

## Analysis

# Tandemocracy in Today's Russia

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### Abstract

Tandemocracy is the best term to describe the evolving relationship between President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Putin and his close allies decided that he should remain in power even if he did not want to change the constitution to give himself a third term as president. Accordingly, Putin chose to take the position of prime minister and selected Medvedev as the next president. The transition was carried out on the basis of informal agreements that preserve the personalistic nature of the regime established under Putin. These arrangements continue to undermine formal institutions in Russia. Within the tandem Putin remains by far the most powerful player. Currently, the two leaders are cooperating, but observers question whether this cooperation will eventually turn into competition. The global economic crisis makes relations more complicated than they have been until now.

### The Crux of the Problem

Six months have passed since a new system of power began to function in Russia, one in which there are two practically equal centers for making decisions in the persons of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. This system has been described in various ways: "diarchy," "dualism," "duumvirate," and "bi-centered." More recently, observers have begun to describe the system as a "tandemocracy."

This latter term has been gaining popularity for two reasons. First, traditionally in Russian, when you use the terms "diarchy," "dualism" or "bi-centered," you *a priori* have in mind competition between two centers of power, even if only within a limited context. The term "duumvirate" derives from classical history and is understood as something born of circumstances and therefore unstable. In this sense, the concept of "tandemocracy" is a useful counterpoint since it emphasizes cooperation between the two centers of power. Today, this concept is a better description of reality, since until now the system for making decisions, at least in the public sphere, strives for coordination between the two centers of power. This approach is particularly obvious in foreign policy. While individual specialists have been able to discern some differences in the positions of Medvedev and Putin, in practice, their actions are well coordinated and it is difficult to see any difference in their international approaches. In domestic policy, Medvedev and Putin have publicly disagreed only on rare occasions and analysts have to work hard to find these cases.

Second, typically the Russian literature uses the first four terms to describe systems in which the two centers of power are based on constitutional and other legal norms or official agreements. But the existing

configuration of power is based only on the personal agreement between the president and the prime minister. Making the transition from the presidential monocentrism to the Medvedev-Putin tandem does not require amending the constitution or revising any constitutional laws, such as the law on the Russian government. Based on these considerations, we will use the term "tandemocracy" to describe the new configuration of power in Russia.

The main questions which arise among political scientists and experts in regard to this political configuration usually come down to: who is the chief in this relationship, how stable and long-lived will the relationship be both in and of itself and in the face of potential political challenges. The following article will address these questions.

### The Origin of the Construction as the Key to Understanding Its Nature

The reasons for the appearance of the new power configuration, which is in no way based on the logic of the development of modern Russian statehood, can largely be explained through an understanding of the particular features of the transition in power from President Putin to Medvedev in the spring of 2008. But, to start at the beginning, it is necessary to point out that Russia, like the majority of post-Soviet countries in the process of post-Communist transformation, did not create stable rules for the transition of power. Moreover, the weakness and instability of the political institutions became one of the defining characteristics of Russia's post-Communist development. Accordingly, one of the most important tasks of the transition remained unfulfilled. Formally, the transition of power in Russia takes place on the basis of competitive presidential elections.

However, it is no secret that the name of the new head of state became known before election day. The previous president appointed him, either on the basis of his own view of the overall situation in the country and at the summit of power, or after informal consultations with the most influential people and groups among his advisors. In other words, in Russia's political system the transfer of power depends on numerous factors, most of which are in constant flux and therefore difficult to predict.

The contradictory situation before the elections complicated the transfer of power in spring 2008. On one hand, President Putin, who according to the Constitution should leave office at the end of his second term, enjoyed enormous popularity, both among the elite and the masses. On the other hand, there was no one who could match Putin's authority and influence, while also serving as a consensus figure for the majority of interest groups that make up the Putin elite. This situation created a feeling of uncertainty in Russia's ruling circles and stoked fears about the threat that the political situation would become unstable if Putin left office. Therefore, several influential members of Putin's team suggested that he amend the constitution so that he could serve a third term as president in the interests of preserving stability at the highest level. Putin rejected these recommendations. It is hard to say what drove Putin to take this decision. Possibly, at that moment, he did not want to complicate relations with the West. Or, feeling somewhat tired from the burdens of power, he decided to take a pause, giving him a little more time to decide if he wanted to continue his political career. Putin's decision to leave the presidential post forced the power elite to seek a configuration of power that would maintain for the ruling team a dominant position in politics and simultaneously save them from internal divisions. Logically, this formula assumed preserving Putin's role in politics. The question was what his status and place would be in the political system. To resolve this problem, they proposed that Putin serve as "national leader," without holding any state position. They advised him to head the party of power United Russia, and in this capacity control the president and government along the Soviet model. Other suggestions included Putin serving as the speaker of the upper house of parliament or as the chairman of the Constitutional Court. Ultimately, Putin rejected them all because he understood that in contemporary Russia only a high post in the executive branch would give him significant political influence. Therefore, Putin chose the position of prime minister. But this office is

dependent on the will of the president and therefore is extremely vulnerable. Both Yeltsin and Putin replaced their prime ministers without making any public explanation to the country. Therefore, in an effort to better equalize the political influence of the president and prime minister, Putin officially took on the position of heading United Russia, while not actually joining the party. He apparently calculated that the official support of the parliamentary majority, in case of a breakdown in relations with the president, would provide additional defense for the cabinet of ministers and the prime minister from his unexpected removal in the manner of his predecessors.

In order to work successfully in his new role, Putin needed to find an appropriate candidate to succeed him as president. This person would have to be a member of his ruling team who would be acceptable to most of the leading interest groups and, as a minimum, if there were any objections, then from the smallest number among them. The successor also had to be a politician capable of negotiating and firmly supporting the agreements made during the transition of power and carrying out the responsibilities that he had accepted. Then First Deputy Prime Minister Medvedev met all of these demands. In this regard, he distinguished himself from the other first deputy prime minister Sergei Ivanov, who was long considered the most likely to succeed Putin. Ivanov, because of his arrogance and efforts to emphatically take the most important public roles, aroused doubts among many of the power elite that as president he would not break the agreements he had made with his predecessor about the division of power and responsibility in his favor. One cannot exclude that these considerations guided Putin in determining his successor.

### Tandemocracy as a New Version of a Personalistic Regime

The majority of political observers in Russia are convinced that the transfer of the presidential post from Putin to Medvedev was carried out on the basis of informal agreements, the content of which is known only to a narrow circle of individuals close to both leaders. Most assume that, according to these agreements, Putin preserved for himself control over the majority of ministries and agencies, including the power ministries, which are the most important bastions of power in contemporary Russia. Allowing the prime minister control over these posts contradicts the Russian constitution, which stipulates that the power ministries and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are directly subordinate

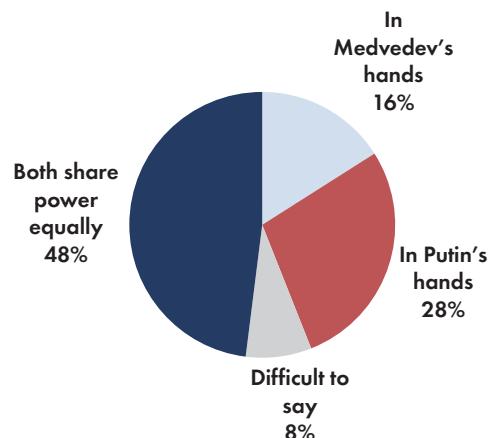
to the president. Such a redistribution of power in favor of the prime minister, carried out without changing the constitution or the constitutional law on the government, was possible because Medvedev became the head of state with Putin's blessing and active support. According to Russian sociologists, Medvedev's strong showing in the March 2008 presidential elections (more than 70 percent support) was achieved largely thanks to Putin's "reflected rating."

The second factor allowing the prime minister to increase his own power within the tandem is the fact that the new president lacks his own constituency and team. Therefore it is completely logical that Medvedev only has one personal ally in the new government – Justice Minister Aleksandr Konovalov, who previously served as the president's envoy to the Volga Federal District. Other highly-placed officials who have been close to Medvedev since his university days include Supreme Arbitration Court Chairman Anton Ivanov and Federal Service of Court Bailiffs Director Nikolai Vinnichenko. These positions are far from the most powerful in the Russian governmental hierarchy. Medvedev's team includes new figures who have only decided to cast their lot with him as the country's leader recently. They include presidential press secretary Natalia Timakova and presidential economics advisor Arkady Dvorkovich. In general, however, the tandem depends on a united team, whose core is people who owe the prime minister their current position.

It might seem paradoxical, but the transition from presidential monocentrism to tandemocracy did not change the nature of the political regime in Russia, which as before remains personalistic. As in previous years, it is not based on strong institutions or legal bases, but on the power of the leaders and the personal agreements among them. In this sense, one can be sure that tandemocracy, as a personalistic regime, would not be created by any other individuals if they were to become president or prime minister. The model was created especially for Medvedev and Putin, taking into account the close personal and, according to several observers, friendly relations between them, lasting since the time of their joint work in the St. Petersburg mayor's office.

About half of Russia's population (48%) believe that the tandem of two politicians share power, according to a September poll conducted by the Levada Center. Twenty-eight percent believe that Putin holds power alone and only 16 percent think that Medvedev does. Thus, not only representatives of the political class, but just under a third of ordinary Russians think that Putin is the main decision-maker in the tandem.

#### *In Whose Hands is the Actual Power in Russia?*



Source: <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008091901.html>  
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#### **Cooperation or Competition?**

Are Putin and Medvedev cooperating or competing? This is the main question that Russian and foreign analysts are trying to figure out. How they see relations between the two leaders determines how such analysts see the future of tandemocracy. Most observers argue that this configuration is not stable. Competition is inevitable in the face of objective conditions, before which the two leaders are powerless. This point of view is based on two arguments. First, tandemocracy contradicts the many centuries' Russian political tradition of monocentric power. In a political system, where power is not based on institutions, but on personal relations, it is important to know concretely where and how decisions are made. Therefore, Russian bureaucrats, used to the idea that "in the heavens there can be only one sun," until now have some difficulties understanding how to behave in current conditions of tandemocracy. Second, in the Russian political system, the role of a monocentric president is extremely important since the head of state serves as the supreme arbiter in resolving arguments and conflicts within the elite. In a situation in which there are two, approximately equal in influence, centers of power and a weak judicial system, such conflicts over time will inevitably undermine the stability of the authorities despite even the good personal relations between the president and prime minister. Advocates of this point of view argue that either the tandemocracy will evolve in the direction of a parliamentary republic, in which, following amendments to the constitution, the official leader of the country will be the prime minister, or the governing system will re-

turn to the traditional monocentrism. The second scenario could be realized if Putin, using his current leadership in the tandem, returns to the post of president in the next round of elections, which could be called ahead of schedule, or if Medvedev, drawing on his constitutional rights and power, gradually concentrates real power in his hands.

A smaller group of analysts argue that the base principle is cooperation between the two political leaders. Therefore this system will be changed only when Medvedev and Putin jointly decide that it has served its purposes. Most likely, this will happen sometime in the middle of the current presidency, when Medvedev as a political leader starts to gain experience and gradually forms his own political team. Or, recognizing that he did not succeed in managing the country, decides not to seek a second term.

In terms of today's practice of cooperation, both politicians prefer to act in agreement on the key questions of domestic and foreign policy. But this does not mean that Medvedev does not have his own position or that he is not seeking to get out of the shadow of his powerful predecessor in the presidential post. As is well known, when Medvedev entered the Kremlin, a part of the political and business elite, which supports moderate positions, tied their hopes for liberalization to his approach for strengthening law and the legal system in the life of the country. Medvedev understands that the positive expectations associated with him will not last long. In contrast to Putin, Medvedev does not have a reserve of time for gradually concentrating power in his hands and assembling his own team. Putin's predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, left the Kremlin forever. But Medvedev's predecessor remained in power at the zenith of his popularity and influence; therefore if the current president does not prove himself as an independent figure, then it is entirely possible that Putin will return.

But the ability of Medvedev to become Russia's unified leader are limited by informal agreements about the division of power, the lack of a deep bench of personnel, and an absence of other resources.

In a difficult situation when, on one hand, it is necessary to demonstrate an effort toward attaining greater independence and, on the other, there are no resources to actually do this, Medvedev chose a flexible tactic, which could prove effective. Avoiding any public disagreement with the prime minister, he began to formulate his own agenda and began to build his own "bureaucratic platform" for moving it forward in political and business circles. Medvedev set out this agenda in such a way that the socially active part of the popula-

tion would see it as the firm intention of the new president to implement reforms oriented toward democratization. The president formulated two major tasks. The first involves restoring in the country an independent judicial branch and channeling social processes in Russia onto a legal track. Although Medvedev never used the term "rule-of-law government," no one doubts that he is pushing the country in this direction. The second task is one of the most difficult battles in Russia today – combating corruption. Medvedev ordered the drafting of a special program to address this issue. It formed the basis for a set of bills, which has been introduced to the State Duma. The distinguishing characteristic of this program is that it defines the main cause of Russia's widespread corruption and its enormous scale the fusing of the state apparatus and business and the massive involvement of bureaucrats in business activity. Therefore, the key solution proposed by Medvedev is the separation of the state and business. Observers are united in the belief that if the president's agenda is even partially realized, it will give a powerful impulse to changing the existing political and social-economic systems, which many call bureaucratic authoritarianism, in favor of a more open model, based on the principles of competition.

At the same time, Medvedev has allowed himself, in very cautious terms, to disagree publicly with Putin's activity in some instances. Thus, at the end of July, when the prime minister's sharp criticism of the Mechel metal company caused a panic in business circles and led to the sharp reduction of its capitalization, Medvedev let it be understood that he did not agree with Putin's position, calling on the state apparatus not to "give business nightmares." In the end of September, when the international financial crisis reached Russia, Medvedev expressed dissatisfaction with the way that the government was battling with the crisis. In doing so, the president pointed out the ineffectiveness of micro-managing the country, when all decisions are concentrated in one center, and their realization is carried out not through institutions, but through trusted individuals. It is no secret that this system came into being during Putin's presidency.

Nevertheless, all Medvedev's efforts to gain greater independence, whether through his political-legal initiatives or formulating positions separate from the prime minister on key questions of domestic policy, remain incomplete. There is no serious movement in his plans to strengthen the independence of judges. Likewise, there are serious concerns that the substance of Medvedev's proposals for combating corruption to a

significant degree will be hollowed out under the pressure of influential interest groups working to maintain that status quo. The state's administrative apparatus has not weakened its pressure on business and the country is managed in the old way through an ineffective and corrupt bureaucratic hierarchy.

In this way, Medvedev succeeded in strengthening his popularity and authority, both in society and the elite during the course of the August conflict with Georgia and in the process of the conflict resolution process that followed it. Medvedev was the one who made the extremely important announcement on national television about the beginning of the military operations against Georgia on August 8 and about recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on August 26. Medvedev represented Russia in the difficult negotiations about peacefully regulating the conflict around Georgia with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who headed the European Union intermediary mission. Nevertheless, these actions did not prevent Russian observers from claiming that Putin made all the key decisions regarding the Russian-Georgian conflict during this period or that they were made under his strong influence. Many analysts began to describe Medvedev as a "military president," given his lack of a desire to distance himself from, or express disagreement with, Putin's tough line in Russian foreign policy, who no longer would be able to carry out a policy of liberalization. However, in one of the speeches after the conflict, Medvedev indirectly criticized this position, confirming his intention to carry out the agenda he laid out shortly after his inauguration.

### Instead of a Conclusion

It is possible that the informal agreements about the division of responsibilities will last until Putin feels that the new president is politically strong and has formed

his own team with which he will be able to carry out the policies of his predecessor. Then Putin will leave the stage with the feeling that he has carried out his job and transferred the leadership of the country to reliable hands. Or the prime minister could decide that without his participation as the single leader of the country, the power system will not function effectively. However, the financial crisis, which many predict will be difficult for Russia's economy and social situation, could change the developing relations of cooperation and competition among the president and prime minister. How relations develop between society and the power elite during the course of the crisis and whom public opinion and the elite blame for the crisis will depend greatly on the relations within the tandem. By the middle of October, the president had taken a more profitable position in the public sphere than the prime minister. Medvedev, using his constitutional opportunities, did not participate in day-to-day management of the economy and focused on the problems of global politics and conflict resolution in the Caucasus. Combating the financial crisis and its consequences remained the job of the government. Not coincidentally, several media outlets that traditionally support Putin began to advise him to resign in order to save his political influence and popularity. They feared that the negative and protest mood which will inevitably grow in the country due to the crisis would have an adverse impact on his authority. There is no doubt that Putin will not follow these recommendations. Nevertheless, the future of the tandem in conditions of the crisis will be more indeterminate and dependent on many factors, including opportunistic ones. It is possible that cooperation will increase if both leaders conclude that the new situation is dangerous for them both. It is also possible that competition will increase if dissatisfaction with the coming difficulties is focused on one of them.

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