Russia's autocrat

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

It didn't take long to understand why Russian President Vladimir Putin chose relatively obscure Dmitry Medvedev, a deputy prime minister, as his endorsed candidate in Russia's presidential election next March. A day after the 42-year-old Medvedev, a Putin protege, was anointed as his virtually certain successor, Medvedev announced he would ask Putin to be prime minister. That speaks volumes about Russia's sham democracy.

The Russian Federation's constitution prohibits Putin from a third term as president. Yet, as a hands-on prime minister in a government presided over by the compliant Medvedev, Putin would accomplish the equivalent of a third term. Add still another reason to regard Russia's leader as Czar Putin.

The Putin-to-Medvedev-to-Putin play follows Russia's parliamentary elections Dec. 2, which sent much the same message. Putin's party, United Russia, steamrollered the fragmented, partially suppressed opposition to win an overwhelming victory. United Russia won 64 percent of the vote, giving the Kremlin's favored party 315 seats in the 450-seat Duma, Russia's parliament. Foreign observers complained about a patently unfair election. Opposition parties had little access to the Kremlin-controlled media, television in particular, which devoted fawning coverage to Putin and United Russia. The dwindling band of Russian liberals striving to defend democracy was manhandled by police and shunned by most of the press. Gary Kasparov, former world chess champion and now a beleaguered pro-democracy activist, was arrested and jailed for five days before the election on a flimsy legal pretext.

This isn't to say that United Russia wouldn't have won anyway. Putin and his party are undeniably popular, thanks to Russia's booming oil and gas revenues and fast-growth economy. The political opposition is fractured and largely ineffective. But that makes the Kremlin's - read, Putin's - heavy-handed tactics all the more ominous. A government that strong-arms a weak opposition when that's hardly necessary betrays an especially ugly penchant. Now, it appears, Putin has effectively evaded constitutional constraints barring him from remaining in power.

What should worry Europe and America most are the multiplying signs that an increasingly autocratic Russia is also increasingly hostile to the West. Putin regularly lashes out at imagined foreign influence and interference in Russian affairs. Whether Medvedev fully shares Putin's prejudices isn't known. But a youthful protege who owes his career to Putin isn't likely to defy his mentor's worldview, or remake the unhelpful Russian foreign policy flowing from it.

Optimists note that at least Medvedev lacks Putin's roots in the old Soviet Union's KGB. That won't matter, however, if the real power in the Kremlin through 2012 is still Czar Putin.

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