

Good cop, bad cop

BY STASH LUCZKIW

Twenty years since the coup that terminated the USSR, Russia’s dynamic duo is gearing up for elections, and everyone is waiting to see if it will be Putin or Medvedev to run for president. Ultimately the situation on the ground will determine what suits Putin best.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (L) and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin prepare to play badminton during an informal meeting at the presidential residence at Gorki, outside Moscow June 11, 2011.

It’s a well-known tactic: the good-cop/bad-cop routine. We see it in films during interrogation scenes. The bad cop threatens harsh punishment, long prison sentences, even a vicious beating. The good cop intimates a possible reprieve, gets the prisoner medical attention, offers a cigarette. You see it in families. Dad will be the stern disciplinarian, mom will come along and soften the terms in exchange for the promise of better behavior. Now we are seeing the good-cop/bad routine applied to Russian politics – and quite effectively.

Since 2008, when Dmitry Medvedev was elected President of the Russian Federation with over 71% of the vote (an almost Soviet-style landslide), Russia has been ruled by a “tandem.” Before the election, Vladimir Putin had been president for two four-year terms. According to the constitution he could not seek a third consecutive term. By then, Putin – who had quickly risen from being Boris Yeltsin’s hand-picked (albeit relatively unknown) successor to lording over Russia as its beloved autocrat – could have had the constitution changed to allow himself a third term. Instead, he chose a subtler approach: he “appointed” Medvedev, his long-time friend and colleague, who was then First Deputy Prime Minister, to run for president. After the election victory (a foregone conclusion), Putin had himself appointed Prime Minister.

One of the first changes pushed through parliament after Medvedev became president was to extend the presidential term from four years to six years. So with the next presidential elections in Russia due to take place in March 2012, the scene has been set for Putin running again. In the event that he wins and remains

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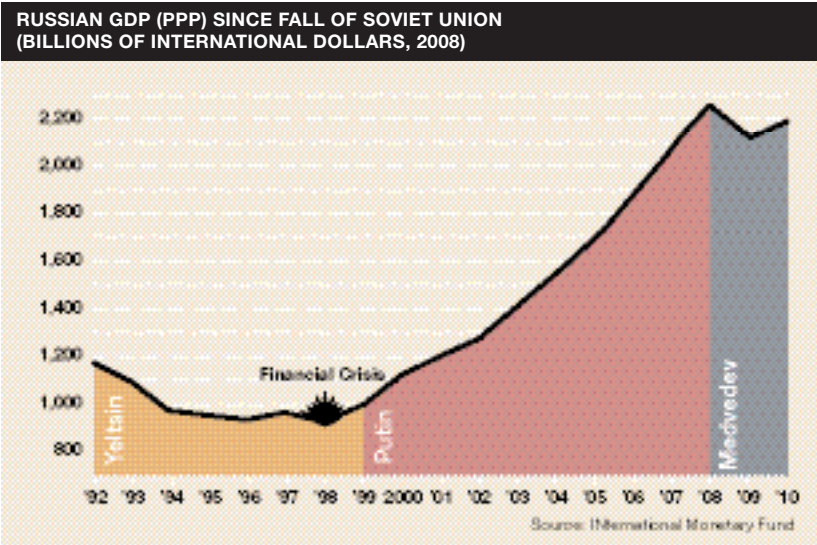
president for another two six-year terms, Putin will have ruled Russia as either president or prime minister from 1999 to 2024 – a quarter of a century. Theoretically Putin, who by then would be 71, could continue ruling as prime minister, much as he has been doing for the past three years. Just to give some perspective, Joseph Stalin ruled for 29 years if you count from Lenin’s death to his own. Leonid Brezhnev only 18 years.

Another scenario is that Putin will decide to let Medvedev, who is 13 years younger than him, run for president and he will continue as prime minister for as long as it suits him. Here again, Putin could realistically extend his reign to more than a quarter of a century.

Kremlinologists are now speculating over which of the tandem will run for president. What everyone seems to agree upon, however, is that Putin is the man who calls the shots. US diplomats, in cables published by WikiLeaks, have described Medvedev as playing “Robin to Putin’s Batman.” Putin is the one with the power base within the government, and he is no less powerful than anyone else among the oligarchs who manage the economy. While his popularity among average Russians may have slipped – according to the independent Levada Center, Putin’s approval rating dropped from 73% in February 2011 to 69% in March, the lowest since the spring of 2005 – such numbers are enviable by any-

body’s standards. Meanwhile Medvedev’s approval rating dropped to 66% in March from 69% a month earlier and was the lowest since he took office in May 2008 – still not too shabby. Ultimately, it is likely that the Prime Minister will confer with Medvedev, whom he clearly respects, but the decision will be Putin’s.

From a Western perspective, Putin is no doubt the bad cop in the tandem and Medvedev is the good cop. Such an analogy is obviously reductive, and by design it plays on subjective interpretations of behavior; but as the basis for tactical maneuvers, such a gambit can throw potential adversaries off balance, which is the whole point.



One of the most recent examples with regard to the West came in the context of the Libyan War. Many observers expected Russia to veto UN Resolution 1973 in March, which called for a no-fly zone and authorized “all necessary measures to protect civilians.” Surprisingly – or perhaps cynically, as it was in Russia’s interest to have NATO bogged down in another conflict while much of Libya’s oil and gas stopped flowing and prices soared – Russia abstained. Shortly after the bombing started, Putin was visiting a Russian missile factory and gave one of his frequent off-the-cuff analyses of the situation. He likened the resolution to “medieval calls for crusades... when someone called on someone else to go to a certain place and liberate something.” He accused the West of blatantly twisting logic and conscience in order to justify what was in reality NATO taking sides in a civil war between various tribal alliances.

The Western press latched on to the crusader remark. Putin was again portrayed like a fulminating pit bull. But he understood that such straight-talking would appeal to nearly everyone at home.

Meanwhile, Medvedev was quick to counter with a public rebuke of his patron: “Under no circumstances is it acceptable to use expressions which essentially lead to a clash of civilizations, such as ‘crusade’ and so on. Otherwise, everything may end up much worse compared to what’s going on now.”

After that exchange the Western press began talking about a possible rift in the tandem. Medvedev, it seemed, was finally asserting himself. Not only did observers speculate as to whether he would run for president next year, they even wondered (wishful thinking perhaps) if he would run *against* Putin.

Within a month of the rebuke, another move among the Kremlin hierarchy caused observers to

speculate about a possible Medvedev ascendancy. Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, a staunch Putin ally, resigned as Chairman of Rosneft following calls by the President to hasten the privatization of Russia’s biggest oil company.

In general, Medvedev is seen as the level-headed pro-Western half of the tandem. He is a lawyer. Putin is a KGB (now FSB) man. Medvedev represents the rule of law, Putin the cloak-and-dagger world of espionage. When Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who was representing US-based Hermitage Capital Management, died in late 2009 while being held in jail on trumped up charges stemming from an elaborate and brazen scam cooked up by rogue elements of the Ministry of Interior (some would say this is a tautology), Medvedev railed against what he called “legal nihilism” and vowed to clean up Russia’s corruption.

At about the same time that Medvedev was calling for legal reform in the face of Western criticism, Putin was gloating over the fact that Mikhail Khodorkovsky had just been sentenced to another seven years in prison (on top of the seven already spent there) in a trial reminiscent of Soviet kangaroo courts. In 2003 when he was first arrested, Khodorkovsky was the CEO of Yukos Oil and the richest man in Russia.

In order to understand the direction in which Putin intends to take Russia, it is important to recognize the initial arrest of Khodorkovsky as a turning point in post-Soviet Russia. When Yeltsin resigned on December 31, 1999 and handed power over to Putin, Russia was still reeling from a privatization program that amounted to the wholesale pillaging of state assets. A handful of ruthless entrepreneurs essentially owned the country. In 1996 these oligarchs financed Yeltsin’s reelection, expecting favors in return. Among the most powerful were media barons Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, also CEO of the Sibneft oil company. Berezovsky was chased into exile in the United Kingdom in late 2000 after coming to loggerheads with Putin. Gusinsky, who was targeted by Putin at around the same time, opted for Spain and Israel. Khodorkovsky, perhaps the brashest of the oligarchs, publically challenged Putin even after the President had explicitly warned oligarchs that if they wanted to keep doing business in Russia they should not to get involved in politics. It didn’t take long before pictures of Khodorkovsky behind bars made their way around the world.

In the West, Putin was deemed an aspiring autocrat bent on reestablishing the security services, from which he came, as the preeminent powers. In Russia he was largely seen as having saved the populace from the rapacious claws of rabid capitalists (disproportionately represented by Jews like Gusinsky, Berezovsky and Khodorkovsky) and given the country back to the Russian people.

Moreover, Putin oversaw the brutal yet successful Second Chechen War, launched in August 1999 while he was Yeltsin’s Prime Minister, after the Chechens, who had won de facto independence in the First Chechen War (1994-1996), had extended the insurgency to neighboring Dagestan. Putin also presided over a partial renationalization of state assets, which coincided with a rise in oil prices before the 2008 financial crisis, and thereby to significant growth in the Russian economy dominated by oil and gas. Indeed, in Putin’s eight years as president Russia’s GDP more than doubled. This projection of military and economic strength extended also to Russia’s “near abroad,” the former Soviet republics still considered Russia’s sphere of influence.

Although Putin is often criticized in the West as an autocrat, from a Russian perspective such a cursory dismissal reflects ignorance with regard to Russian political culture. Had he chosen to, Putin could have probably changed the constitution and established himself as a “benign dictator” in true Russian fashion. The only power base that could opposed him – i.e. the *siloviki*, as the security and military apparatus have come to be called – owed its resurgence to Putin. After all, this is a context in which less than a century ago Stalin would play good cop to Lavrentiy Beria, who as head of the NKVD (precursor to the KGB) was one of the fiercest bad cops in a century with no dearth of them.

But Putin is well aware of Russia’s dilemma in the 21st century. He must ensure that Russia does not fall into chaos, as it did in the 1990s. At the same time, he must guide the country toward effective modernization. Too much autocracy will hinder post-industrial modernization.

In order to avoid chaos, Putin needs to bolster security within – protecting the nascent capitalist system from those oligarchs (and *siloviki*) for whom Russia’s interests are secondary to their own personal interests, as well as from rebellious ethnic groups that would undermine the Russian Federation’s cohesion. He also needs to protect Russia from external threats: NATO in the west, jihadists in the south, and China on its eastern flank. In order to maintain stability in such a precarious context, Russians have learned to accept unfathomable hardships. Invasions have historically been met with scorched earth tactics.



Another aspect of Russian history that almost begs for an iron fist to rule the people, is that the Russians have become averse to change because change usually results in chaos, mayhem and widespread death. Among Western European leftists, Russia was seen as the vanguard of political change because of the Bolshevik Revolution. But the Bolsheviks were merely a ruthless minority. Their power was only fully consolidated on top of the graves of millions of dead from the civil war and government enforced famine aimed at a peasantry resistant to collectivization. When Western Europe was winding down the Reformation, the Russians had their own religious protests. The only difference was that the Russian “Old Believers” refused to accept Archbishop Nikon’s ritual and textual revisions meant to unify the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches.

In short, the average Russian holds neither the ideals of free enterprise and free speech nor some vague Athenian abstraction known as democracy (the Russians were informed by Patristic Greek rather than Attic Greek) in such high regard as to be unwilling to sacrifice it for a guarantee against marauders from without or within. This brings us to the shift in perception needed if one is to assess what might be going on in Moscow before the presidential election. Winston Churchill compared Kremlin power struggles to bulldogs fighting under a carpet: “An outsider only hears the growling, and when he sees the bones fly out from beneath, it is obvious who won.” In this light, superficial observers keep waiting for either Putin or

Moscow, August 1991. Soldiers with a portrait of Boris Yeltsin on their armored personnel carrier. Pro-democracy demonstrators supporting Yeltsin took to the streets to defy tanks and soldiers sent by hard-line Communists, who imprisoned Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in an attempted coup that collapsed after three days.



Russian matryoshka dolls decorated with images of Barack Obama (R), his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev (C) and Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (L) on display at a market in Moscow.

Medvedev's bones to come flying out. What may not be obvious, however, is that *inside* Russia, Medvedev may be playing bad cop to Putin's good cop.

Churchill's observation still holds, but the power struggle is not so much between the President and the Prime Minister, even less with any opposition figures. If recent history is any indication, the real threat to Putin's power will come from among the *siloviki*. When Gorbachev was in power he was continually undercut by Yeltsin, a prominent member of the Communist Party. The same Gorbachev was the target of a coup 20 years ago this August 19-21, led by his Vice President Gennady Yanayev, after which Yeltsin took power. Even the notorious Beria, who became General Secretary upon Stalin's death, didn't last more than four months before party insider Nikita Krushchev organized his arrest and execution.

In other words, a power struggle implies a fight between those who wield power. Thus far, Medvedev's

Times, Kudrin put his finger on the issue that should determine Putin's decision to run for president or not. "We won't be able to grow the economy by simply increasing oil production anymore. More complicated work is ahead of us. In essence, it will be diversification of economy... Communication, transport, information communications, main branches of industry will grow. But not oil. Of course, we will get away from our dependence on oil. It will be very difficult – it is necessary to create good rules of the game, and both Putin and Medvedev understand this." Perhaps Medvedev – the lawyer who was also chairman of Gazprom's board of directors – is the man best qualified to get the job done. Or even Kudrin himself, whose name is now being whispered as possible prime minister.

Putin is too often viewed in the West as a cold, calculating ruler with despotic tendencies. While this may not be entirely inaccurate, it is an incomplete vision of the man. What is often downplayed is his deeply root-

ed patriotism, which in the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire that it sprang from was commonly known as "Russian chauvinism." The Russian people sense this, and as long as they feel he has the best interests of the Russian nation as a priority, they will continue to support him.

If Putin's chauvinism determines his strategic view – i.e., reassert Russia as a major international power able to defend itself and its interests well into the future – his tactics reflect an often overlooked element of his upbringing. The Western press tends to ignore the fact that he is a black belt in judo – or at least they only mention it to show how Putin is trying to feed a "cult of personality" with macho images of himself hunting and fighting.

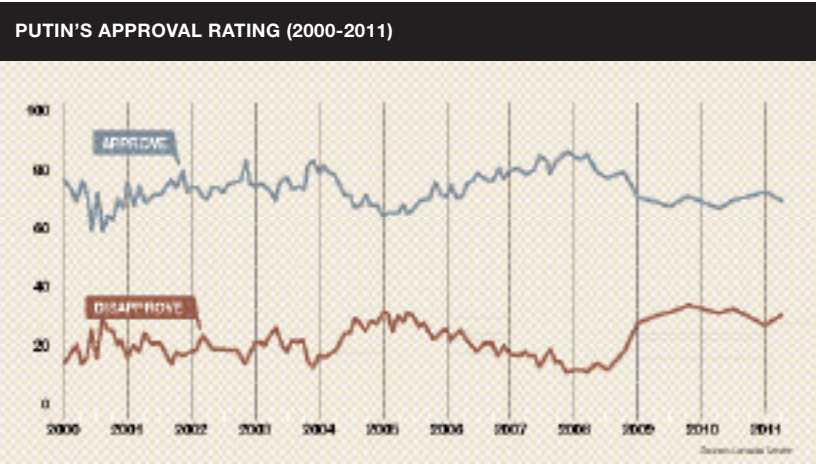
Judo, a martial art that Putin has studied since the age of six, is designed to enable a physically weaker person to defeat a stronger opponent. It must be remembered that Putin took over as President at a historical nadir for Russia. All the moves he has made since then reflect "the gentle way," which is what the Japanese word "judo" means. He waits patiently, always maintaining a solid base, and with subtle fairs, pushes and pulls, attempts to unbalance his opponent. When the moment is right – and timing is of the essence – he uses the opponent's own force against him to gain a position of control and neutralize him.

Ultimately Putin will base his decision on whether he feels he needs to project power outward, or concentrate on the power struggle taking place under the rug. In the latter case, he may choose to have Medvedev run for president and spend the next six years consolidating power within Russia. Judo's central principle is "maximum efficiency, minimum effort"; and in one of his rambling press conferences while still President, Putin complained of having to work too many hours. Since relinquishing the presidency, he has had to go on fewer trips abroad, which has allowed him to keep his sharp eyes on various Kremlin dog fights. And if need be, he can sic Medvedev on any of his "staunch supporters" who seem to be getting too ambitious. On the other hand, if Putin feels he has achieved a position of control at home, he can then choose to extend that control abroad.

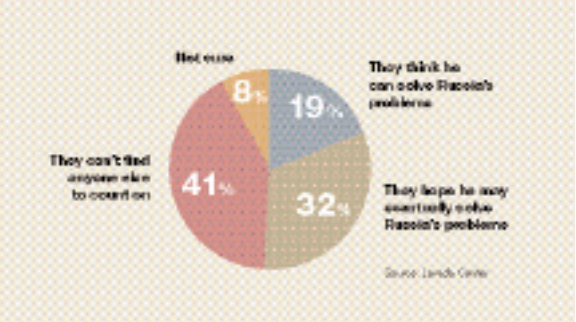
Meanwhile the Russian political scene is mushrooming new "independent" parties such as Russia's Right Cause and the Popular Front, more an umbrella organization created by Putin to unite Russia's labor unions, prominent social organizations, economic lobbying sectors, big business, individuals and political parties. It's too early to tell what the scope of the Popular Front is. It might serve as merely a diversion to unbalance the opposition, or it might form the basis for a viable institution in the future. For now, though, there is no truly empowered opposition to contest Putin in the short term. And yet, this doesn't mean

that a gradual shift toward a more open economy and society is counter to Putin's strategic objectives. As Medvedev has said, warning of stagnation lurking behind the stability Russia has gained, "Economies are like parachutes: they only work when they are open." Perhaps Medvedev will be the one to open Russian society. After all, when Putin turns 71 Medvedev will only be 58.

The thing to keep in mind when dealing with Putin – arguably the most formidable political figure of this century – is that merely seeing into his Russian soul will not be enough. He must not be pigeonholed as a self-serving autocrat no matter what he does in that vein, and none of his moves should be taken for granted. Because as anyone who has any experience in dog fights with judo black belts can attest to, your own strength – be it military, economic or analytical – can easily be turned into a weapon against you.



IN YOUR OPINION WHY DO SO MANY PEOPLE TRUST PRIME MINISTER PUTIN?



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