

Tensions in Kremlin continue to mount

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's May 6 call for a Russian National Popular Front reflects rising tensions in his relations with President Dmitri Medvedev, and inside the ruling elite as a whole, in the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections in December and next March.

Speaking on the eve of Victory Day over Nazi Germany in Volgograd—which he called Stalingrad, the city's name when it saw the battle that was a turning point on the Eastern Front of World War II—Putin called for unity around his ruling party, United Russia. He stressed patriotism, prosperity, strengthening the state apparatus, and “the search for equitable solutions in the social sphere.”

This was an implicit admission of mass popular frustration with his regime, which has presided over a continuing fall of life expectancy and industry, and dependence on exports of oil and gas to European and East Asian powers. He called for purging the ranks of United Russia of “bureaucratic elements, to ensure a flow of new faces to new roads toward social advancement.”

Putin's spokesman Dmitri Peskov said the Front would be created “not based on the party,” but “rather, around Putin.”

Many commentators noted the incoherence of the name and stated purposes of the Popular Front. On the one hand, it is supposedly based around the ruling party—which already has an overwhelming majority in parliament (315 seats of 450), dominates all levels of government, and oversees most officially recognized public organizations.

On the other, as National Strategy institute President Mikhail Remizov said, “the designation of such a coalition as a Popular Front is very stark and compelling”—it suggests that Putin was attempting to mobilize the entire country “in the face of clearly defined threats. However, this threat is not clearly identified.”

While the media do not identify the threats against which Putin is trying to rally support, these threats undoubtedly exist. There is a rising struggle between the camps of Putin and Medvedev—the ruling “tandem” in Russia—reflecting a deeper crisis in the Kremlin's economic policy and relations with the West, as revolutionary struggles and wars spread in the Middle East. In this, Medvedev is the champion of closer ties with the Western powers.

Putin's speech in Volgograd was an attempt to counter Medvedev's rising influence in the state bureaucracy, and the falling credibility of United Russia, which emerged weakened from the March 12-13 regional elections. Though the media trumpeted the party's good final results, they were largely due to the fact that many deputies joined the party after being elected. Official results showed that United Russia got only 46 percent of the vote, with “opposition” parties—the Communists, Liberal Democrats, and A Just Russia—getting 48 percent combined.

March also saw a major split inside the Kremlin over the US-British-French war of aggression against Libya. Medvedev supported UN Security Council Resolution 1973—voted on March 17, and which the imperialist powers seized upon to attack Libya. In contrast, Putin denounced the resolution as “defective and deficient” and like a “medieval call for a crusade;” he criticized Washington for acting “without logic.”

Medvedev replied to Putin's comments by appearing on state television, the day before he met with US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, to denounce Putin's comments as “unacceptable.”

This rapidly led to political infighting inside United Russia. The right-wing nationalists Konstantin Zatulin and Alexei Chadaev, who had both supported Putin's position on Libya, were dismissed by the party. Zatulin in particular had spoken for Putin's return to the presidency.

By mid-April, as Medvedev adopted positions more critical of the Libyan war, some of his more outspoken supporters began leaving their posts. In particular, Gleb Pavlovsky—one of Russia's most publicized political scientists and the founder of the personality cult of Putin as a “national leader”—left the presidential administration. While he began as Putin supporter, Pavlovsky had recently developed arguments why Medvedev was the only viable candidate for the next presidential elections.

Commenting on his resignation in the *Independent Gazette* on April 28, Pavlovsky said: “There is no clash of programs. There is Medvedev and his program. It should be clarified, improved, and discussed, and take on the character of a presidential campaign. He is a man with a certain strategy,

with successes and failures, and one must discuss the failures as well. Putin is in a quite different position. He is the man who laid the foundations of the current system, but he has not coped with the task of modernizing it.”

Pavlovsky attempted to deny the split in the “tandem,” but insisted on the rapid nomination of a single presidential candidate. This underscores the broad fear in the ruling elite that any weakening of the government’s authority could prove disastrous, as mass protests continue to spread and intensify in the Arab countries.

In an April 27 interview with the *Russian Journal*, he said: “The tandem will remain a political alliance, but its design will change. My view is that the state needs a hard and fast transition to modernize the economy and establish the rule of law in the country. Medvedev has this program, it has been initiated, and therefore he should run for a second term.”

Medvedev is pressing ahead with free-market reforms of the system of so-called “state corporations,” set up by Putin. These corporations were mostly run by individuals in Putin’s entourage who are given huge state assets. As they do not answer to the population, they can then amass immense fortunes by plundering the companies they nominally lead.

In his November 2009 “Go Russia” speech, Medvedev criticized these corporations and demanded closer ties with Western capitalism to modernize Russia. Describing the Russian economy as suffering from a “humiliating dependence on raw materials,” he said: “With a few exceptions, domestic business does not invent nor create the necessary things and technology that people need. We sell things that we have not produced, raw materials or imported goods. Finished products produced in Russia are plagued by their extremely low competitiveness.”

He continued, “The issue of harmonizing our relations with western democracies is not a question of taste, personal preferences, or the prerogatives of given political groups. Our current domestic financial and technological capabilities are not sufficient for a qualitative improvement in quality of life. We need money and technology from Europe, America, and Asia.”

Medvedev has since moved to curb the prerogatives of state officials and cement closer ties to Western imperialism. On March 30 in Magnitogorsk, Medvedev announced that ministers and vice-premiers would leave the boards of directors at Russia’s 1700 companies with state participation.

In particular, this decision forced powerful Vice-Premier Igor Sechin, a close Putin ally, to leave the board of directors of the largest Russian oil firm, Rosneft. This firm took over the assets of billionaire oil oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s firm, Yukos, after Khodorkovsky’s arrest

in 2003—an event denounced by Western oil companies and media.

Divisions between the Medvedev-Putin “tandem” over military and economic policy have spread to election races. Medvedev in particular made numerous statements suggesting that he would be the Kremlin’s sole presidential candidate, implicitly ruling out a run by Putin. On April 12 Medvedev commented that he would “in the relatively short term” announce whether he would run for president.

Putin responded with attempts to postpone the decision. He noted that elections were a year away, adding: “if we give wrong signals, then half the administration and more than half the government will no longer work in anticipation of some changes.”

This expresses not only clashing personal ambitions, but above all the objective crisis of Russian society after the fall of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism. Facing competition from the world market and constant strategic pressure from the United States—with US forces in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia—Russian capitalism is deeply dependent on the state, both to protect Russian geopolitical interests and quell opposition from the working class.

Putin sought to preserve Russian control of Russia’s oil industry, and Russian influence against US-backed “color revolutions” in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine, by strengthening the state bureaucracy, and its privileges, secrecy, and wealth.

Putin’s selection of Medvedev as his successor in 2008 was bound up his attempts to project a more liberal, pseudo-democratic “human face” for his regime, to disorient social opposition to his regime and particularly its welfare cuts. To be sure, Putin and Medvedev both represented the oligarchic kleptocracy that emerged as the Russian ruling elite after the restoration of capitalism. However, this resulted in Medvedev projecting a more pro-Western, free-market position.

Ultimately, the difference between the roles Putin assigned to himself and to Medvedev had a logic of their own. Today, amid rising social and political discontent internationally, it threatens to take on explosive proportions.



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