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Still an Open Question

Comment by Gerhard Mangott

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Zubkov Just a Place Holder

It was utterly clear that Russian President Vladimir Putin would not seek a third term in office almost two years ago. Even then, sources close to him stated that he was "tired" with the job and was looking for a position that would offer more behind-the-scenes authority and influence. Some of these sources argued that he could return to the Kremlin at a later stage, but that this was not yet decided.

More than once Putin has made it clear that he is firmly committed to leaving office in 2008. This decision has triggered increasingly tense relations within the different elite camps Putin has supported since 2003; in the past months, these tensions turned into serious infighting between the technocratic-economic camp – represented in government by First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Economic and Trade Minister German Gref and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin – and the siloviki, led by people like FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev and Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Igor Sechin.

The moderate economic liberals put Medvedev on their shield; the siloviki camp, however, was left without any serious contender for the presidency and instead kept putting pressure on Putin to stay in office beyond 2008. Contrary to Western press reports, the second crown prince for the Putin succession, former Defense Minister and current First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov is not the presidential candidate of the siloviki camp. Ivanov is himself a silovik, but his is very independent-minded and separated from the core group of the siloviki.

At the beginning of this year, Putin faced two options: Either he would decided in this fall to replace Mikhail Fradkov and appoint as the new prime minister his chosen heir, thus repeating the 1999 scenario. The other option was to decide closer to the date of the presidential elections who to support as his successor.


The first option would have made clear whose side Putin was on and given this person more leeway to put an end to the infighting within the presidential entourage, which has had a negative impact on the efficiency of Putin's government. With the losers desperate to keep their positions of political – and, more importantly, economic – power, they would have accepted their defeat in order to be kept within the echelons. This option however would most likely have turned Putin into a lame duck, with authority and power quickly gravitating towards his appointed successor.

The second option would have allowed Putin to remain a strong president until the very end of his presidential term and keep the two camps at bay, dependent on whom Putin would eventually endorse. This would, however, have left little time to sell the heir to the public. More importantly, though, this scenario would not have provided the chosen successor the time necessary to assemble his team in order to hit the ground running immediately after the elections in March 2008.

Putin has chosen the second option. The decision to appoint Viktor Zubkov prime minister is no indication of whom Putin will eventually endorse as the next president. Zubkov is neither a member of the liberal economist's camp, nor someone associated with the security services. The decision has been postponed.

It can definitely be ruled out that Zubkov will become Putin's heir. Zubkov is far too old for even the best spin doctors and the regime loyal electronic media to sell to Russian society. He is a grey and aging bureaucrat and unlike Putin, who was also unknown when he became prime minister in August 1999, Zubkov has never held any positions of real influence. Zubkov's appointment allows Putin to pursue the second option.

But why then Putin decided to replace Fradkov by Zubkov? Why not keep Fradkov as prime minister for the final months of Putin's presidency? In my opinion, the most plausible explanation is that Putin preferred to have a loyal person and a friend in place for the difficult months ahead. Fradkov has certainly been loyal to Putin over the past three years, but he was never Putin's intimate friend.

Now, it is most likely that Putin will make his final decision on who to support in the presidential election in January, but it is unlikely that he will appoint that person prime minister. The scenario Putin has chosen to select his heir does not follow the 1999 script and it is by all means speculation who that person will be. 

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