

## **Marc Oprach: Dmitri Medvedev – President on Standby or Worthy Successor to Putin?**

Proposed by the chairmen of all Kremlin-friendly political parties, Dmitri Medvedev will probably be the winner of the Russian presidential elections which are scheduled for March 2, 2008. Born in Leningrad in 1965, Mr Medvedev studied law and later pursued a scientific career. Mr Medvedev and today's president Putin are linked by a close relationship of mutual trust: In 1999, the president appointed Mr Medvedev leader of his campaign team and head of his presidential administration after his election victory in 2003. Moreover, Mr Medvedev has been holding the office of chairman of the supervisory board of the gas and oil giant Gazprom since 2000.

Because of his career, Mr Medvedev has for years been tipped as one of the possible successors of Mr Putin, even though he does not belong to the 'Siloviki', a group of former military and secret-service officers that has systematically expanded its power since Mr Putin took office. The 'Siloviki' rose so consistently that a political career with a military background is by now even regarded as symptomatic of the current president's term of office. One reason for this probably is that, as a response to the lack of familiar staff he had to deal with from the start of his career, Mr Putin appointed representatives of the army and the security service to positions at all hierarchical levels of the country's administration.

Furthermore, former officers and security-service staff were given a chance to expand their personal networks through the political and economic power granted to them. Eberhard Schneider of the German Science and Politics Foundation uses the term 'FSB network' to describe the increasing influence of the Siloviki. Other people who know Russia confirm that by the end of Mr Putin's first term of office, the Siloviki had come closer to Russia's centre of power than other influential groups. Given the fact that the number of enterprises taken over by Siloviki is increasing, they are also regarded as a powerful factor in the country's economic life.

However, there are other opinions. Bettina Lenz, for one, rates the Siloviki's influence as considerably smaller than "often assumed". In fact, during Mr Putin's presidency, many decision-making positions were given to persons without any military background, so that there is reason to believe that it is rather the promoted person's relationship of trust with Mr Putin than proximity to the military and the secret service on which his or her rise to power depends. And indeed, the persons appointed by the president to leading positions come from diverse areas: Next to some students he was friends with while he was reading law at the Leningrad State University, they include colleagues of the secret service and the city government of St. Petersburg.

However, forcing the expansion of the central power is only one tool in Mr Putin's strategy to secure his own rule. Another is cultivating the rivalry between different power groups. The cliques operating in the Kremlin are not backed by the country's societal forces and, therefore, do not meet democratic requirements. That Mr Putin should have little interest in reconciling the rival groups is obvious. On the contrary: The only way to secure his power is to retain the prevailing balance.

By announcing his intention to withdraw from the country's politics, Mr Putin destabilised Russia's political structure. To guarantee the coexistence of the Kremlin groups in the future, a consensus on a single candidate acceptable to all would have been needed but was not reached. Thus, Mr Ivanov and Mr Medvedev confronted each other – one symbolising 'sovereign democracy', 'sovereign economy', and a 'strong military power', the other championing classical liberalism and an orientation towards the West. To Mr Medvedev, democracy and sovereignty are inseparable concepts.

To be sure, Mr Ivanov distanced himself from the Siloviki, but this did not give him much of a profile on the international plane. Unlike Mr Medvedev, he still appeared a 'Putin clone' and as such, he was rated as the favourite in the presidential succession. It was only when Viktor Subkov, who had been appointed prime minister by Mr Putin, appeared on the scene that Mr Ivanov and Mr Medvedev seemed to be the losers. However, all that changed when Mr Putin announced his definite decision in favour of Mr Medvedev shortly afterwards.

What long-term objectives the ruling president is pursuing is not clear. Some assume that Mr Putin is deliberately building up a weak successor to prepare his own return to power. Others believe that Mr Medvedev will be able to establish himself as a strong head of state. The former assumption is corroborated by the fact that Russia's political system is designed to serve the president as the central figure of the country's power structure and that, having once held this office, Mr Putin will certainly not accept a subordinate position.

How should we interpret Mr Putin's statement that he intends to become prime minister? We can only speculate about his reasons. It is cogitable that there will be a formal shift of power in favour of the prime minister. However, Mr Putin has spoken out against amending the constitution on several occasions; furthermore, he will hardly seek to take over a weakened presidency later on. Rather, he will soon try to redistribute the power which is now concentrated on the president.

If Mr Putin did indeed nominate Mr Medvedev to secure his own power in the long run, this would by no means threaten the dominant position of the Siloviki. Rather, it would be a clear sign of their influence. Thus, for example, the communist leader Gennady Zyuganov said that Mr Putin had appointed Mr Medvedev to push ahead the process of uniting Belarus and Russia, and to position himself as the future president of this union.

Another variant could be that Mr Putin intends to use the redistribution of power to secure for himself the position of Russia's most powerful statesman, the 'national leader', in the long run. In this context, prime minister Putin, as an important player in security and foreign policy, could become the 'protector of Russian interests' par excellence.

Mr Medvedev has already made himself popular as a politician as he was responsible for housing, health care, educational policy, and agricultural projects. And he used energy export profits to bring about social-policy reforms. Today, he is facing the task of confronting the old wielders of power with his own confidants, just as Mr Putin once was. In this context, whom he will appoint to the ministries of power, i.e. the secret-service and security machine, is particularly important.

It is beyond doubt that Mr Medvedev does not belong to the former secret-service officials who succeeded in expanding their influence under Mr Putin. However, although he is a civilian without a career in the KGB/FSB, he has demonstrably adopted the basic principle of this service – unquestioning loyalty towards the commander. With this, Mr Medvedev fulfilled one of the basic prerequisites for his rise under Mr Putin. Unlike Mr Ivanov, however, he has so far not shown much profile in foreign policy. He is counted among the reformers and endorses cooperation with Europe and the USA.

Mr Medvedev's core competence will be in the field of economy. The future president, who rejects the energy charter proposed by the EU, will aim at securing Russia's international competitiveness. In this, he will probably be guided by his experience as manager of Gazprom. The company's monopoly on the gas and oil market must be secured. All in all, solving the problems of Russia's economic system will probably be the greatest challenge for Mr Medvedev. This includes

improving the administration, reducing corruption, and reforming the health, education, and housing policies as well as agriculture.

It remains to be seen how the Putin/Medvedev tandem will work. Not only their differing approaches to foreign policy but also the redistribution of competences could lead to conflicts. Mr Medvedev's loyalty towards Mr Putin is indisputable, as the Yukos crisis has shown. However, it may be assumed that the new president is able to show what stuff he is made of. Mr Putin was similarly regarded as vague until he bared his teeth in the Khodorkovsky case, eliminating the oligarchs as a political group.

Should the Putin system, which in foreign countries is often called a 'democracy with adjectives', i.e. 'controlled', 'defective' or 'incomplete' democracy, permit Mr Medvedev to become a powerful president, this would offer these self-same foreign countries their chance. While the name of Boris Yeltsin stands for societal liberties but also for political chaos and economic decline, the name of Vladimir Putin is associated with stability and an economic upturn. Therefore, it will be interesting to see which values Dmitri Medvedev will support.