

Putin in 2012: More Expert Analysis

by Joshua Tucker on September 27, 2011

Following up on [previous posts](#), here are three more assessments of [this weekend's announcement](#) that Vladimir Putin will seek the Russian presidency in 2012:

[Sufian Zhemukhov](#), Visiting Scholar at George Washington University's Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies

Why so fast and so simple? That is the question. The way Vladimir Putin was announced as a candidate for the next Russian presidential election was unexpected due to two reasons. Firstly, it came out earlier than anticipated – that is, before the parliamentary elections. Secondly, the simplest possible scheme out of all possibilities was chosen, or rather it seems that nobody thought it would be so simple. Both the speed and simplicity of the decision suggest that the situation inside the Russian elite has been becoming more and more unstable because of the uncertainty of who will be the next president. Actually, early announcements as a stabilizing method of change of power has been used during most appointments and reappointments of the governors of the Russian regions and, in the same pattern, recently, Valentina Matvienko was announced to become the Speaker before she was even elected as a member of the Sovet Federatsii. It seems that the situation inside of the elite has been so unstable that the tandem decided to reveal their intentions earlier to provoke and resolve the problems long before the presidential elections and chose the simplest scheme because of the fear of complicating the situation even more. Right after the announcement, a surprising conflict between president Dmitri Medvedev and minister Alexei Kudrin happened that proved the seriousness of the problems inside the elite. The resignation of the latter showed the determination of the Tandem to resolve all similar challenges.

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Putin's self-renomination begs a quote from Karl Marx: Second time, a farce. But possibly worse than farce. The Russian economy in the last 20 years has grown grotesque disproportions atop the irrationalities inherited from late Soviet period. I mean outsized retail and service sectors not to mention the export-oriented mineral extraction with very little real investment in infrastructure, industrial modernization and human capital. Basically, Russians and above all the elites were allowed to consume and not to save more than perhaps any Western counterpart. A major unknown, then, is how would Putin's notoriously inefficient and venal 'vertical of power' fare in the face of world economic turmoil? Retrench and pray for high oil prices, collapse in the face of protests and elite defections, or turn into a developmental dictatorship of savings? Still more unknown is what could be the ideologies and mobilization resources of the opposition in the eventuality of catastrophic crisis with such daily-life occurrences as electrical shutdowns and industrial accidents.

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The most surprising aspect of President Medvedev's coronation of Prime Minister Putin at the United Russia party conference on September 24 was that it happened at all. Until this

point, Mr. Putin's political strategy has been to deploy uncertainty to keep his political opposition off guard. Both in terms of parliamentary and presidential elections, the Putin team has waited until the last moment to reveal its intentions. This strategy placed considerable burdens on the political opposition, forcing them to organize to face a number of different contingencies or risk being unprepared for the eventual reality of the eventual contest.

The likely effects of this new "early and often" strategy are significant. First and foremost, Mr. Medvedev's announcement firmly links presidential and parliamentary elections, placing Mr. Putin and his team at the center of political debate. The clear link between the President and his party will shift political debate in parliamentary elections away from concrete policy issues to the effectiveness of Mr. Putin and his team, highlighting the electoral themes of stability and government efficiency that have been so effective to this point. Against the backdrop of the chaotic political conflict between President Yeltsin and his parliaments, Mr. Putin will be the only candidate who can promise that his policies will receive parliamentary support. Since a number of regional elections will be held contemporaneously with regional elections, this logic of political support will also extend through the regions as Mr. Putin's coattails drag along skeptical voters.

Yet, while this confluence of forces is likely to create an electoral boost for United Russia in December it cannot be the entire explanation for the strategic shift. Nor can Mr. Medvedev's claim that he was implementing a long ago agreed upon plan explain the timing. In fact, the announcement seemed unnecessary in a race whose outcome is thought to be a foregone conclusion. After all, since UR consolidated in 2002, electoral opposition has been largely impotent in the face of UR's control of state resources and resulting capacity to redistribute of wealth to key constituencies to gain vote support. There is no political personality on the landscape who might rival Mr. Putin's voting-getting capacity, even Mr. Medvedev. Likewise, any organization seeking to encroach on UR's territory would have to redefine political debate and open a new dimension of competition around either corruption or individual liberties. Both possibilities seem very unlikely given public opinion.

Mr. Putin's candidacy may well be designed to stifle the elite political support for Mr. Medvedev that was beginning to rebound within the inchoate party system. The quick rise and fall of the Right Cause affiliation with NJ Nets owner Mikhail Prokhorov was marked by a very public attack on Mr. Putin's successful political strategist, Vladislav Surkov. The dormant right-center party, Yabloko undertook a revitalization program under their former leader, Grigory Yavlinsky. Public opinion polls suggest that voters also sensed the potential for political change as their assessments of the tandem declined and support for United Russia wilted. While it is unlikely that Mr. Medvedev was tempted to assert independence, Mr. Putin wanted to put an end to any activity designed to undermine his legitimacy or ignite latent political forces. It is clear that the Kremlin wants to avoid the need for blatant fraud that might lead to post-election protest.

Yet, linking three levels of elections through a common political party also creates significant demands on the United Russia organization. Increased linkage brings increased potential for party accountability. The party will now have to solve thorny and sometimes contradictory problems such as creating paths for policy innovation, sustaining loyalty among members and devising a path for new leadership to emerge. While the party appears to be beginning to address these concerns, it is slow going and fraught with problems. Failure to address them in the longer term could push politics back into the streets as economic and political stagnation riles Russian voters who have heightened expectations of their government.

In the end, the tandem had some to gain and little to lose by making an early announcement of Putin's candidacy. The decision to announce reflects the Kremlin's caution and as well as its ongoing concern about popular backlash against heavy-handed tactics. Mr. Putin's strategy has created even more certainty about the outcome and made have created incentives that will strengthen his institutional base through the next term.