

# Deepening democratic values

## PROFILE OF DMITRY MEDVEDEV

PRESIDENT OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Slowly but surely, Vladimir Putin's successor has been putting his own distinctive stamp upon the presidential role

There were some raised eyebrows on the international stage when Dmitry Antolievitch Medvedev was elected the third President of the Russian Federation in March 2008 at the age of forty-two, with a majority of just over 70 per cent of the voter. Many have described his rise as meteoric, but in fact the former academic became chief of administration at the Kremlin in October 2003. More at issue though were his close ties to the man whose job he was taking over, Vladimir Putin, the second President of the Federation of Russia (2000 to 2008) who subsequently resumed his former role as prime minister.

The two men go back a long way. From 1990 to 1995 Medvedev was councillor to the president of the municipal council of St Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, a post which put him under the authority of Mr Putin. Both have stated that they may consider standing for the presidency as candidates at the next elections in 2012, although in an apparent gentleman's agreement Medvedev announced that he would not stand against Putin should the latter decide to put himself up for re-election. But meanwhile, slowly but surely, Medvedev has been putting his own stamp upon the presidential role. Two years on, he is no longer seen as simply Putin's "successor".

At the time of his election he declared that one of his priorities would be to defend civil rights in Russia, placing a greater emphasis on this theme than his predecessor. With his background as a professor of law at the University of St Petersburg, (the town near where he was born, then called Leningrad, as the only son of two academics), it is a subject to which he was naturally drawn – though, as he has since discovered, it can be a complex one in such areas as the Caucasus. On the foreign policy front, one of his first actions as President after the border conflict with Georgia was to authorise in August 2008 the independence of the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, coming out strongly to defend Russia's actions before the international community. But he has nonetheless continued to pursue the issue of human rights, most recently holding a meeting with activists and NGOs on the situation in Chechnya.

He has also sought to stamp his mark on the international economic front, following a meeting in June of this year with the German Chancellor Angela

Merkel to discuss the fate of the embattled euro. After speaking with Ms Merkel, Mr Medvedev expressed his confidence that a package of measures put in place to stabilise the euro "will work". He also emphasised however that a stable euro is vital for EU trade partners, including Russia, which holds a substantial part of its foreign currency reserves in euros. This could be seen as simply making sure everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet prior to the G20 summit in Canada; but there can be little doubt that Medvedev is serious about ensuring Russia's voice is heard more clearly within the European Union and more broadly on the international stage.

At the recent EU-Russia summit held in June of this year in Rostov-on-Don (a location the President pointed out that held great historical significance due to hardships the city endured during the "Great Patriotic" or Second World War) he stated that, since the signing of the EU-Russia partnership agreement, "relations of partnership and cooperation have become, in essence, our daily practice". This was a point echoed by the President of the Council of Europe, Herman van Rompuy, who, whilst feeling that Russia was still at a "crossroads", acknowledged Medvedev's "choice to base Russia's modernisation in the 21st century on building democratic values and building a modern economy".

Over the past 18 months he also appears to have built up a stronger relationship with the President of the United States, Barack Obama, whose decision to cancel the proposed ballistic missile shield in Central and Eastern Europe has certainly contributed to the thaw in US-Russian relations. This April, Medvedev described Obama as "a smart guy" and "a thinker", although he refused to be drawn upon whom exactly he was comparing him to, apart from agreeing to the American TV interviewer that he did have "someone else on my mind!" Certainly the body language between the two presidents looks good, and in May – according to Kremlin sources – they spent an hour-and-a-half on the phone, discussing amongst other topics possible sanctions against Iran and Medvedev's then-imminent visit to Turkey and Syria. President Medvedev is widely seen as presenting Russia's friendly face to the world, though some sceptics question whether he can deliver the goods.

On the home front, the President immediately faced grave economic issues that needed decisive action.

Just a few months after coming to office the global economic crisis struck, causing Russia's currency and capital markets to go into a worryingly sharp decline. Medvedev came out quickly to attribute the collapse in Russian share prices purely to global factors, rather than to any fundamental problems within the domestic economy, and moved rapidly to pump state money into the system. No doubt he was reassured by the knowledge that Russia could count upon its huge natural resources – provided, that is, energy and other commodities prices rebounded. As a former director of Gazprom, the giant Russian energy company, he was well aware of the 'cushion' that energy exports could provide. He had, after all, overseen the planning of the sub-sea gas pipeline linking Russia directly to key markets in Western Europe, thereby cutting the Baltic states and Poland out of the equation.

Elected by a coalition of four parties and seen by many as a member of the liberal wing of the Kremlin as opposed to the so-called "siloviki" (the association of the army, police and security services), he has also made moves to amend the political system. His first step was to suggest to the Duma or Parliament that the presidential mandate be extended from four to six years. In March 2009 he followed this up by signing a presidential decree aimed at putting in place reforms to the civil service. A four-year programme was initiated in 2009, one of its specific objectives being to reduce the level of corruption, and he has set Russia's securities watchdog on the trail of market manipulators and proposed new laws allowing foreign bondholders to launch civil actions.

A similar in-depth study is taking place within Russia's legal system, with much the same aim. In June of last year, Medvedev put forward a proposal that the President of the Constitutional Court of the Federation and his associates be put before Parliament by the President, rather than being elected by the judges themselves, as had previously been the case – a move which could allay many of the concerns of foreign investors in Russia over 'Rule of Law' issues. Elsewhere, Medvedev has set up a presidential commission to "restore Russia's history" in the light of what are claimed to be previous attempts to falsify historical facts.

Looking to the future rather than the past,

the President has announced that technological innovation will be one of the priorities of his term of office. He chairs a powerful committee, established in May of last year and made up members of government, entrepreneurs and academics, one of whose remits is to ensure that Russia keeps up to speed in the digital world. He has also called for the privatisation of major state-owned companies. Whilst acknowledging that in recent years the state has played a growing role in the economy, his intention is that this will be only a temporary phase and that Russia will move towards more open markets within a more open society.

Perhaps his most liberal move to date has been to say that he wishes to break with what he described as "the quasi-monopoly" of the party in power, announcing in August of last year that "the new democracy has begun". This won popular support in last October's regional elections, when 66 per cent of those eligible voted (although some critics such as the independent pollsters Golos subsequently raised queries about the results). But he is nonetheless seen as being sincere in his wish to change the electoral system as a step towards implanting deeper democratic values in Russia. **E**

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Photo: RIA Novosti

