became central to Putin’s programme during his second term. This position gave him some public exposure, but what was more important in his emergence was that he was publicly designated by Putin as his preferred successor and had undertaken to appoint Putin as prime minister if he was elected. This was a promise he kept following his inauguration in May.

Medvedev was a very different type of politician to Putin. Putin had gone from university into the security services (the KGB, serving in East Germany at the time of its fall), then into the administration of the democratic mayor of St Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak before being brought to Moscow. Medvedev was much younger, being 42 when elected president. Also from St Petersburg, he was a trained lawyer with a PhD, and had written a popular legal textbook. He had served with Putin in St Petersburg and the latter had brought him to Moscow. So although he owed his career advancement to Putin, his age (and consequently less exposure to the Soviet system), his lack of a security background and his legal training suggested to many that he might take Russia in a distinctly different, less authoritarian, direction than that of his mentor.

A tandem?

Thirty months into Medvedev’s term, by which time speculation was already rampant about whether Medvedev would run for a second term or whether he would step aside to allow Putin to run again for the presidency, the relationship between president and prime minister remained one about which there was significant public discussion. While analysts pored over their speeches and
statements, trying to discern differences between what they were saying and possible policy conflicts between the two men, most Russians seem to assume that they were working largely together in what has been called a “tandem”. On the few occasions they have discussed the issue, both Medvedev and Putin have emphasised that they are working together and that they discuss issues; and Medvedev has said that he would not run against Putin should the latter run in the 2012 presidential poll. But of course, just because they say they work together does not mean that there are not differences, and being in a tandem does not necessarily mean that they must always agree. What it means is that, when they disagree, those disagreements are kept within bounds (i.e. they do not seep from one policy area to another and thereby both build up and infect the general relationship) and they do not get played out in public.

It is clear that the tandem has changed the rules of Russian politics, both in terms of the standing of the prime minister vis-à-vis the president and in terms of the spheres of competence of each of these offices. Under both presidents Yeltsin and Putin, the prime minister was a distinctly subordinate figure. It was the president who was the dominant leader, giving the public direction and, more specifically, direct leadership to his prime minister. Except when Yeltsin was ill and, in the absence of a vice-president, the prime minister became the leading political figure, the president was always the leader who dominated the political stage. That has not been the case while the tandem has been in power. Putin has been an activist prime minister, not only making speeches at major gatherings but also being shown as a hands-on, no-nonsense politician who goes to where the problems are and tries to sort them out in an effective fashion. Rather than someone waiting for direction from the president, he appears as a politician who shows initiative, demonstrates leadership and enjoys widespread popularity. Medvedev too gives speeches and reaches out to the populace; like his predecessors he visits different parts of the country and evinces a concern for the problems of his people. But compared with the former presidents, he seems somewhat reduced by the heightened public profile of his prime minister. The contrast was evident in their public images during the fires that gripped much of central Russia in the summer of 2010: while Medvedev was shown in Moscow issuing orders about the suppression of the fires, Putin was seen out in the field with the firefighters trying to do something practical about the crisis. This is the sort of image that Putin has projected since he became president in 2000, so it was not a change for him personally, but it has been a very different profile for the prime minister than that which had prevailed before. He does not appear as the subordinate of the president, but his equal.

The spheres of responsibility also seem to have become less clear since 2008. Broadly speaking, constitutionally the president is responsible for foreign affairs and defence and the prime minister for the economy. This distinction has never been absolute; successive presidents became involved in economic matters whenever they felt the urge, but prime ministers rarely ventured onto the president’s turf. Under the tandem, the distinction seems virtually to have disappeared. Medvedev has been involved in economic matters; his part in shaping and publicly selling Russia’s response to the global financial crisis of 2008–09 is a case in point. But more importantly, Putin has been directly involved in issues of foreign affairs. He has travelled abroad more than his predecessors ever did, but perhaps the most striking instance of his playing a leading role was in the conduct of the war with Georgia in 2008. Putin clearly appeared as an active participant in relation to the conduct of the conflict and the whole relationship with Georgia. He has also been outspoken on questions of the relationship with the West in ways that his predecessors as prime minister generally were not.

This blurring of lines of responsibility also had a personnel dimension, which had implications for any attempt by the new president to build up his own personal power base. Attention has been drawn to the way in which Putin brought to Moscow many people who were not only personally associated with him but who had served in the security services. These “siloviki” were said to
occupy important positions throughout the upper reaches of the power structure in Moscow (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003; Rivera and Rivera 2006; Chapter 18 by Bettina Renz) and in particular in Putin’s own bailiwick, the presidential administration (see Chapter 7 by Pat Willerton). Many have imputed both a particular policy outlook to these people as well as a personal loyalty to Putin, both as the source of their promotion and as a former member of the security services (Putin’s “once a chekist, always a chekist” quip may be illustrative of this). Upon coming to Moscow, Medvedev also began to bring people who might be loyal to him into positions in the state apparatus; some have referred to these people as “civiliki”. If there was tension between Medvedev and Putin, it is likely that this would be manifested in conflict within the central Moscow political apparatus. There certainly has been some conflict within the Moscow bureaucracies, but how it maps onto any putative Medvedev–Putin tension is not clear. For example, there would be a dilemma for those siloviki promoted into the presidential administration by Putin: would their best interests be served by giving loyalty and support to their former patron who is now not in charge of that administration, or should they give allegiance to their current boss who presumably possesses the power to hire, fire and promote? In any case many of those who worked in the presidential administration while Putin was president would have had Medvedev as the head of that administration, perhaps suggesting that the attribution of loyalty is not as easy as it might appear. At the moment, we just do not know enough about the dynamics of elite politics to be able to say anything definitive about the Putin–Medvedev relationship, except that the public face is perfectly consistent with the two leaders working in harness together. But this does not mean, as noted above, that there cannot be differences.

A Medvedev Programme?

It is certainly the case that a number of Medvedev’s public statements have been consistent with the view of him as more liberal than his predecessor. One recurring theme in his remarks has been criticism of what he calls “legal nihilism”, “contempt for law” and the need for the “supremacy of the law” (Vremya novostei, 23 January and 18 February 2008). He spoke of the need for human rights and freedom as the “supreme value in our society” and the “fundamental role of law [as] the cornerstone of our state and our civil society” (Vremya novostei, 8 May 2008); he sought a strengthening of the court system and of the legal order. A more just and free society, one with the best interests of the people as its focus, resting on the traditional values of Russia was what they were trying to build. He was not averse to praising democracy, with the source of the continued development of the country said to be “personal freedom and the maturity of the democratic institutions and procedures guaranteed by the Constitution”. He affirmed that democracy was the best way forward, but acknowledged, in a theme that had been central to Putin, the importance of a strong state; this was seen as essential for the development of civil society and for protecting and strengthening democratic institutions (Medvedev 2008). Medvedev emphasised the importance of civil society and the independence of the judicial process (Novaya gazeta 39, 15 April 2009). While Putin too had spoken about the rule of law, this theme had been overshadowed by his emphasis upon the strong state. The difference between the two was a nuance, but it was real.

In September 2009 Medvedev had issued a programmatic statement entitled “Forward Russia” (Medvedev 2009). He lauded the virtues of personal self-help, of people pitching in to help solve problems, a characteristic which he linked with the development of civil society. In his view, democracy remained the path to the future, with fundamental rights and freedoms protected by law essential. Freedom and civil society had to be created by the people’s own activity; it could not be imported. Economic development was also essential, and – in a precursor of his future call for a programme of “modernisation” – for this the development of high-tech industry was necessary.
Medvedev also criticised corruption among officialdom and entrepreneurs who were unwilling to become involved in the development of the country.

Medvedev also discussed the question of the Stalinist repressions in a way which seemed consistently to go further than his predecessor had done. He spoke of the terror as “one of the greatest tragedies in the history of Russia” (www.kremlin.ru, 30 October 2009) and rejected the claim that the deaths of millions caused by terror and false accusations could be justified by some higher national purpose. He declared, there is “no excuse for repression”.

In 2009 Medvedev called for the country to undergo a programme of “comprehensive modernisation … based on democratic values and institutions” (Medvedev 2009a). This involved overcoming “our chronic backwardness, dependence on raw materials exports, and corruption”. The priority for modernisation and technological development was meeting people’s real needs. He favoured some withdrawal of the state from economic activity, for people’s problems to be solved by themselves rather than the state, and for the strengthening of the political system, legal institutions and civil society. He also came out in favour of the multi-party system, which he saw as “the most important tool for ensuring the fundamental rights and freedoms of our people, including their exclusive right to power”. The strengthening of democratic institutions, greater transparency in government and the fight with corruption and legal nihilism were fundamental. It was this speech which launched the programme of modernisation which became a key plank in the public message Medvedev sought to project; the technological modernisation of Russia was what he saw his principal responsibility to be. Consistent with this aim was his sponsoring of the Skolkovo Innovation Centre outside Moscow, which was envisaged as the driver of this version of Silicon Valley.

The themes Medvedev raised were not new. Former leaders had raised all of these issues at one time or another, including Putin. However, the force with which Medvedev seems to have projected them and the consistency of his message does suggest a contrast with his predecessor. While Medvedev favours a strong state, he emphasises a strong political system, the rule of law and democracy; not “sovereign democracy”. Civil society seems to have a positive place in his vision of Russia’s future, and in accord with this he emphasises popular initiative and creativity rather than relying on the state for solutions. The tone of his message is different and so is some of the content. But has this been manifested in policy?

**A continuation of Putinism?**

In terms of practical policy, there has been little substantial change from the Putin presidency, although at the half-way mark of Medvedev’s term, there have been some innovations. As Leslie Holmes points out in Chapter 17, Medvedev has launched an anti-corruption campaign that seems to go somewhat further than just words. Initiated in mid-2008, this has been directed at (mainly) middle- and lower-level officials in the Ministry of the Interior, and against the police. This has resulted in dismissals from both bodies and in some cases official charges. This was followed in 2010 by measures to reform the police, including making them a more professional and better-paid force, both of which would help in the fight against corruption. So too could the extension in powers given to the security apparatus in mid-2010, although this could also have implications in the human-rights area. But it remains to be seen how far such a campaign will extend. Certainly it gives some substance to Medvedev’s comments about corruption and the need for the strengthening of law, but given the size of the problem, it is unclear how effective this can be. Change has also been pursued in the military where attempts have been made to reform and modernise the army, including the shifting of power from military to civilian officials (see Chapter 19 by Dmitry Gorenburg).
In the public sphere, there has been no lightening of pressure on opposition forces. Demonstrations in Moscow have mostly still been either not allowed or broken up, although it remains unclear whether this was mainly due to regime policy or opposition strategy. A change did occur with regard to this in October 2010 following the replacement of long-serving Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov by Sergei Sobyanin, when protesters were given permission to demonstrate in Triumfalnaya Square where formerly this had been denied. Protest activity has sporadically also broken out in other parts of the country, but this has not been on a large scale. The media has remained in the state it was under Putin’s presidency and, in a highly symbolic move, further charges were brought against the incarcerated businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who, following a trial in December 2010, was sentenced to a further spell in prison. The length of parliamentary and presidential terms has been extended (to take effect from the next election), but despite the rhetoric there has been no effort to make the political system more genuinely competitive. Greater central control also seemed to be asserted in 2010 with the removal of three long-standing regional leaders whose autonomy had bucked the trend of centralism of the power vertical – Yury Luzhkov in Moscow, Mintimir Shaimiyev in Tatarstan and Murtaz Rakhimov in Bashkortostan (see Chapter 13 by Darrell Slider).

Economically, the principal development was the global financial crisis, which hit soon after Medvedev’s election. This had a significant, but temporary, effect on Russia’s growth. As William Tompson points out in his chapter, Russia’s recovery was due in large part to the global economic recovery, but some credit also must go to the Medvedev government. The massive amounts of money generated principally by oil and gas sales that the government had put away in its sovereign wealth fund over the preceding decade gave it significant resources with which to combat the effects of the crisis. While not everything it did had a positive effect, overall its strategy seems to have been successful. One important factor arising from its response to the crisis relates to the state’s role in the economy. Under Putin there had been an expansion of state ownership in key strategic sectors of the economy, and many believed that the global financial crisis offered a perfect opportunity for the continued expansion of that role. However, although some banks in difficulty were nationalised, there was no wholesale expansion of state ownership and the government did not use this opportunity to make the case for increased state involvement on anything but a short-term, crisis basis; indeed, Medvedev advocated a more limited role for the state in the economy.

In foreign policy, the most important development during Medvedev’s presidency was the 2008 war with Georgia (see Chapter 36 by Robert Donaldson). While it is clear that it was the Georgian side which started the conflict, it is also clear that there was significant Russian provocation. In terms of the Russian foreign-policy outlook, the war had two primary effects. First, it was a public reassertion of Russian primacy in much of the area of the former Soviet Union, sending a signal to all that it would act forcefully to defend its interests and that it was going to continue to be a major actor in this region. Second, it effectively blunted the momentum that had been building for Ukraine and Georgia to become members of NATO. Both governments had been pressing this case, and there had been considerable sympathy for their views from within the ranks of NATO, especially from the United States. However, the perceived adventurism of the Georgian leader Mikhail Saakashvili seems to have convinced his putative Western backers to moderate their support for membership. This was seen as a major foreign-policy victory for the Medvedev leadership in Moscow.

So too was the election in Ukraine of the pro-Moscow Viktor Yanukovich in 2010. His election seemed to create a more conducive (from Moscow’s point of view) atmosphere for the negotiation of gas prices, an issue which under former governments had been somewhat fraught. More importantly from Moscow’s perspective, agreement was reached on an extension of the long-term basing rights for the Black Sea fleet in the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol; an agreement
was signed providing for Russian occupancy of the port for a further 25 years, apparently with little offsetting costs for Moscow. This was a major success.

The policy toward the West remained basically unchanged from the period of the Putin presidency: a more assertive expression of Russian interests and views, a projection of Russia into all the major issues on the international agenda, and a desire for a more stable and equal relationship with the West. Part of this seemed to be gained with the signature of a new START treaty in mid-2010, designed to reduce the number of warheads on each side, although not in such a way as to substantially alter the prevailing balance of forces.

In sum, the Medvedev presidency has seen the continuation of the main themes of the Putin presidency, with a more liberal tinge in the tone of what the president says, some positive beginnings in the policy sphere, but nothing substantial achieved. Given the announcement in September 2011 that Putin would stand for the presidency again in 2012 and Medvedev could become the prime minister, the tandem looked likely to continue, albeit with a different configuration as the two leaders swap positions. This also means that the Medvedev presidency would be seen as an interregnum rather than the beginning of a new era.

References


