

The cautious liberal

PROFILE OF DMITRY MEDVEDEV

PRESIDENT OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

President Medvedev believes he can offer Russia both freedom and prosperity without trading one off against the other

Despite having been President of the Russian Federation for more than one year – during which time he has attended many international summits, issued policy statements, and given numerous speeches and media interviews – Dmitry Medvedev still presents something of a mystery to Kremlin-watchers. The reason for this being so is the unusual relationship between the president and his prime minister and former boss, Vladimir Putin.

Together, they appear to cooperate in running the world's largest country as an effective team (or as Medvedev prefers to describe it, 'a tandem'). On major foreign policy issues including the conflict in South Ossetia/Georgia, gas supply disputes with Ukraine, and opposition to the installation of a US-backed strategic missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, they speak as one. Moreover, this system of 'dual-control' appears to have survived the financial crisis, which has placed exceptional strains on Russia's economy, undamaged. When asked by an interviewer whether he and Putin were a "good cop/bad cop duo", Medvedev laughed it off, replying they were "both good cops". Yet the question first raised when Medvedev was confirmed as a presidential candidate back in December 2007 – namely, who's the boss? – still remains for the most part unanswered.

Most observers assume that real influence still rests with the former president. Although Medvedev has brought in a few hundred technocrats, the vast majority of high-ranking positions are still held by bureaucrats – many former intelligence officers among them – who previously served under Putin. Likewise, most senior judges appointed have been Putin loyalists or 'conservatives'. During the first year of Medvedev's presidency there has been little progress towards reinforcing the rule of law, individual rights or, indeed, any of the other 'liberal' issues raised during his presidential campaign. Moreover, does this signify that Medvedev is merely a figurehead, a 'caretaker president' fulfilling the role of head of state until his mentor Vladimir Putin, who was disbarred by the Russian constitution from standing for a third term in a row, chooses to stand for re-election? Political cartoonists have long made a habit of portraying Medvedev as Putin's puppet. More tellingly, a recent opinion poll found that only 12 per cent of Russians believe that their president is actually in charge of their country.

There are two strands in President Medvedev's past

that may throw some light on this conundrum. The first is that by his upbringing, education and early career choices, Dmitry Medvedev has strongly liberal credentials. He was born and raised in Leningrad (now again St Petersburg, the city built from nothing by Peter the Great as a 'window on the West' and which has ever since maintained a liberal, free-thinking tradition). Both of his parents were university teachers, and after completing high school the young Medvedev went on to study law at Leningrad State University, graduating in 1987 before continuing to complete his PhD three years later. He was, and still is, a fan of British 'heavy rock' bands that were banned during the Soviet Union such as Deep Purple, who later played a concert for him when he resigned from Gazprom on being elected president. From his mother, who taught Russian literature, he inherited his love of books, and even now during interviews as President of Russia he frequently alludes to European classics. Compared to previous Russian presidents he is a thoroughgoing intellectual.

That is reflected in his first career choice, which was to continue teaching at his university. He wrote several award-winning legal works which became university textbooks in Russia, while at the same time practising the law (especially corporate and securities law) and working for his former professor, Anatoly Sobchak, in city government as a legal adviser. It was through Sobchak, one of the early advocates of political pluralism and free markets in Russia, that Medvedev first became involved in politics and got to know another of the professor's former students, Vladimir Putin.

That link-up was to prove decisive in Medvedev's subsequent political career. As Putin's protégé, his rise was meteoric. For the same reasons, many observers see his role as president being circumscribed, both because his legitimacy is so closely linked with Putin's, and because he reached the highest office without building up an independent political base of his own.

Medvedev moved from St Petersburg to Moscow when appointed by Prime Minister and President-elect Vladimir Putin to be deputy head of presidential staff. During the 2000 presidential elections he headed Putin's campaign. He continued to work closely with Russia's new president and was appointed chairman of the board of directors at the state-controlled gas monopoly Gazprom, which soon gained control of the NTV television channel. From 2001 onwards Medvedev combined day-to-day support of the president's office with special projects, including heading

Dmitry Medvedev,
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the commission charged with overseeing civil service reform and how best to modernise the judicial system. He was made chief of staff at the Kremlin, and in November 2005 was appointed to the newly created office of First Deputy Prime Minister. By 2007 Medvedev was widely considered as a likely successor for the top job when Vladimir Putin stepped down, although there were at least two other serious candidates for the presidential ticket. But when the leaders of United Russia and other pro-government parties offered their support for Medvedev, President Putin declared: "I support this candidacy". In response to which Medvedev promptly stated that, should he be elected President of Russia, he would ask Putin to be his prime minister.

Medvedev has stated that "my most important aims will be to protect civil and economic freedoms". However, partly because he has not been directly responsible for economic policies, the president has been able to distance himself from the rise in unemployment, arrears in paying wages, and other dire effects of the drying up of international credit combined with the collapse in oil and other commodities prices.

More recently, he has deliberately stressed his liberal credentials by granting his first ever interview with a Russian newspaper to Novaya Gazeta, which has a reputation for investigative journalism that is strongly critical of the government (four journalists and the newspaper's lawyer have been assassinated in recent years). "Do you know why I gave the interview to Novaya Gazeta?", Medvedev is reported to have said, "because you never sucked up to anybody."

Some Kremlin-watchers see this as a carefully timed message to a different constituency – reformist liberals, human rights activists and others who want to a change from Putin's 'hard-line,' authoritarian style of government. During the interview Medvedev argued that a strong civil society "an inalienable institution in any state...that provides feedback: the organisations of people who do not hold office, but are nevertheless actively involved in the life of their country." Therefore, he concluded, "meetings and contacts between the President and representatives of civil society are indispensable."

Once more, he showed his liberal and intellectual background, citing Hume and Rousseau on the role of the judiciary and the social contract between the state and its citizens respectively. He also showed his grounding as a lawyer, arguing that the Russian Constitution forms the basis of the modern social contract. But he also used the language of the people when speaking of the unwritten 'prosperity-for-stability' contract of the Putin era. "You mean 'democracy in exchange for prosperity' or say, 'sausages in exchange for freedom?'" he queried, seeking clarification. However, he added that "one should never oppose a stable and prosperous life, and a set of political rights and freedoms. You cannot

oppose democracy and well-being. Inalienable rights and freedoms", he said, "may be in jeopardy if society is unstable, if the elementary needs of individuals are not provided for, if people do not feel secure, if they do not receive their wages, if they are unable to buy basic foodstuffs, if their lives are threatened." On the face of it, this would seem to be an endorsement of a strong state and the prosperity-for-stability contract that has so far stifled democratic movements in Russia. But the message is ambivalent. Looking at that list, many Russians will note 'benefits' that they did not receive even during the period of economic boom. And Medvedev affirmed that, as president, he can offer Russia both freedom and prosperity.

The President of Russia would appear to be gingerly stepping out of his predecessor's shadow. How far he is able to do so depends on both the internal balance of power and the degree of disenchantment felt by Russians towards the 'ancien regime'. It could be a first move towards his standing for re-election, rather than handing the presidency back to Vladimir Putin. Alternatively, a more liberal-sounding president could help boost the popularity of the Medvedev-Putin tandem during times of economic hardship. It is by no means clear which of the two will emerge as the next presidential candidate, nor indeed how that decision will be reached – except that it will be done in private. F

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