

Russian President Putin names his putative successor

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The December 10 announcement proclaiming Vice-Premier Dmitri Medvedev the Kremlin's leading candidate for the post of president was aimed at ameliorating the protracted crisis in the upper echelons of the Russian political establishment. The aim is to find a successor to President Vladimir Putin who can consolidate the various groupings within the ruling elite. Medvedev's candidacy was supported by four parties and quickly received the backing of Putin.

It now falls upon Medvedev to serve as the guarantor of the continuity of the capitalist reforms that were carried out by the Putin administration while preserving the leading role of the bureaucracy and the security services. He must also act as the proxy for the current president, who is leaving his post in 2008.

Analyzing the Kremlin's immediate intentions in relation to the "successor" and summing up the essence of the selection of Medvedev, political scientist Stanislav Belkovskii wrote that "under a Medvedev presidency, the legitimization of the Yeltsin-Putin ruling elite in the West and the liquidation of the Soviet social system will be carried through to the end."

Regardless of whether or not the plan to have Medvedev elevated as the new president in elections scheduled for March 2 is successful, the announcement of his candidacy intensifies the struggle of the Kremlin groupings and sharpens the social opposition of the ruling elite to the broad masses of workers.

The announcement was carried out in the spirit of the former Kremlin order and recalled the traditions of the old Soviet bureaucracy. The initiative was taken by leaders of the parties that are obedient puppets of the Kremlin. Two of them—United Russia and A Just Russia—command an absolute majority in the newly formed parliament (Duma). The other two—the Agrarian Party and Citizens Power—having garnered between them less than three percent of the December 2 parliamentary vote, are the obvious outsiders.

The actual weight of the parties, as expressed in the official result of the parliamentary election, was not important. Rather, the four parties were supposed to reflect the essential layers of the population. If the two leading "parties of power" embody the interests of business, the bureaucracy and the middle class, Citizens Power ostensibly reflects the outlook of the liberal intelligentsia and the Agrarian Party represents the rural electorate.

Medvedev unhesitatingly accepted the nomination. The following day he publicly requested that Putin agree to serve, in the event of his election, as prime minister.

Medvedev's candidacy, formalized at the December 17 congress of United Russia, provoked a series of commentaries noting that he had already been considered a potential successor for some time. He occupies one of the leading posts in the Putin administration and oversees "national projects" in the areas of housing, education, health care and agriculture. As a candidate for the "succession," Medvedev represented Russia at the elite Davos forum this past winter.

However, last September his likely succession faltered. At that point Putin was expected to announce the presidential candidacy of the other vice-premier in his administration, Sergei Ivanov. This coincided with a reorganization of the administration, in which the head of government, Mikhail Fradkov, was replaced by long-time associate of Putin, Viktor Zubkov.

At the same time, Putin announced there was no single candidate for president, but rather several. This was interpreted as a move by Putin to induce competition among potential candidates, with the experienced and loyal apparatchik Zubkov serving as arbitrator, and, if necessary, himself becoming the candidate.

Shortly thereafter Putin announced that he would lead the list of candidates for United Russia in the December parliamentary elections, throwing his weight behind the effort to guarantee a parliamentary majority for the "party of power," whose public authority had steeply fallen.

In the ensuing months, Putin evidently attempted to forge a compromise between the bureaucratic-oligarchic groupings, not giving any of them preference and postponing the final decision on the candidate to succeed him. This only fueled rumblings and conflicts within the ruling elite.

The day after Putin's decision to lead the United Russia list in the parliamentary elections, a general in the Federal Service for the Control of Narcotics Trafficking (FSNK), Aleksandr Bulbov, was arrested, along with a number of his co-workers. This opened a new stage in the "war of the security services," which has been ongoing for several years.

The FSNK, headed by Victor Cherkesov, was created in 2003. It is considered a governing structure in competition with the more powerful security service, the FSB, which is the direct continuation of the Stalinist KGB.

Politically, the FSNK is oriented toward "Kremlin liberals," including Medvedev, at a time when the FSB, headed by Nikolai Patrushev, is linked to right-wing nationalists and supporters of a harder line toward the West. The most important figure among this group of "siloviki" (people connected with the various security services) is Igor Sechin, the "grey cardinal" of Putin's Kremlin, who occupies the post of deputy head of the president's administration.

The arrest of General Bulbov has provoked several new episodes in this confrontation.

One of them was the arrest on November 15 of the deputy minister of finance, Sergei Storchak, accused of embezzling more than 40 million rubles from public funds.

This is seen as a blow to the minister of finance, Aleksei Kudrin, who is close to the Kremlin "liberals," and also an attempt by Sechin's "siloviki" to establish their control over the expenditure of resources from the Stabilization Fund, which has been swollen by the influx of petrodollars in recent years.

The "liberals" responded by publishing a scandalous interview with the entrepreneur Oleg Shvartsman, which appeared in the newspaper

Kommersant on November 30. In this interview, the hitherto practically unknown businessman announced that under the aegis of Sechin, a scenario of “velvet re-privatization” was unfolding, in which certain private firms were being seized by means of “soft” raids in the interests of state structures and companies, particularly Rosoboronekspport (Russian Defense Export), headed by Sergei Chemezov.

In his interview, Shvartsman boasted that he was being helped by 600,000 retired security agents “with colossal experience as operatives.” These people, in Shvartsman’s opinion, were engaged in useful activities, otherwise they “might be used by criminals in the most varied affairs and undertakings.”

The interview caused a great scandal because it raised the curtain on the degree to which leading state functionaries and Russian companies are employing semi-criminal methods for seizing private property at a time when, according to government propaganda, the period of “the privatization of the state by private individuals” had come to an end.

Such episodes are only the starkest examples of the heightened struggle for power within the Kremlin. In actual fact, the “range of the confrontations” is much wider. Up for grabs is access to powerful levers of authority and enormous sums of money.

The Sechin group, in particular, was the main driving force in the struggle against the billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who has been behind bars for several years. The employees of his oil company, Yukos, have almost completely passed over to the control of the semi-state Rosneft, whose board chairman is Sechin.

Shifts in power under modern Russian conditions inevitably mean transfers of wealth to the newly emerging victors, something those currently in positions of authority do not want to happen. They are prepared to defend their positions by any means.

More generally, the “war of the security services” is a manifestation of the profound degeneration of official Russian politics. The less the ruling elite is inclined to allow any open disagreements in its midst, the less that the most important governmental decisions correspond to the will of society at large and depend on formal procedures of a public character, the more the purely bureaucratic levers, behind-the-scenes semi-criminal machinations and security “special operations” become a necessary and even dominant element of political life.

Several commentators believe that Putin has created his own system of “checks and balances,” which to a significant degree is based on the competition between various security services directly connected with big business and clans of the bureaucratic elite. As present events show, this system is becoming ever more internally unstable.

On October 9, the head of the FSNK, Cherkesov, published an article in *Kommersant* in which he called for the cessation of the “war of the security services” and outlined his views on Russia’s recent history. In his opinion, it is precisely the security services which saved the country from collapse in the 1990s. Then, he wrote, the country was experiencing a “full-scale catastrophe.” But, “as it was falling into the abyss, post-Soviet society latched onto... a ‘chekist’ hook, and was now hanging from it.”

Now, in Cherkesov’s words, Russia “has created out of the chaos a minimal amount of order,” which, however, can be destroyed if agreement is not found among the rival groups of the ruling elite. Then, the “hook” that saved the country—the security service—“will break because it will have rusted through.” Along with it, “the entire social structure will begin to shatter.” The country “will perish.”

As one can see, Putin’s condemnation of the legacy of the 1990s, which occupied such a prominent place in the campaign for the elections to parliament, reflects a broad consensus regarding the Yeltsin era among various layers around the current president. This is joined by a glorification of the role of the special services as Russia’s “saviors.”

The alarm which resounds in Cherkesov’s article reflects the depth of the contradictions within the ruling establishment. In the words of an

editorial in *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* published on December 6, “the split within the elites has already ceased to be a simple dogfight proceeding under the rug, and has instead turned into a war for survival.”

Proposing Medvedev as “successor” must be seen against the background of this growing conflict. His candidacy must be regarded as a partial strengthening of the position of the “liberals,” as well as a gesture of sorts toward a new reconciliation.

It is unlikely, however, that a compromise will be found. Some commentators paint a picture of full-scale political destabilization. One such prognosis was advanced by the authoritative Western Russian specialist, Andrew Kuchins, the former head of the Carnegie Foundation in Moscow.

In a report, “Alternative Scenarios of Russia’s Future,” prepared by the well-known non-governmental Center for Strategic Research, Kuchins speaks of the possibility of Putin’s assassination and the introduction of emergency rule headed by an authoritarian dictatorship of security forces headed by Sechin and a number of other figures.

Among the actions of this regime could be, according to Kuchins, the shooting of “striking oil workers in Surgut” and bloody purges among the ruling elite.

Despite its highly speculative and seemingly fantastic character, Kuchins’ prognosis was taken very seriously by the Russian mass media. As the newspaper *Kommersant* commented on December 13, the author “is one of the most informed and authoritative American Kremlinologists” and “continues to be among the narrow circle of Western experts who meet each year with Vladimir Putin at sessions of the so-called ‘Valdaiskii Club,’ including a meeting this last summer.”

The danger of a growing confrontation was also underscored by the head of the Trade Industrial Chamber, Evgenii Primakov, during a meeting with President Putin on December 11. According to Primakov, two dangers threaten the continuity of Putin’s course of development for Russia: the oligarchy and the coalescence of bureaucrats and businessmen. In essence, both of these dangers are a euphemism for the “orange revolution” which would be carried out by dissatisfied representatives of the business elite if they were to win over to their side key layers of the state apparatus.

Proceeding from the experience of post-Soviet history, when the continuity of a capitalist course and the positions of the dominant power groups were secured by shelling the parliament with tanks (in 1993), and exploiting, if not organizing, explosions in apartment blocs in Moscow and Volgograd, no provocations or bloody adventures at the hands of today’s Kremlin rulers can be ruled out.



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