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The Russian constitution barred Vladimir Putin from running for a third consecutive term for the office of President of the Russian Federation (Chapter 4, Article 81.3).[1] This however did nothing to put to rest murmurings amongst political elites worldwide that Putin was not ready to relinquish the reigns of power just yet.

Prime Minister Putin has played a more dominant role in government than any other predecessor in this position. According to many Russian politicians, the status of the Kremlin under Putin's premiership has been reduced to nothing more than a representative establishment. Political analyst Dimitry Oreshkin asserts; "...the centre of power has been unquestionably transferred to the White House." [2]

The first sign that Putin would continue his dominant role in Russian politics came just a week after the presidential election during the first cabinet meeting to assign key politicians to their posts. Putin sat in the same seat he held as President, whilst newly elected President Medvedev, sat to one side, in a seat usually occupied by subordinate members of the cabinet.[3] During the meeting, Medvedev outlined which key politicians would be appointed to the roles of Foreign Minister and Energy Minister as well as who would be the new head of the security services and the Secretary of the Presidential administration. In a predictable, albeit unprecedented turn of events, all of these posts went to Putin loyalists. These appointments have historically been the responsibility and privilege of the President, and never before been so dominated by a Prime Minister. Putin's disregard for convention cemented the belief that he remains the driving force in the supposed new age of Russian Politics.

The Constitution of the Russian Federation clearly defines the separation of powers between the President and the Prime Minister. Chapter 4 of the constitution is specific to the rights and responsibilities of the President. It stipulates that he shall determine the domestic and foreign policy and is required to formally appoint federal ministers in the government, including the Prime Minister, Judges of the Supreme Court and Chairman of the Federal Bank, with the respective federal ministries reporting directly to him. He also has the power to call elections and dissolve the government; and can also call a state of emergency and impose military law if there is a perceived threat to national security.

The Prime Minister is bound by the rules set out in Chapter 6 of the constitution. It maintains that the Prime Minister's role is secondary to the president as the head of the cabinet of ministers. His role is to implement the policies determined by the President. The civil service reports to the PM and he usually chairs the cabinet meetings. There are powers at the PM's disposal, namely the co-ordination and control of economic and fiscal, social and labour policy.[4]

As Chairman of the government of the Russian Federation, one can understand how Putin's power is constitutionally, greatly diminished. However, he has been successful in maintaining control over the reins, and in doing so has made himself into a powerful Prime Minister who eclipses and undermines a perceived weak President.

Although Medvedev's popularity continues to increase, Putin is still regarded as the number 1 politician in Russia. The Levada centre, an independent polling company, released figures in late 2009 that show the number of people who trust the President had dramatically increased over the course of the summer. In May, the figure was 10.9%, but by August it had almost doubled to 20.6%. That said, even though Putin's figure did not increase on such a scale, his rating is much higher than that of Medvedev, rising from 27.5% to 28% respectively.[5]

Olga Kryshtanovskaya, Director of the Elite Studies Centre at the Institute of Sociology in Moscow's Academy of Sciences, believes that the tandem power share between the President and Prime Minister is key to their popularity. Although Medvedev is developing into a statesman, he has yet to do anything that outshines his predecessor's achievements.

The problem for Medvedev is that people still regard him as Putin's successor and merely a subordinate rather than an independent head of state. A poll by Radio Free Europe concluded that 66% of Russians are convinced that Medvedev is under the control of Putin.[6]

One reason for Putin's domestic popularity lies in the fact that he was president during Russia's largest economic boom in decades when people witnessed the re-emergence of Russia as a key state in world political and economic affairs. As Maria Lipman, a Moscow based Political Scientist, suggests, "...For the people of Russia, Putin is clearly the man in charge...the one who protects everybody..." [7]

Like his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Putin nominated a candidate whom he wanted to succeed him. Yeltsin defended his decision to choose Putin during his New Year address. "I tried to find a man whose fundamental values are freedom, the market, and progress, together with civilized states. I thought it was important for him to have a strong will." [8] Putin's public justification of Medvedev's nomination was of a similar tone. He stated that his personal and working relationship with Medvedev had spanned over 17 years and he fully supported his candidacy, asserting that he trusted Medvedev was the man who could form the next government that would continue to ensure Russia's growth in the 21st century. In reality however, Putin is more likely to have based his decision on the preservation of his political status rather than taking steps towards liberalisation and democratisation. By selecting a younger candidate, Putin was able to maintain the interest of the younger generation of supporters, while, simultaneously, preserving the continued cooperation of the older generations who were keen to see change take place to ensure Russia moves forward in the new era. Following his election, Medvedev was quick to appoint Putin for the role of Prime Minister. This has led many to assume that a deal was made with the siloviki (men in power) to ensure that the system of personal power that has been firmly established in the political sphere since the start of the century is set to continue.

Medvedev is a protege of Putin. He is considered to be a weak and bureaucratic player who will require Putin's support if he is to successfully secure political power. He is an economic liberal whose focus and experience lies mainly within the domestic sphere. This should prove to be useful in terms of formulating domestic policies. His lack of experience in foreign policy however, means he will need to rely on Putin's advice and support until he is able to successfully command his own political presence. Since the economic crisis began, there have been several summits designed to plan how the world's states will cope. Medvedev's presence at these summits has provided him with opportunities to gain experience in the field of foreign policy.

Yet behind the scenes, Medvedev's wings have been tightly clipped, severely limiting his exercise of power. The Russian constitution states that the responsibility for devising foreign policy falls to the President, whilst the Prime Minister is accountable for its implementation. Putin chose Sergei Lavrov to remain as Foreign Secretary after the election. Lavrov is regarded as a tough and sophisticated diplomat with a very strong CV. Although Lavrov was considered an outsider in Putin's government, the power shift from the Kremlin to the Prime Minister's office has meant that his influence has increased. Regardless of the power-share, there are two camps within the government. The Pro Putin faction have successfully secured the majority of power, with very few Medvedev appointments. The perception of Medvedev outside of Russia is that of a much more liberal and democratic leader than his predecessor; who has been highly criticized and condemned for actions that contradict the democratic reforms he promised at the turn of the century.

Aside from their supposed tandem power share, cracks have been beginning to show in the Putin Medvedev partnership. Medvedev is all too aware of the impressions people hold and has become increasingly keen to shed the image of the subordinate. His state of the union address set out plans to modernise Russian society and its' lagging economy. These policies back up his arguments that he is not merely a subordinate who will follow the will of his predecessor, but rather tackle these issues from a very different angle to Putin. He links political and economic reform to social change, and has stated that he wants to attempt to resolve the 'persistent social ills that plague Russian society.'[9]

If Putin simply wanted a pawn, he had a wide selection to choose from that consisted of candidates from inside his circle of former KGB colleagues and who were his personal friends. The main factions within the Kremlin are the Technocrats, and the Siloviki. The Siloviki form a hierarchy of men with influence and power in the Kremlin. They include people like Igor Sechin, Viktor Ivanov and Nikolai Patrushev. These men have all held positions either in Government, or in large private enterprise.[10]

Medvedev was not one of these men. He was a technocrat; a man who Putin felt would be more likely to stay in line with the White House. Nominating Medvedev was also a way in which Putin could ensure that the Siloviki don't become too powerful. His choice says a lot about Putin's deep-rooted belief that even though he was hesitant to relinquish his seat, he wanted an individual who, whilst following the party line, also had Russia's best interests at heart. Medvedev is an accomplished lawyer and professor and was one of Putin's closest advisors during his presidency.

Throughout these years, Putin had been acting in accordance with Medvedev's advice, so claims that he is unable to lead without Putin's dictation seem to lack substance. During the Putin years, Medvedev occupied powerful seats near the top of the Kremlin hierarchy, but was never actually the top man; instead he held influential posts without attracting public scrutiny. Because of this, many falsely believe that Medvedev was new to the world of politics and was an obscure choice for Putin's nomination for the presidency, when he was, in fact, an obvious choice for those in the Kremlin.

After Putin's election in 2000, Medvedev became chairman of the board at Russia's largest company, Gazprom. This job saw the emergence of a very different character. The usually soft-spoken Medvedev showed himself to be a ruthless executive who possessed the necessary skills and talent to lead a successful organization.

Medvedev may have been characterized by foreign media as lacking the charisma of his predecessor, yet this is an impression that, according to his former colleagues and employees, couldn't be further from truth. In order to successfully get rid of this impression, Putin was essential to Medvedev's presidential bid. Initially the Russian electorate knew very little about Medvedev. It wasn't until the last months before the election that their perception changed in his favour. Because of Putin's influence in Russia, his nomination and support for Medvedev meant that the public was quick to change their opinions. Kremlin controlled state media gave Medvedev blanket coverage during the election. Putin went so far as to address the electorate in the run up to polling day, telling them that in order to ensure Medvedev is able to effectively perform his duties, he requires popular approval. Like the USA, televised presidential debates are common in Russia. Yet Medvedev's refusal to appear in such debates was a tactic that would ensure the electorate was unable to compare him with the other candidates.[11] Following Medvedev's nomination, his popularity ratings massively increased from around 20% to 79%.[12] This left political analysts, at home and abroad, bewildered as to the sudden popularity of a relatively unknown candidate.

The question on people's minds was why Medvedev? Was this, as many analysts suggest, an attempt by Putin to play puppeteer for the next four years, and to continue shaping Russian Politics in preparation for his return? International journalists who were looking for answers favoured this argument. Such was the belief in Putin's political prowess, that even following Medvedev's election, a number of publications still speculated that it would not be long before he would be back in the Kremlin; a claim on which Medvedev has so far declined to comment.[13]

Yet Medvedev is nevertheless developing his own political presence, especially with the international community. Each man surrounds himself with an inner circle of people inside the Kremlin and the White House. Because Medvedev is beginning to come out of Putin's shadow, the role of those closest to them should not be overlooked. Medvedev and Putin have always been keen to deny rumours of a rift between them, but those surrounding them are keen to portray their own man with the higher profile, which will inevitably lend itself to further controversy.

Putin faces bigger potential political challenges than Medvedev. Medvedev constitutionally has the authority to dismiss Putin, whereas Putin lacks such power, which makes Medvedev the biggest threat to Putin, as well as being his lifeline. As the Prime Minister, Putin is charged with fiscal and economic responsibility. If he continues in his role as PM, he faces the possibility that the public would blame him for the government's inability to properly address economic issues. This would cause serious damage to the reputation he has worked to build for so long and runs the risk of possibly denying him the presidency in 2012, should he choose to run. However, if he resigns from his post, or worse, is dismissed, then he faces political oblivion, making a

presidential campaign in 2012 almost impossible. Furthermore, the public considers Putin to be the most powerful politician in Russia, and so in their eyes, if Putin is not able to successfully deal with such a crisis, then no one can, thus exacerbating the situation.[14]

Putin is regarded as the strategic Prime Minister of Russia, whilst Igor Shuvalov is seen to be the technical Prime Minister; he became the chair of the Council for development of financial markets. This usually falls under the auspices of the Prime Minister, however, Putin is not even on the Council, which could imply that economic issues are not paramount to him. This could signify that to Putin, there are more important tasks at hand, most importantly, foreign policy, where he has been intent on continually exerting his influence. He has created new institutions that have taken away some of the responsibility from the Foreign Ministry. The Federal Agency for CIS Affairs, which is headed by Putin's own appointed minister makes a clear point that Putin regards the CIS as under Russian jurisdiction.[15]

The Agency was set up to help strengthen Russian policies implemented in the region, with the Kremlin explaining that the time was right for Russia to successfully enhance its influence in the commonwealth region using peaceful methods. Valery Mikhaylov, the deputy of the former CIS States First Department stressed that the need for such an agency is required to help those countries in the commonwealth and address the challenges they face under the patronage of Russia.[16] Such an organisation would in other circumstances be applauded, such as the USAID programme. Yet the Agency is different to similar programmes, in that it will continue to work in the region regardless of the political climate in any particular country. A Kremlin source has said that "Whatever our relations with one country or another, this department will do its business: give grants, provide libraries with literature in the Russian language, work with NGOs. At the same time, the President and the government can wage war with the neighbours as much as they want." [17]

His participation in foreign policy debates is a sign that he is far from ready to relinquish his power, constitutional or not. Putin's interest in the CIS implies that he does not regard the region as being included in foreign policy negotiations. He leaves the 'real' foreign policy to Medvedev, without appearing to interfere or contradict his constitutional confines. By focusing his influence on the "near abroad", and possibly regaining some power in those nearby states, he is shaping the future political landscape in an area where there are real possibilities to consolidate power. The states in question are on Europe's doorstep; therefore any dealings with the EU will be directly with Putin himself, as unlike Medvedev, his zone of influence may pose more challenges to EU foreign policy. This simultaneously undermines Medvedev in the eyes of the west and secures his position in Russia.

Although Medvedev and Putin deny any rifts in their tandem power share, there have been instances where the two have tried to out shine the other. In his first State of the Union address in November 2008, Medvedev announced a plan that was implicitly intended to relax some of the un-democratic civil restrictions introduced during Putin's presidency.[18] He intervened in January 2009, to prevent the State Duma from passing a bill that would allow the FSB to formally suspect anyone with contact to a foreign national of treason and espionage. This would have done nothing for Russia's association with the West, a relationship that Medvedev is keen to develop.

Medvedev has also made promises to reform the justice system, to ease media restrictions, democratise politics and advance Russia's relationship with the international community. We have yet to see how successful these changes will be and whether they will be able to withstand the challenges that are inevitably going to come from within the government.

Putin's future looks uncertain. At the beginning of Medvedev's presidency, it was evident that Putin was still Russia's premier leader and his return to the presidency in 2012 would be inevitable. As time goes on, and Medvedev has begun to step out of the shadows, we begin to see that there is a possibility that Putin may have underestimated his successor. Medvedev has already achieved what Putin failed to do during his presidency; to improve his status in the West, and the polls suggest that his popularity is surging. He has yet to actually implement any policy that will define his presidency, but time will tell if he has the staying power of his predecessor.

Conversely, Putin would not be regarded in the manner he is if he was not a formidable character. He is nothing, if not a statesman, and he knew exactly how to play his cards when his presidential term was ending. He may appear to be taking a back seat, he may appear to be delegating many of his responsibilities, but he is in no way fading away from politics. Medvedev does have the power to dismiss Putin, but without him, he would lack public support for his presidency, and Putin knows this. His future may not be guaranteed as it was before, but his influence is far from fading. He has continued to shape Medvedev's government, and will most likely continue to dominate Russian politics after 2012. Whether he does this as President or Prime Minister is yet to be determined, most probably by Putin himself.

[1] Constitution of the Russian Federation, www.constitution.ru.

[2] Daily Telegraph, May 12th 2008

[3] *ibid.*

[4] Constitution of the Russian Federation

[5] Levada Centre, www.levada.ru.

[6] Russia News, May 11th 2010.

[7] BILD News Putin vs. Medvedev, August 12th 2008.

[8] Radio Free Europe, www.refrl.org.

[9] www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/296.

[10] Bremmer & Charap, *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2006-2007.

[11] Bloomberg, March 1st 2008.

[12] Reuters, December 27th 2007.

[13] Medvedev interview with *Le Figaro* 2008. www.ireport.cnn.com.

[14] Caucasian Review of International Affairs, Vol 3 (2) Spring 2009.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Kommersant July 31st 2008.

[17] Ibid.

[18] www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/296.