

AN ETHICAL EXAMINATION OF DEVELOPMENTS REGARDING 2012 RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

By Alexis Giannoulis
(RIEAS Research Associate & Independent Analyst)

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In 24 September 2011 the world witnessed the end of the debate about who will be running for (and most certainly become) the next Russian president at the elections of 2012. The plan was revealed on the 24th of September at the annual conference of United Russia party and this plan shocked a good portion of international and Russian political analysts and experts. However and rather astonishingly, a large amount of respected international media have welcomed this arrangement as an orderly 'swap' of the two most important posts in Russian politics, the one of the president and the one of the prime minister (PM). For example, a FT article of September 22 argued that the uncertainty surrounding the 2012 elections has "left Russia paralysed"ⁱ. Washington had also claimed that whoever becomes the next Russian President the "reset" of US-Russian relations would continueⁱⁱ without, in essence officially commenting on the swap.

This could be viewed as an overwhelming victory of realism vis-à-vis liberalism as far as global politics are concerned. It is worth noticing that despite a lack of liberal political culture and past, the Russian population has been reacting to the distant political developments that are taking place for the population, despite the population, in a rather orderly and realistic way. A poll by the Levada Center for instance a few days before the decision indicated that 41% of the responders were certain about this swap and the return of Putin as presidentⁱⁱⁱ. The swap, as many indicate confirmed that Medvedev acted as nothing else but a 'place holder' for Putin as the former president could not run for a third consecutive term and, to a large extent followed his predecessor's and now successor's general political directions.

Close partners of Putin and Medvedev such as the finance and economy minister Alexei Kudrin who is said to have played the most important role during the financial crisis of 2008, have openly declared that this is not a good prospect. Kudrin said that he cannot be part of the government that will emerge after the parliamentary elections of December 4th ^{iv}. The former member of Yeltsin's government and currently a member of the opposition Boris Nemtsov said this is the "worst possible scenario for Russia" and that the world will not eventually support such an authoritarian course^v. Also, Igor Yurgens, head of the Institute of Contemporary Development, indicated that without political liberalisation there will be a collapse^{vi}.

In spite these voices of concern however, a good part of governments around the world have, publicly or not, welcomed this decision. It remains a fact that certain experts in the US voice concern over Putin's potential differentiation from his protégé's policies in issues such as the Missile Defence System, Ukraine, Middle Eastern developments including the future of Arab Spring and certain states such as Libya as well as the rapid developments regarding eastern Mediterranean Sea's hydrocarbons. The good personal relations between Medvedev and Obama have signalled some progress and understanding between the world's two most powerful nations and some fear that this trend will reverse. Similar fears exist also for German-Russian as well as British-Russian relations (that is why PM Cameron urged

to Moscow earlier this month to sign a number of major deals and projects and reassure cooperation over terrorism^{vii}). Despite that, analysts such as Mateusz Piskorski of the Eurasian Center for Geopolitical Analysis and several financial centres, funds and other figures said that this is a positive development since currently and amidst the international financial turmoil, confidence and political stability are deemed as necessary for the tranquillity of the Russian economy including crucial reforms and projects^{viii}.

The reality of the situation however is that the Russian people were not trusted by their leadership not even for a (s)election between two, “pre-approved” candidates. That alone is a worrying signal in terms of the next Russian president’s politico-ethical legitimacy. Official or constitutional legitimacy exists since the Russian constitution only prohibits a candidate from running for a third *consecutive* term. In the meantime and as the presidential term was amended and extended from five to six years, Vladimir Putin by opting to re-enter the Kremlin looks at another 12 years in office. If one calculates the five years of the Medvedev presidency, Vladimir Putin will have been at the top and in reality in charge of Russia’s affairs for a quarter of a century, that is second only to Joseph Stalin as far as recent history is concerned while makes the top-20 list of longest serving rulers of Russia and subsequently Europe since the 9th century!^{ix}

This vividly illustrated comparison is being used to underline the fact that that the Russian leadership opted yet again to secure the status quo of the *state* with a total disregard of the will of the Russian *civil society* and against the vital characteristic of *choice and variety* in the political affairs of a democratic state. It also fails to comply with the directives of *political pluralism*, a foundational feature of the complex liberal/democratic system apparently not yet fully embedded into Russian political culture, at least the culture of the political elite. Those who sympathise and admire Russian popular culture, history and contribution to world art, science and literature find it difficult to accept that such a prospect could be the only one for the Russian citizens. The swap even appears unnecessary since the political realism (if not cynicism) of the Russian public would most probably had led to the election of either (and more possibly of Putin) even if this was determined in the forgotten, and thus far mostly ceremonial second round of presidential elections.

The claim that stability ultimately helps and works in favour of the political system, the economy and subsequently the population (especially during these economically crucial and harsh times) is unfounded because the lack of choice hence lack of true consent by the population is a serious backdrop of the future of Russia as a contemporary liberal democracy. Especially when considering the economic interests at stake in the country it is obvious that the business clans surrounding the two presidents will continue dominating the market and all its aspects (such as employment, wages, trade unions and so on) hence the ruling class will continue be politico-economical keeping Russia as a place pretty much closed for foreign business at a smaller scale while large projects have usually exhausting demands. This in turn creates a rather controlled and unfavourable economic climate. Politically, voices that claim that the (theoretical) election of a third “non-aligned” candidate could jeopardise the future of the country including its internal power and integrity, are simply propagating for the current status quo again overlooking the popular will and the characteristic of political pluralism that defines the global civil society as well as the global society of democratic sovereign states.

Russians face now the possibility of having Vladimir Putin as president until 2024 while simultaneously having effectively a “one party system” since United Russia is

currently controlling 2/3 of the Duma^x, a trend likely to continue. Similarly, one could assume that Putin will not go (at the age of 70 in 2024) without appointing an heir hence fuelling further this vicious circle of succession in Russian politics. As a last note, if we accept that there will be no surprises in the upcoming elections, by the next presidential elections of 2018 (if everything goes as planned) the Russian public will hopefully be in a position to choose only if voices from the opposition, NGOs and political movements seeking more liberalism unite and grow strong in view of this undemocratic, centuries-old trend.

Footnotes:

ⁱ <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/fc7a6e24-e50b-11e0-9aa8-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1ZENpOlij1> (accessed 28/9/2011).

ⁱⁱ A "reset" which was largely based on the good personal relations between Presidents Obama and Medvedev.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/fc7a6e24-e50b-11e0-9aa8-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1ZENpOlij1> (accessed 28/9/2011).

^{iv} <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/594a509e-e78f-11e0-9da3-00144feab49a.html#axzz1ZENpOlij1> (accessed 28/9/2011).

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/video/2011/sep/12/david-cameron-moscow-russia-video> (accessed 28/9/2011).

^{viii} <http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/09/26/56768584.html> (accessed 28/9/2011).

^{ix} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Russian_rulers

^x http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_parties_in_Russia