

Putin Forever

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In a normal electoral system, only one person can be president, but anyone can be a voter. The Russian system is the exact opposite. The president can be anyone — even Connie, Putin's beloved Labrador retriever — but there can be only one voter: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

At the United Russia convention on Saturday, Putin put an end to the uncertainty surrounding the presidential race. Using his hand puppet, President Dmitry Medvedev, Putin essentially nominated himself for president.

"I would like to express my gratitude for the positive reaction to [Medvedev's] proposal that I run for the office of Russian president," he said.

In other words, Putin said, "I don't give a damn about you and your elections."

The tandem will remain in effect — only now the hand puppet will be prime minister, and his puppet master will return to the presidency.

Medvedev's position has not changed. He never really was the president, and he will not be now either. And Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, who had hoped to become prime minister,

has resigned, reiterating that he would not serve in a government led by Medvedev. In other words, “Putin will appoint me Central Bank chairman.”

Because Putin’s ratings are twice as high as United Russia’s, he cleverly slipped free of that political deadweight by dumping the thankless responsibility of heading the “party of crooks and thieves” on Medvedev.

The most amazing thing is not the maneuver itself but that it happened this long before the December State Duma elections. Obviously, Putin could not be happier with the present division of powers in which Medvedev is saddled with all the tedious and unpopular tasks, while he has unlimited time for rest and relaxation in his numerous official and unofficial residences around the country.

The only potential obstacle to this arrangement was Medvedev himself, who could have taken offense at being treated as a nobody. But Medvedev hurried to show that Putin could walk all over him, and Medvedev would take this treatment compliantly — and even smile at the same time.

The current tandem could have lasted for one term, but not two. By the time Medvedev had served a second term, enough people could have come to believe he was the true president that he might have started acting like one — and therefore usurped Putin’s perpetual grasp on power. Judging from what just transpired, Medvedev had wanted a second term so badly that Putin decided to end the confusion — and Medvedev’s delusions — earlier than December.

The tandem switch will have absolutely no repercussions on Moscow’s foreign relations. I think that Putin has judged his foreign partners correctly. They are full of lofty words on human rights and democracy, but this is just talk.

The Russia that Putin will inherit in 2012 will differ greatly from the Russia he led when he first became president in 2000. The Pension Fund has a \$30 billion deficit, and the budget will not balance with oil prices lower than \$120 per barrel. The wealthy fear for their wealth, and the poor fear for their lives.

The only real strategic scheme that the Kremlin has any serious plans to implement is a project by the name of “Putin Forever.” Whether such a plan can work in a country where no other strategic project is allowed will become evident in five or six years.

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