

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The Russian “Election”

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Q1: What will happen in Russia in the near term politically—given Sunday’s expected events?

A1: Sunday’s events are the culmination of several months of opaque decisionmaking inside the Kremlin concerning whether or not Vladimir Putin will step aside (in accordance with the Russian Constitution that prohibits a third presidential term) or stay on, transforming his role from president to prime minister. My reading of what will happen next in Russia is that for the near future, the authoritarian trend we have seen over the last several years will continue, and the “presidential transition” will amount to the current president, Putin, becoming prime minister and the new president, Dmitri Medvedev, becoming largely a symbolic figure. The Putin administration, in which Medvedev held a key post, has spent much time and energy shutting down or stifling independent, critical voices and getting control of institutions such as national television, the Parliament, and political parties. Putin chose Medvedev as his favored presidential candidate. Therefore, I find the argument that Medvedev is a “closet liberal” unconvincing. Instead, I believe that Russia is shifting to a prime ministerial system. I would wager there is a good chance that Medvedev will be a largely symbolic president and that Putin will be the dominant leader for some time to come.

Q2: What are the implications for policymakers in the United States and Europe?

A2: Policymakers in the United States and Europe ought to avoid the word “election” when speaking of Sunday’s events; the selection process has not in any way resembled a transparent, competitive election. That said, policymakers should recognize that Dmitri Medvedev—barring some extraordinary event—will have gotten a significant job promotion and will likely be the head of state. Millions of Russians will likely go to polling stations and, as in Soviet times, obediently select the candidate the authorities pressed them to support. Over time, Medvedev may be able to develop a power base separate from and perhaps less authoritarian than Putin’s. So policymakers in the United States and Europe ought to reach out to Medvedev. But they should also reach out to Russians beyond the Kremlin. The next U.S. administration should avoid the over-personalization of presidential politics that characterized both the Bush and Clinton administrations. Instead, policies ought to support broader engagement with Russians, including the minority who still hope to see Russia as part of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Q3: What if Medvedev turns out to be a liberal? What metrics should we be looking for to recognize such changes?

A3: I hope I am wrong and that Medvedev is a liberal. Regardless, there are numerous metrics to track Russia’s political trajectory: do we see an end to impunity by law enforcement authorities; greater independence of the judiciary; a diminishing of the role that the security services play in governance; favorable conditions for foreign and local investment in impoverished parts of Russia such as the North Caucasus; an end to harassment of those who criticize the government; the freeing of political prisoners; the restoration of freedom of assembly and movement; noninterference by the authorities in competitive elections; critical voices on national television; or an end to the blacklisting of foreign journalists, activists, and business people who do not pose a national security threat to Russia but are nevertheless blocked from entering Russia for political reasons? A positive answer to any of these questions would be evidence of progress.

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