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Medvedev in Electoral Pickle

By Victor Davidoff

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United Russia's pre-election convention finally put an end to the main political intrigue of the year. Russia's next president will be Vladimir Putin. Of course, about five months remain before the vote, but few harbor any doubt that Putin, who was nominated at the convention by Dmitry Medvedev to run for president, is guaranteed victory at the polls next March.

The decision means that President Medvedev lost the under-the-rug battle fought between the Kremlin and the White House over the past few months. While at the convention Prime Minister Putin and Medvedev symbolically showed their unity with a friendly hug, all indications are that the decision was made as a result of some compromise at the very last moment. Just a few days earlier, sources in the United Russia leadership were still talking about Putin being at the top of the party list. And in his speech before the party, Putin let it slip that Medvedev's name was added to the list right before the convention.

Medvedev's team is not hiding its disappointment with this turn of events. Arkady Dvorkovich, a Medvedev aide, wrote on Twitter: "Yeah, well, there's nothing to be happy about."

Medvedev's decision not to run puts him in a bit of an electoral pickle. If Russia were a democratic country, Medvedev would have to explain to his constituency why he is leaving his post if he considers his presidency to have been successful. On the other hand, if Medvedev admits that he has been a failure as a politician, then how can he claim the No. 1 spot on United Russia's electoral list?

But this is not the only paradox. Someone uninitiated in the subtleties of Russian politics might find it strange that Medvedev, who is not a member of the United Russia party, could be on its electoral list. And then there is a legal quandary: How can the president run for a seat in parliament before his term is up? Not to mention another niggling detail — that Medvedev has no intention of working in the Duma. Instead he apparently plans to take the position of prime minister, which Putin generously offered him.

The United Russia convention decided to use the speeches made by Putin and Medvedev as the basis for the electoral platform, presumably because the so-called popular program prepared and widely touted by the All-Russia People's Front ended up in the wastebasket. But neither said anything new.

Far more interesting were Medvedev's words about "what our country must not be."

"Our country must not be weak, poor or ineffective; it must not slide toward disintegration; it must not suffer from technological backwardness, from bureaucrats' abuse of power, from corruption or from terrorism; it must not be isolated."

Ironically, this description best fits the reality of Russia today — what the country has become after almost 12 years of leadership by the St. Petersburg siloviki.

It is unlikely that this reshuffling of personnel between the Kremlin and the White House will alter the nature of Russian political life. Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the Yabloko party, said the country can forget any change: "Modernization is a change in power, not a reshuffling of the ruling tandem. That's not modernization. That's stagnation."

Former State Duma Deputy Mark Feigin wrote on his blog that "the issue of personal security is paramount for Putin and his entourage, and this is the only way to secure it. Putin will stay in power as long as he can — besides, he has nowhere else to go."

Boris Nemtsov, leader of the opposition party Parnas, had even harsher words: "Putin is a provocateur of the highest order. He is provoking the Russian nation to rebellion. By holding on to power, he is provoking the Russian nation to go out on the streets and act the way people act in countries where the orderly transfer of power has been eliminated."

It would be comforting to believe that Nemtsov is wrong in his prediction. But it is amazing how tenaciously Russian leaders try again and again to make their rule eternal. "They haven't learned anything," a contemporary of the royalists wrote during the French Revolution. In the 21st century, there are also people who have learned nothing from the dark experience of the Soviet Union or the even more unfortunate fate of Arab dictators.

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