

The Putin-Medvedev Ruling Tandem Disintegrates

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By: [Pavel Felgenhauer](#)



Russia's tandem rulers – President Dmitry Medvedev and former president and current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin – continue to profess their friendship, but these statements are increasingly unconvincing as the presidential elections that will install a new head of state for six years come closer. In Russia elections are shamelessly rigged and results prearranged by a corrupt bureaucracy, so the nomination of an official candidate is indeed the election per se, while the casting of the popular vote is a public relations exercise, mostly intended to appease foreigners and gain international legitimacy. Not in the spring of 2012, but much earlier this year it will be decided: either Medvedev will be reelected for six more years or Putin for a third term until 2018 with a legal option of a fourth term to 2024. The present tandem arrangement with Putin as the all-powerful prime minister officially sitting in the backseat with Medvedev performing the role of a largely figurehead president cannot continue much longer, certainly not for another six years, as it is already beginning to visibly crack.

In an interview with China's CCTV before a visit to Sanya for a meeting of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) Medvedev once again stressed that he had been working with Putin for 20 years and has known Putin for "practically half of my life," that they are good comrades, and all want Russia to prosper, but "see, possibly, different ways and means" in achieving the goal. Medvedev announced he is thinking about running for reelection and will take a decision "rather soon" (www.kremlin.ru, April 12).

Medvedev outlined an agenda of technological and political modernization and building a "free

market economy.” Medvedev said: “what was good 10 years ago is not good today.” Medvedev forcefully defended his recent decision to order top government officials to be replaced on the boards of directors of Russia’s major companies by independent directors: “Let the ministers do their jobs instead of [Medvedev used a colloquial Russian expression] sitting on their backsides at board meetings doing nothing” (www.kremlin.ru, April 12).

Medvedev’s attempt to partially dismantle a major institution of personalized state control over the economy, created by Putin, is seen in Moscow as a major change that could seriously displease Putin and his cohorts. Officially, top government officials were not paid for being chairmen or directors of major state-controlled companies, but their opinion dominated corporative decision-making, creating opportunities for nepotism and other corrupt practices. Medvedev demanded that officials must leave the boards of directors before 2012. Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin – Putin’s right-hand man from the former KGB – announced his immediate resignation as chairman of the board of directors of Rosneft – Russia’s biggest oil company (Vedomosti, April 13). The present Rosneft was created by Sechin through the takeover of the key assets of Yukos – once Russia’s biggest publicly owned company. Sechin was known in Moscow as the driving force behind the bankruptcy and dismantling of Yukos and the imprisonment on trumped up charges of its CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Sechin tightly controlled Rosneft and may consider his ouster as a personal insult. Putin has neither publicly supported nor criticized the president’s order to cleanse the boards of major corporations.

Until now Putin and Medvedev have been publicly at loggerheads only over the conflict in Libya. Under Medvedev’s orders Russia did not veto UN Resolution 1973 authorizing allied military action, while Putin declared the resolution “flawed and defective” (EDM, March 24). In the CCTV interview Medvedev spoke of an uncontrollable civil war raging in Libya, but “we must not forget the present regime [of Muammar Gaddafi] is to blame” (www.kremlin.ru, April 12).

In recent days two prominent United Russia members were publicly censured for siding with Putin over Libya. Alexei Chadayev – head of the political department of the Central Executive Committee of United Russia was ordered to resign for criticizing the Kremlin for supporting UN Resolution 1973 (www.gzt.ru, April 7). The ranking United Russia deputy (first deputy chairman) of the Duma CIS affairs committee, Konstantin Zatulin, lost his seniority and was demoted to backbencher status by the United Russia leadership for supporting Putin and criticizing the Kremlin. It is rumored in Moscow that Zatulin, a United Russia Duma deputy since 2003, will not receive a place in the party list in the upcoming elections in December and will lose his seat in parliament (Kommersant, April 5).

Zatulin told reporters after his demotion: if Putin does not run for president it would be “a catastrophe for Russia” and “a betrayal of his followers.” Only Putin, according to Zatulin, may resist the “other tendency within the elite” to sell out Russia to the West. “Putin is creating tension in political circles by postponing the decision to run until September, by not sending United Russia and his supporters a clear signal,” lamented Zatulin adding “Time is not on Putin’s side” (www.newsru.com, April 11).

This week Putin replied that both he and Medvedev are eligible to run for president, but that there is still “almost a year until the elections and speculation is impeding government work.” Putin’s press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, insisted it is too early to say if Medvedev or Putin will run for president (Ekho Moskv, April 13).

Putin may believe that at the right moment he can singlehandedly decide who is the next president

of Russia. According to an opinion poll in March, in nine months the number of citizens expecting Medvedev to run has grown from 14 percent to 18 percent and those expecting Putin to run has decreased from 30 percent to 27 percent. The number of citizens expecting a confrontation within the tandem has risen from 9 percent to 17 percent (www.levada.ru, April 13).

Putin's powerbase seems stronger and if there is a competitive election with both running, he may easily win. But Medvedev may turn the tables by acting decisively and ousting Putin from the government by September at the latest to eradicate and marginalize his powerbase and use the highly effective state-controlled TV propaganda machine to discredit his former boss by promoting stories of corruption and nepotism. The ouster and subsequent successful public tarnishing of former popular Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov last fall demonstrates that such a campaign needs two months to be fully successful. If Medvedev decides to wait until the election it may be too late.