



CRS Report for Congress

Russia's March 2008 Presidential Election: Outcome and Implications

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Summary

This report discusses the campaign and results of Russia's March 2, 2008, presidential election and implications for Russia and U.S. interests. Popular outgoing President Vladimir Putin endorsed his First Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitriy Medvedev, who easily won an election viewed by some observers as not free and fair. This report will not be updated. Related products include CRS Report RL33407, *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*, by Stuart Goldman; and CRS Report RS22770, *Russia's December 2007 Legislative Election*, by Jim Nichol. For more background and prospects, see CRS Report RL34392, *Russia's 2008 Presidential Succession*, by Stuart Goldman.

Introduction

The popular Russian President Vladimir Putin — in his second and constitutionally-limited final term in office — was faced in 2007 with the decision of either stepping down at the expiration of his second term or with abolishing constitutional term limits. After he announced in April 2005 that he would not change the constitution, a period of political uncertainty set in that lasted until December 10, 2007, when Putin publically endorsed his First Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitriy Medvedev (pronounced dee-MEE-tree mehd-VYED-yehf), as his choice to be the next president. Both Putin and Medvedev reassured Russians that the “Putin plan” would continue, and Russians received further assurances a few days later when Putin accepted Medvedev's request to serve as prime minister under a Medvedev presidency.¹

Medvedev had become better known by Russians after Putin appointed him first deputy prime minister in late 2005 and tasked him with implementing various high-budget

¹ The “Putin plan” was put forward by the United Russia Party as its campaign platform in preparation for the Duma (lower legislative chamber) elections in December 2007. Rather than a detailed plan, it consists of the annual speeches by President Putin to the Federal Assembly. Open Source Center. *Central Eurasia: Daily Report* (hereafter *CEDR*), May 22, 2007, Doc. No. CEP-21007.

“national projects” to implement social service and other reforms. Medvedev had long served under Putin during the latter’s rise to power, and since 2000 Medvedev also held the chairmanship of Gazprom — the world’s largest gas firm — to ensure government control over its operations. He had never run for elective office.

The Campaign

Four candidates were able to register for the March 2, 2008, presidential election. Three of the four candidates — Medvedev, Gennadiy Zyuganov, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy — were nominated by parties with seats in the Duma. According to the election rules, other prospective candidates had to gather two million signatures of support within a few weeks. One prospective self-nominated candidate, well-known oppositionist Mikhail Kasyanov, was denied registration, after repeated examinations of his signature lists by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) alleged a higher-than-permitted number of invalid signatures. Oppositionist Garry Kasparov alleged that his United Civil Front group was repeatedly turned down in its attempts to rent halls for a meeting to nominate him as its candidate. Oppositionist Boris Nemtsov, nominated by the Union of Right Forces Party, received approval from the CEC on December 22, 2007, to gather signatures, but he ended his campaign four days later, stating that the government had predetermined who would be president. A prospective candidate from the tiny pro-Putin Democratic Party, the little-known Andrey Bogdanov, was able to gather two million signatures and was approved as a candidate.

Medvedev refused to debate the other candidates, “whose programs ... obviously have no chance of being implemented.”² Debates between the other candidates often were broadcast only late at night or early morning. The Russian non-governmental organization Golos (“Voice”) concluded that in many regions where its representatives carried out pre-election monitoring, Medvedev received overwhelming television coverage.³ Zyuganov and Zhirinovskiy filed several complaints with the courts alleging unequal coverage by state television, which appeared to spur slightly more coverage for Zyuganov.

Among the main events during the campaign were long-term development programs set out by Putin at a State Council (a presidential advisory body composed of regional governors) meeting on February 8, 2008 and by Medvedev at an economic forum in the city of Krasnoyarsk on February 15. Both speeches juxtaposed the economic and political disorder of the 1990s to present-day stability and prosperity, and called for further health, education, and other reforms through the year 2020. Medvedev’s speech was viewed by some observers in Russia as more liberal in tone than Putin’s, although both mostly covered similar topics. Medvedev highlighted reforms to the judicial system as a “key priority” to make the courts “genuinely independent from the executive and legislative branches of power.” He called for “protect[ing] the real independence of the media,” to enable them to expose corruption and provide for free expression. He lamented that “the state itself often fails to protect [private] ownership rights,” and asserted that “respect for private property must become one of the pillars upon which the state’s policy is built.” He stated that economic development requires that all citizens have equal access to

² Dmitriy Medvedev, “Interview with Itogi Magazine,” February 18, 2008.

³ Golos. *Statement No. 2 on Findings of Long-Term Observation*, February 28, 2008.

healthcare, education and other social support. He also called for giving “more people the possibility of ... acquiring their own home and land,” so that a large middle class eventually may be created.

Results and Assessments

According to the final report of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), Medvedev won 70.28% of almost 75 million votes cast, very similar to (but slightly less than) the percentage of the vote received by Putin in the 2004 presidential election (71.31%). Some observers suggested that Zyuganov benefitted from his runner-up results, since he gained a greater percentage of the vote than the Communist Party — which he heads — received in the December 2007 Duma election. Zhirinovskiy benefitted too, according to this thinking, because he also received a higher percentage than his party received in the Duma election. Bogdanov, on the other hand, appeared to have secured fewer votes than the number of spoiled ballots and less than one-half of the votes he might have expected if those who signed his voter registration petitions had later voted for him. He conceded defeat quickly and expressed the view that the election had been conducted properly. Zhirinovskiy’s representative on the CEC reportedly stated that the results reflected the will of the people, and Zhirinovskiy pledged that his party would support the new president. Zyuganov claimed that election “rigging” had probably denied him an extra 5%-10% of the vote.⁴

Presidential Election Results

Candidate	Percent of Vote
Dmitriy Medvedev	70.28
Gennadiy Zyuganov	17.72
Vladimir Zhirinovskiy	09.34
Andrey Bogdanov	01.29

Source: Central Electoral Commission, March 7, 2008.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR) declined to monitor the Russian presidential election because of Russian government restrictions on its proposed work (it had similarly declined to monitor the December 2007 legislative election). A small 22-member monitoring group from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) concluded that the election “had more the character of a plebiscite” on Putin’s rule than a competitive election, but that Medvedev was given “a solid mandate ... by the majority of Russians.” The monitors raised concerns that an onerous registration process for independent candidates and uneven media coverage contributed to an electoral process that was not free and fair. A pre-election report by PACE also criticized Medvedev’s decision not to engage in debates. U.S. analyst Michael McFaul termed the election “the least competitive election in Russia’s post-communist history.”⁵

Amendments to the electoral legislation in 2005 banned electoral observers from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), permitting only representatives of the candidates and of media to observe voting. However, Golos sent its “press

⁴ CEDR, March 6, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950520.

⁵ PACE. Press Release. *Russian Presidential Election: for an Election to Be Good it Takes a Good Process, Not Just a Good Election Day*, March 3, 2008; *PACE Pre-election Delegation Concerned by Limited Choice in Russian Presidential Election*, February 8, 2008; *Democracy Arsenal*, February 28, 2008.

correspondents” as observers to hundreds of voting precincts, although they were blocked from monitoring in some localities. Besides Medvedev, only Zyuganov mounted a serious monitoring effort, sending representatives to about 58% of polling stations, according to Golos. Golos monitors witnessed local government officials at the premises of most territorial electoral commissions during vote counting.⁶

Implications for Russia

In his congratulations to Medvedev, Putin on March 3 stated that the duo would start to restructure the government even before Medvedev’s inauguration, planned for May 7. Putin also asked Medvedev to immediately assume leadership over the State Council. Medvedev in turn stated that the election results were an endorsement of Putin’s policies and a mandate for the duo to continue them “for years to come.” Putin immediately convened a cabinet meeting and directed the ministries to work out detailed plans as early as May to implement the 2020 development goals. He also called for the ministries to “immediately submit concrete proposals” on carrying out national project goals on urban policy, agricultural lands, and social sector reforms. He called for plans to promote finished goods processing of natural resources, to strengthen the home mortgage system and banking system, and to streamline rules for setting up and running small businesses. He reminded the ministers that he recently had ordered increases in various social benefits, and stated that revenues must be found to cover these expenses.⁷

Some observers suggest that Putin will retain the levers of power and Medvedev will be a “ceremonial” president.⁸ Putin himself asserted on February 14 that he would have substantial constitutional powers as a prime minister, including “formulating ... and presenting budgets to the legislature, formulating ... monetary and credit policy, tackling social, health care, educational and environmental issues, creating conditions to ensure the country’s defense capability ... and carrying out foreign economic policies.... There are enough powers [for me].”⁹ These observers also speculate that Medvedev was chosen with the expectation that he would not touch the personal assets of — or otherwise reverse policies benefitting — the Putin-era “siloviki” (literally, “strong ones,” referring to many of Putin’s associates with ties to the security agencies).

Other observers argue that since Medvedev prevailed during in-fighting in the Kremlin, he may well have a strong will as president.¹⁰ They predict that, just as Putin moved against some of the so-called oligarchs late in his first term in office, Medvedev

⁶ Golos. *Statement No. 3 of the Golos Association on the Results of Short-term Monitoring of Presidential Elections*, March 3, 2008.

⁷ The Kremlin, Moscow. *Excerpts from the Transcript of a Meeting with the Government Cabinet*, March 3, 2008, at [<http://www.Kremlin.ru>].

⁸ Robert Orttung, *Russian Analytical Digest*, March 4, 2008.

⁹ CEDR, February 14, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950599. Putin stated that as president, Medvedev would “determine the main directions of internal and foreign policy,” but that “the highest executive body in the country” is the ministerial system headed by the prime minister. However, the Foreign Intelligence and Federal Security services and the ministries of Defense, Interior, Emergency Situations, Foreign Affairs, and Justice report directly to the president.

¹⁰ James Hughes, London School of Economics, March 5, 2008.

also may move slowly to assert himself vis-à-vis the “siloviki.” A few analysts suggest that the power-sharing arrangement with Putin may prove workable and may bolster possible democratization. Russian analyst Dmitriy Trenin argues that if Putin strengthens the ministerial system vis-à-vis the presidency, other institutions may also attempt to garner some autonomy, such as the legislature and the judicial system, creating a better balance of powers between these institutions.¹¹ The election also may have strengthened the constitutional norm of two presidential terms.

Putin asserted on February 14 that he would hold the prime ministership as long as he felt he was meeting his own objectives and as long as Medvedev was president, apparently not considering that he and Medvedev would ever clash or that Medvedev would exercise his constitutional power to dismiss the prime minister.¹² Alexander Voloshin, Putin's former chief of staff, has predicted that the two leaders will eventually clash, even if only because of the different institutions they head.¹³ Some observers have raised concerns that inter-bureaucratic clashes will come to paralyze the government. A few have even warned that during a similar period of dual power centers in 1993, then-President Boris Yeltsin used military forces to defeat a strong legislative speaker.¹⁴

Medvedev faces several domestic problems at the outset of his presidency. It may be hard for Medvedev to build on or sustain the economic boom that occurred during most of Putin's presidency, since the world economy may be facing problems and the Russian economy needs restructuring. Rising inflation is one pressing economic concern. Other domestic problems include increasing terrorism and civil disorder in the North Caucasus area. An approved opposition march was held in St. Petersburg on March 3, but a similar unsanctioned demonstration in Moscow the same day was forcibly dispersed, perhaps a troubling sign after the election. Instead, Moscow officials sanctioned a large march by the pro-Putin Nashi (“Ours”) youth group, which picketed the U.S. embassy to protest alleged Western meddling in Russia's affairs.¹⁵

Medvedev has not traveled extensively abroad or had extended responsibility for foreign affairs within the Putin administration. On March 3, he announced that he would focus on foreign policy. He has accepted invitations to visit Belarus, Turkmenistan, Venezuela, and Germany. Some international problems may have ameliorated recently, providing Medvedev with some breathing room, including Russia's vote in the UN Security Council on March 3 favoring new sanctions against Iranian uranium enrichment and possibly improved relations with Georgia. However, among the first international issues confronting the president-elect, Medvedev on March 4 urged Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko to quickly pay the country's gas debt.

¹¹ Dmitriy Trenin, “The Meaning of Medvedev,” *Wall Street Journal Europe*, March 4, 2008.

¹² *CEDR*, February 14, 2008, Doc. No. CEP-950611.

¹³ Henry Meyer and Sebastian Alison, *Bloomberg News*, March 4, 2008.

¹⁴ Nikolai Petrov, *Washington Profile*, February 28, 2008; Liliya Shevtsova, *Vedomosti*, December 27, 2007.

¹⁵ John Wendle and Svetlana Osadchuk, *Moscow Times*, March 4, 2008.

Implications for U.S. Interests

Before the Russian election, President Bush stated that he and a future U.S. president should work to have a personal relationship with a new Russian president, “a trustworthy relationship, to be able to disagree and yet maintain common interests in other areas.” Areas of common U.S.-Russian interest, Bush stated, include non-proliferation and Iranian nuclear issues. He wondered who would represent Russia at the next Group of 8 Summit (G8; conclave of major industrial democracies), appearing to oppose calls by some U.S. observers to oust Russia from the G8. On March 4, President Bush called Medvedev to urge the continuation of cooperation on counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, transnational crime, and other issues, and reportedly stated that he had “read with interest” Medvedev’s campaign commitments on human rights, independent media, the rule of law, and combating corruption.¹⁶ Issues on which the United States and Russia disagree include U.S. missile defenses in Eastern Europe, Kosovo’s independence, and NATO enlargement. Putin on February 14, 2008, threatened to consider targeting Poland and the Czech Republic if they move forward with hosting elements of U.S. intermediate ballistic missile defenses, and to target Ukraine if it joins NATO. Medvedev visited Serbia in February 2008 and backed its opposition to independence for Kosovo.

Medvedev’s chairmanship of Gazprom heavily involved economic relations with Europe, so Medvedev is likely to continue to focus on such ties, including by influencing the future chairman. Some observers stress that Gazprom has acted as a trusted agent of the Putin government in using energy as a political weapon, and that this probably will not change under Medvedev. Signs of such a continued policy include Gazprom’s reduction of gas supplies to Ukraine on March 3. More broadly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with Medvedev and Putin in Moscow on March 8 and reportedly suggested that “there will be continuity” in Russia’s relations with the West, and that “I do not think that the controversies [in relations] will just disappear.”¹⁷ Other observers argue that Medvedev may work toward better energy and other ties with Europe.

Some observers suggest that Medvedev’s reformist statements and career might augur his eventual emergence as a reformist president of Russia and to improved U.S.-Russia ties. Russian analyst Alexey Pushkov argues that U.S. policy analysts erroneously have focused on the possible negative ramifications of increased authoritarianism in Russia under Putin, rather than on Russia’s growing economic stability.¹⁸ Others are less sanguine. Andrey Illarionov, Putin’s former economic advisor, calls Russia a unique historical “siloviki dictatorship,” and argues that Medvedev has used his legal background to reverse democratization in the country. He warns that recent Russian actions such as cyber attacks on Estonia, the radiation poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in England, and the closure of the British Council offices in Russia are typical of such a regime.¹⁹

¹⁶ The White House. *Press Briefing by Dana Perino*, March 4, 2008; *Agence France Presse*, March 4, 2008.

¹⁷ *Financial Times*, March 10, 2008, p. 8.

¹⁸ Alexey Pushkov, *The National Interest*, March 3, 2008; Nicolai N Petro, “The Medvedev Moment,” February 28, 2008, at [<http://www.opendemocracy.net>]; Andreas Umland, “A Second Gorbachev?” *Prospect Magazine*, March 2008.

¹⁹ Heritage Foundation. Seminar, “Russian Presidential Transition,” February 27, 2008.