

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The Russian “Election”

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Q1: Who is Dmitri Medvedev?

A1: There is some interesting speculation about who Dmitri Medvedev is and whether his outlook differs from that of his political mentor, Vladimir Putin. Frankly, it is hard to imagine that Putin would appoint a successor whose political philosophy and goals fundamentally differ from his own, and we certainly would not describe Putin as a real liberal, particularly with regard to political institutions. There are, however, a number of aspects of Medvedev’s biography that differ from Putin’s, including: 1) they are from different generations; Putin came of age in Leonid Brezhnev’s Soviet Union while Medvedev grew up during Mikhail Gorbachev’s reign; 2) Medvedev came from a more well-off Soviet intelligentsia family; 3) Medvedev, as far as we know, did not work in the intelligence services; and 4) Medvedev has worked in the private sector, serving as general counsel for the large lumber company Ilim Pulp in the 1990s. This last point stands out when reading his recent speech in Krasnoyarsk. I think Medvedev may better understand the practical business needs for reinvigorating the economic reform agenda to promote more broad-based and sustainable growth. On the other hand, while he talked a lot about promoting “freedoms” in the same speech, never does he speak about this in the context of political freedom.

Q2: Whither Russian foreign and security policy?

A2: The good news is that we see none of the sharp anti-Western and anti-U.S. rhetoric that we have heard from Putin, especially in the past year since his famous Munich speech. The bad news is that Medvedev has said virtually nothing about foreign policy and international relations since his nomination. This suggests that at least in the near term Putin will continue to play the leading role in foreign policy, so we should probably expect more continuity than change. That does not mean, however, that we are on the brink of a new Cold War era of confrontation with Russia. Russia’s primary goal for the next generation will be economic growth and modernization of the country. The needs there are immense. A Cold War–like military competition bankrupted the USSR, and no serious Russian politician wants to re-run that kind of exercise today. The Russian political elite also understand that to have any chance of meeting their ambitious economic goals, they will have to be more and not less integrated in the global economy and especially with Europe. Their real, not imaginary threats are currently radical Islam and terrorism to the south and longer-term concern about China’s development to the east: neither contingency will be effectively addressed by hostility toward the West, just the opposite. On the darker side, we should expect increasing Russian assertiveness often contrary to our interests in the countries on its western periphery including Ukraine, Georgia, and others. And while we may find more constructive engagement with Russia in international economic organizations, Russia’s growing obstructiveness in international political organizations, especially those devoted to promotion of democracy and human rights, will endure.

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