

Russia: Putin launches electoral bid to retain power

By Andrea Peters
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Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on October 1 that he intends to lead the slate of candidates for the pro-Kremlin political party United Russia in the Duma elections scheduled to take place this December. This latest move by Putin—who is barred from running for a third presidential term by Russia’s constitution—is part of the ongoing intrigue surrounding who he will support as his successor in the Russian presidential elections scheduled for next spring.

Speaking before a meeting of delegates from the United Russia party, Putin indicated his willingness to serve as prime minister in the event that United Russia wins the majority of seats in the upcoming parliamentary race. With Putin’s approval ratings hovering around 70 percent, it is now widely expected that Russian voters will back United Russia against other parties running in the Duma elections. As the leading candidate on the United Russia list, Putin would then be called upon to form a government.

Putin’s announcement has put to rest months of speculation as to how he would seek to retain power upon leaving office next year. However, although the Russian president appears to have found a means of holding on to a position within the government, Putin’s decision—which still does not resolve the central question of who he will indicate as his presidential successor—is an expression of political crisis within his authoritarian regime.

Once it became clear over the course of the past several months that Putin would not attempt to change the constitution to allow himself to serve a third term or to extend the length of his presidential term, the political establishment has been waiting for an indication of who Putin will support in the presidential elections. Two weeks ago, when Putin dissolved his cabinet and accepted the resignation of his Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov, analysts expected that Putin would name his successor to the newly vacant post.

However, with news sources close to the Kremlin reporting growing factional tensions, neither of the two frontrunners in the unofficial race, First Deputy Prime Ministers Sergei Ivanov and Dmitri Medvedev, was appointed. Instead, Putin picked a loyal but relatively unknown figure from within his political circle of loyalists from his hometown of St. Petersburg, Viktor Zubkov.

Prior to his appointment as prime minister, Zubkov served as the head of the Russian federal financial monitoring service, which is a subdivision of the Ministry of Finance and conducts investigations into financial dealings. He is, therefore, in a position

to know the intricacies of the various dirty financial deals within Russian business and the government. However, while Zubkov may very well become Putin’s successor, his appointment was effectively a way for the president to put off making any final decision about the matter and keep the various interested parties in a state of suspension.

Asked several weeks ago whether or not he would run for president in next year’s election, Zubkov simply indicated that this was a “possibility” but failed to make any definitive statement, a position confirmed shortly thereafter by Putin.

Putin’s decision to run on the United Russia ticket in the Duma elections in hopes of becoming prime minister may give some indication of how he will seek to resolve the succession question. That is, there is increasing speculation that Putin will throw his weight behind someone of relatively weak political stature—like Zubkov—so that he is able to assert his political authority through the post of prime minister. However, this is a political gamble with many potential pitfalls.

In making a bid for this position, Putin is most likely gambling on one of two uncertain possibilities—either United Russia, in collaboration with the to-be-elected Russian president, will use its parliamentary majority to institute constitutional changes that relegate more powers to the prime minister, or the future president will at some point resign his post, thereby allowing Putin to return to the presidential seat for an additional term.

There are, however, a number of political dangers in pursuing either of these scenarios. First, under the current Russian constitution, the prime minister has very limited political powers, the most important of which reside in the presidency. The prime minister does not even have the right to appoint his own cabinet.

Thus, Putin is counting on the person who is elected next spring to be largely under his control, willing to do his bidding, and able to fend off any competing demands from other Kremlin insiders.

In addition, Putin is betting on his presence as the leading figure within United Russia holding the party together. United Russia, however, was created as a pro-presidential party, based on its loyalty to Putin as president. It has very little in the way of a clear political program and is constituted by diverse social elements.

As one commentator noted in an October 2 article on the *Agentstvo Politicheskikh Novostei* entitled “The midnight of Putin,” “United Russia is not a collective of co-thinkers joined together by a past history of civil war and common ordeals, and thus able to preserve their loyalty to Putin after he leaves the post

of president. And this means that between [United Russia] and [Putin's] successor a gap could arise, through which, sooner or later, this or that bureaucratic or political force could insert itself."

While Putin himself enjoys high approval ratings, United Russia as a political party does not command the same level of support, with its approval ratings hovering around 45 percent. While Putin's decision to run as the party's candidate in the Duma elections will greatly boost United Russia's electoral fortunes, many ordinary Russians harbor distrust and hostility to the bureaucratic character and intrigues of party politics.

The general instability within Russia's party system and the unique importance of Putin's position as president for that system is further highlighted by the fact that Putin's decision to lead the United Party list was a tremendous blow to the other pro-Kremlin party, A Just Russia. Ardent backers of the Putin administration, A Just Russia presents itself as the political alternative to United Russia, placing greater emphasis on popular welfare and other social concerns. Putin's announcement that he will lead the United Russia list essentially pulled the rug out from under A Just Russia, whose modus operandi has been to back Putin, while supposedly opposing United Russia.

Within financial circles, the news of Putin's bid for prime minister was greeted rapturously. The Russian Trading System closed above 2,100 points for the first time ever, while most Russian securities rose between 1.9 and 5.7 points in the immediate aftermath of the announcement. Despite the Yukos scandal and the increase of state control over key industries, foreign investors have been pleased with the Putin regime. Last year, foreign direct investment rose 13.5 percent and in the first seven months of this year, 20 percent.

However, the Russian economy is plagued by serious problems.

While investment in manufacturing and other industries has significantly increased over the past several years, the oil and gas industries are still the linchpin of Russia's economic boom. This places the country in a precarious position, as any decline in energy prices on the world market, or challenges to its geopolitical position in the world's oil producing and transportation areas, would be a significant blow to the country's economy.

Russia is currently facing major challenges from the United States within its traditional sphere of influence. While US ambitions in the former Soviet bloc have been dealt a blow by the disarray within the various "Color Revolutions" and the cooling of relations with several key states in Central Asia, this does not mean that the US will simply retreat from a bid to assert its dominance in these areas. Currently, the US and Russia are at loggerheads over Washington's aim to create a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe and growing threats against Iran, where Russia has major strategic interests.

According to news sources, many of the differences that exist within various factions in the Kremlin have to do with disagreements over relations with the United States.

Internally, the economic boom of the past several years has created expectations on the part of the population that this growth will translate into a significant improvement in its living standards. As the coffers of the Russian treasury fill, the gross inequities in the distribution of wealth in the country are felt all the more

acutely by the population at large.

An October 2 article in the daily *Izvestia* noted that all the election campaigns of the various parties vying for the Duma have made the demand for "social justice" a central part of their platforms. Citing survey research by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion the newspaper stated, "64 percent of Russians are convinced that they and their families 'are not able to resolve problems in their living conditions' without help from the government. And the government, for the majority of people, is associated today with the figure of the president—in the eyes of the society it is he, and not a political party, who is their defender."

However, recent experiences have shown that the various promises made by the Kremlin and United Russia will not be met. In August of this year, a strike hit the Russian automobile industry in the city of Togliatti, which drew widespread attention. While the number of participants in the strike was relatively small, it had enormous political significance. The president of the AutoVAZ conglomerate in Togliatti, Vladimir Artyakov, is a top leader within the regional United Russia and a member of the local Duma. Artyakov won office by promising to raise the monthly salaries of workers to 25,000 rubles (approximately US\$1,000), from its current level of 7,000 rubles. What the strike effectively did was reveal the hostility of a critical section of the working class to the policies of Putin's party.

An article entitled "The time of proletarian solidarity," published in the leading daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on September 26, issued the following warning:

"The current parliamentary and presidential campaigns in Russia's regions may develop on the basis of the increased political activity of the new Russian working class. The recent events at AutoVAZ (the strike, the attempt to stop the conveyer, the demand for increased wages, the distribution of leaflets, the active protest actions of the small but aggressive factory union 'United') allow one to talk about the fact that today's working class is no longer afraid of public forms of protest."

The authoritarianism of the Putin regime and the game of smoke and mirrors unfolding in Putin's gamble to secure his political position in the aftermath of his presidency are an expression of growing strains within the Russian political elite as it confronts a series of growing geopolitical, economic and social problems.

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