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Russia: continuity of the apex of power

Tandem for continuity

When Putin came to power, the Russian federal system was very fragmented and highly confused. Putin committed himself to the task of restoring the authority of the political centre over federal subjects¹ by creating an apex of power: a system whereby the Kremlin's policies can be respected and continued at regional and local levels without discrepancies. There were four key steps in Putin's path to the apex of power: the establishment of seven regional Districts headed by seven presidential plenipotentiary representatives, *polnomochnye-predstavitseli* or *polpredy*; the reform of the Council of Federation, the upper house of Russian parliament by eliminating the membership of regional governors; modification of regional constitutions and cancellation of Kremlin-regions agreements to unify the national legal area; cancellation of direct elections of regional governors and a return to the appointment system. Regional governors then became fully dependent on the President and the central authorities. When Medvedev took over the Russian presidency many observers hoped he would rescue Russia from the state of tension between the Kremlin and Western leaders and models, to which Putin's tenure had led². At the beginning of Medvedev's presidency, although Putin remained in power as prime minister there were still expectations that this 'tandem' would have worked for a transition to a post-Putin Russia. Yet over the last years it has become clear that the tandem has worked for political continuity. One of the main keystones of this continuity is the apex of power, as Medvedev did not dismantle this power system created by Putin but rather made it a stable feature of the Russian political structure.

¹ On the growing power of the political centre, the presidency and the other central executive organs under Putin, see: C. COLLINA, *La tensione tra democrazia e ricostruzione dello stato nella Russia di Putin: i casi degli oligarchi e dei governatori regionali*, in O. CAPPELLI (ed.), *Oltre la democratizzazione: il problema della ricostruzione dello stato nello spazio postcomunista*, Naples 2006.

² See for example the article by A. UMLAND, *The Democratic Roots of Putin's Choice*, in «Washington Post», 11 December 2007. The author emphasizes that Medvedev, unlike Putin, was a member of the Soviet Union's Democratic Movement.

No. 101 – MARCH 2012

Abstract

By creating the apex of power, Putin sought to make Russia a hierarchical state at home and a unitary actor abroad. Medvedev's initiatives focused on managing and strengthening Putin's policies rather than changing them. This paper aims to outline the continuity of the apex of power under Medvedev. He introduced some changes in the governors' appointment system, created a new Federal District and expanded the scope of the apex of power from the level of regions and governors to that of cities and mayors. At the end of the Medvedev presidency, with Putin announcing his return to the Kremlin in 2012, the apex of power is a key and stable feature of the Russian political structure. Nonetheless it is in constant evolution and may need a new basis for legitimacy other than the claim of political stability. This active continuity from Putin to Medvedev reasonably affects the way the international policy communities should conceive their approach to Russia.

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(*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

Medvedev's policies: managing and strengthening the apex of power

In autumn 2008, Medvedev sent the first signal that he would continue Putin's policies, by declaring that those who did not favour the appointment systems could tender their resignations to the Kremlin. This was a response to Moscow's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, who had declared that he was in favour of a return to direct gubernatorial elections³. Today, at the end of his presidency, we can summarize Medvedev's main initiatives in centre-regions relations as intending to manage and strengthen the apex of power.

Decline of the incumbents. The choice of regional governors has been a key initiative in the management of the apex of power. In his first rounds of appointments Putin confirmed most of the incumbent governors in exchange for their willingness to cooperate with the Kremlin. This strategy allowed a smooth start for the new system after the cancellation of direct elections. In addition, a few months on from the introduction of the appointment system it became possible for incumbent governors to appeal to the President for confirmation. Under Putin, most of the new governors appointed have been chosen from the main Pro-Kremlin party, *ER* (*Edinaya Rossiya*). In many cases the incumbent governors were confirmed by the President once they joined the party⁴. Medvedev's management of the apex of power consisted primarily in the overstepping of this initial phase, with the Kremlin becoming little more independent from the incumbents. Under Medvedev, increasingly often the candidates put forward to the regional assemblies as governors were not the incumbents. The percentage of incumbent re-appointments has declined from Putin to Medvedev, from 73% (2005) to 56.7% (2009)⁵.

Cadres reserve and the outsiders. Medvedev created a cadres reserve in order to replace ineffective governors at any time. This reserve is made up of people of different backgrounds who work for central ministries or agencies, or even large enterprises. They can be called to lead a certain region or District as presidential envoy, *polpredy* or governor. Whereas Putin started to reduce the political autonomy of the regions by establishing alliances with incumbents and regional elites, Medvedev consolidated the Kremlin's power by creating his own cadres reserve at the expense of the incumbents and general regional elites. While the number of incumbents confirmed had already begun to decline under Putin, Medvedev not only continued this trend but also since 2008 increased the number of outsiders appointed as governors. The outsiders are political figures who have no links to regional elites and institutions but are loyal to the President and share the federal government's targets. This practice increased with the economic crisis that began in 2008, showing that when faced by the international crisis the Kremlin prefers to control the regions with its own men without depending on regional elites. Outsiders appointed under Medvedev numbered 42% of appointed governors against 23.1% under Putin⁶.

Governors' appointment procedure. Another change was the way the President chooses candidates. Under Putin the President had the *polpredy* make an indication of possible candidates to be proposed to the regional assemblies and then appointed as governors in their Districts. In 2009, Medvedev transferred this right to suggest the names of possible candidates for the regional assemblies, and more specifically to the parties winning the majority of seats at the regional legislative elections. As the majority in most regional assemblies is held by the pro-Kremlin party *ER*, this move gave more political leverage to this party, which Putin accepted to lead in the 2007-2008 election round when he left the presidency⁷. In some cases the Kremlin can count on *ER* to

³ Similar expectations to reintroduce a regional governors' election had also been expressed by the President of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaimiev in June 2008, and by another prominent regional leader, Murtaza Rakhimov of Bashkortostan. For Medvedev's declaration see: www.news.kremlin.ru/news/2120.

⁴ On the key aspects of the relations between *ER* and the regional governors see: O.J. REUTER, *The Politics of Dominant Party Formation: United Russia and Russia's Governors*, in «Europe-Asia Studies», 62, 2, 2010, pp. 293-327.

⁵ The percentage started to decline in 2006 with a minimum in 2008, the first year of Medvedev's presidency, when the incumbents covered only 17% of appointments. These data and an analyses of the governors appointment procedure under Putin and Medvedev are in N. PETROV, *Regional Governors under the Dual Power of Medvedev and Putin*, in «Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics», 26, 2, 2010, pp. 276-305.

⁶ These data are in H. BLAKKISRUD, *Medvedev's New Governors*, in «Europe-Asia Studies», 63, 3, 2011, pp. 367-395.

⁷ The list forwarded by the regional parties to the President can include 3 to 5 gubernatorial candidates, which means that the incumbent is not the only candidate. Generally other names come from deputy governors, speakers of legislative assemblies, deputies to the Federal Assembly, federal government officials, mayors and university rectors. See N. PETROV, *Regional Governors under the Dual Power...*, cit.

facilitate the distribution of appointments while in other cases the Kremlin can bypass *ER* if the regional elites are too divided.

These changes helped Medvedev take the apex of power to a further stabilization stage, where not only the incumbents but also the regional elites are not always necessary and the President can introduce new people and renew the regional executives according to the growing role of the *ER* pro-Kremlin party at the regional level. Sometimes the Kremlin can count on insiders only, for example in the ethnic regions, while at other times it can also count on outsiders, for example where they suit the regional elite balance better than insiders.

Evaluation system. Medvedev adopted a strict evaluation system to assess the results and performance of appointed governors and decide on their removal, confirmation or promotion to higher executive positions. The evaluation system is based on almost 300 indicators measuring governors' action in education, health, communal service, crime prevention and house building. Apart from these indicators, the population's satisfaction is also taken into account. The Kremlin carries out secret opinion polls to evaluate the success of governors' performance as perceived by citizens⁸. Governors report to the government each autumn and are evaluated by the end of year. Unsuccessful governors are likely to be removed. Although very detailed, Medvedev's evaluation system is still very questionable and most of all appears to be only a slight compensation for the lack of popular legitimacy of appointed governors compared to elected ones.

If these initiatives aimed at managing the apex of power were inherited from Putin, Medvedev's other initiatives have been aimed at strengthening and expanding this system of power.

Creation of the North Caucasus Federal District. The new District of North Caucasus was created in 2010 by dividing the Southern Federal District; it comprises six of the seven North Caucasus republics and the Stavropol Krai. With this move Medvedev strengthened the control of the Kremlin and other central organs in the Caucasus, a crucial area for national security. According to Medvedev, the creation of a new dedicated District in this area should help to solve the main problems of the North Caucasus, derived from economic backwardness, unemployment and corruption. As leader of the new District, Medvedev chose Aleksandr Khloponin the former governor of Krasnoyarsk⁹. The capital of the new District is Pyatigorsk in the Stavropol region. Through the creation of this new District, Medvedev divided the troubled region of North Caucasus along an east-west line, insulating the western side and the Sochi area. Apart from the security issues, with this new District the Kremlin also seeks to manage more closely and directly the political, economic and technical dynamics of the region and the city where the 2014 Olympic Games will be held. The preparation of the Sochi Olympic Games will be managed by the Kremlin and the central government, along with a new *polpred* working on a more focused area compared to what was formerly the larger South District. Medvedev advised Khloponin to prioritise the economic targets of the District. At the *St. Petersburg International Economic Forum* in June 2011, the President also announced the possibility to create another new federal district in the Moscow region, so as to oversee and manage the transformation of Moscow in the larger metropolitan area hosting all the new trade and institutional centres that can no longer be contained in the saturated city of Moscow¹⁰.

This seems to suggest that under Medvedev the federal districts have become part of the Kremlin's management strategy for major infrastructural and modernization plans. The policy Putin introduced to centralise decisions and overview capacities through the creation of the regional districts has not been abandoned by Medvedev, but rather extended from security and political issues to economic and developmental ones. The modernization plans for the Sochi and Moscow areas are likely to involve Western and European investors. Potential partners should pay attention to the structure and profiles of the new districts, their *polpredy* and their executive branches, as they are key actors in the decision and management process.

⁸ The secret surveys have been conducted by Kremlin-connected Public Opinion Foundation since 2003. See details in *Ibidem*.

⁹ Some details on the creation of the new District and the appointment of Khloponin are in a Radio Free Europe report, *Medvedev Creates New North Caucasus Federal Districts*, 20 January 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/Medvedev_Creates_New_North_Caucasus_Federal_District/1934705.html. The official statement is in: *V Rossii obrazovan novyi federal'nyi okrug—Severo-Kavkazskii (In Russia was created a new Federal District-North Caucasus)*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6664>.

¹⁰ The announcement was reported by Russia media. See: *Medvedev proposes expanding Moscow to form new federal district*, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20110617/164674826.html> and I. FILATOVA, *Moscow Faces an Extreme Makeover*, in «The Moscow Times», 20 June 2011.

Reform of local power. Another contribution to the strengthening of the apex of power was the reform of local power, that further extended the influence of the Kremlin and the central organs while limiting the autonomy of the mayors, local institutions and elites.

The first step was to extend Putin's electoral reform to local elections for city councils and mayors. This reform changed the single mandate system into a full proportional one, where each party has a blocked list of candidates decided by the central offices and citizens cannot choose the candidates but only the parties admitted to the elections. This allowed Medvedev to strengthen the power of the *ER* pro-Kremlin party and increase the centre's influence on the composition of city councils and local elites¹¹.

Subsequently, taking his example from what Putin did with the regional governors, Medvedev reduced the role and power of city mayors in favour of city councils and regional governors. The Kremlin's official aim was to limit and control the arbitrary power of Russian mayors and their corrupted practices and to improve the delivery of municipal services to citizens. However it should be noted that in many cases the elected mayors were the main rivals to the appointed regional governors for the implementation of their policies. So the limitation of mayors' powers represents a touchable extension of the apex of power. At first the mayors' powers were reduced by the 2005 introduction of a competitive figure, the city manager, who is nominated by and accountable to the city council. The city managers take over the mayors' key executive duties and oversee the implementation of the city budget and the daily operation of municipal departments and agencies. Medvedev gave a further shot to mayors' political autonomy by inviting the city councils to amend their city charters so as to replace the popular direct mayoral elections with an indirect election performed by city councils. In 2009, one third of the municipalities had amended their charter. In the same year, the city councils' right to recall mayors was also introduced¹². In addition, since 2010 mayors have to report on their activities to the city councils and the mayor must quit in the event of two consecutive unsatisfactory votes. The reform of local powers does indeed favour the regional governors, appointed by the Kremlin, as they can indicate the name of the city managers, influence the activity of the mayors and call for their removal.

Summarizing, under Medvedev the apex of power has been highly strengthened and the Kremlin's power and central power has been extended from the governor level to that of the mayors. Both in the case of the governors and the mayors, the apex of power implied the demise of directly elected executive chiefs that could be independent from the Kremlin. Apart from the central power, this demise benefits the regional assemblies and city councils, where the *ER* pro-Kremlin party generally holds the majority. Then Medvedev's policies expanded the potential of the apex of power and limited the autonomy of the last executive chiefs still directly elected in Russia.

The apex of power after Medvedev

In the middle of the 2011 and 2012 election rounds, the apex of power appears to be a system in constant evolution that may still acquire new features. The latter may arise from two main factors: political legitimacy and the democratic deficit. As for the former, claims for political stability are losing value as the federal fragility inherited from the 90s has been addressed. So, the central authorities have to look for another shared basis with which to legitimate their action at the regional and local levels. As the regional government is perceived, by and large, as a projection of the Kremlin and the central authorities, the President and the federal government can be regarded as liable for any failure, defeat or crisis at the regional level. To overcome this condition the simple removal of blamed regional leaders is not a solution that can be repeated forever. What Russia needs instead is a more balanced distribution of liabilities between the centre and the periphery. As for the second factor - the democratic deficit - the apex of power has created sharp tension between state re-building and democracy¹³. Most of the features of the apex of power, and mainly the abolition of governors' elections, are at odds with democracy and Russians are becoming more and more aware of this. In 2010, a survey by Levada Centre reported that 57% of Russian public opinion was in favour of a return to direct elections¹⁴. In addition, five out

¹¹ Details on changes in electoral systems to city councils are in J.C. MOSES, *Russian Local Politics in the Putin-Medvedev Era*, in «Europe-Asia Studies», 62, 9, 2010, pp. 1427 -1452.

¹² On local power reform under Putin and Medvedev see *Ibidem*.

¹³ On the tension between democracy and authority under Putin see C. COLLINA, *La tensione tra democrazia e ricostruzione dello stato...*, cit.

¹⁴ See the Levada survey at: <http://www.levada.ru/press/2009062604.html>.

of seven parties running for the 2011-2012 Duma and Presidential elections declared that they were in favour of the return to direct election of governors. Presently, the appointment system is still supported only by *ER* and Zhirinovskiy's *Liberal Democratic Party*. With *ER* gaining barely 50% of the votes and so losing its two thirds majority, the Kremlin will need parliamentary coalitions in order to introduce further constitutional reforms. At this point, a concession to other parties and the public opinion must not be excluded.

The contours of the apex of power are then likely to change in the future, hopefully in a more democratic way. What will not be modified easily is the principle of the apex of power to provide stability and political coherence. This legacy of Putin and the tandem tenure will be harder to eradicate, as no ruling or opposition parties nor the public opinion want a return to the federal asymmetry and fragility of the 90s.

Conclusion

A twofold lesson for European and US foreign policy communities ensues from this overview of the apex of power. On the one hand, the apex of power has been strengthened so much under Medvedev that it does not appear to be a reversible feature of the current Russian political order. On the other, the Russian power system is changing constantly, and domestic and internal dynamics can make it change to a more democratic and participating path. What Western powers and communities need to work on is a new pro-active approach to Russia that takes both of these situations into account. On the one hand they need to seize the opportunities that the apex of power does offer: a more stable political system; a coherent legal frame; more focused regional economic interests. Also, the position and role of key regional actors (*polpredy*, governors, city managers and mayors) in direct investment and cooperation programs, are clearer today than in the past. On the other hand, the West needs to abandon approaches based on deployment of the centre-periphery duality, as they will only help the hardest wings of the apex of power to resist the change. So far the Kremlin's claim of Western interference has been successfully used to legitimate the continuity of the apex of power and other assertive policies. Today the Kremlin needs to find a new legitimating basis for the apex of power, and the internal demand for democracy and participation is growing autonomously. And the European and US foreign policy communities need to pragmatically combine their hopes for gradual and spontaneous democratic change in Russia with economic and strategic cooperation.

So far these two principles have not been properly combined in US and EU approaches to Russia, and on some occasions the democratic issue has been sacrificed for pragmatic cooperation or vice versa.

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Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

ISPI
Palazzo Clerici
Via Clerici, 5
I - 20121 Milano
www.ispionline.it

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