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Putin's Matryoshka Plays

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The matryoshka doll is the most famous Russian souvenir. Considered a phenomenon in world culture, it is a puzzle wrapped inside an enigma, the soul of Russia. President Vladimir Putin's nomination of little-known Viktor Zubkov as acting prime minister on 12 September 2007, after dismissing his government, has confounded many. Like the matryoshka puzzle, questions arise on how and through whom Putin will continue wielding power after stepping down, and what this could mean for Asia.

ON 12 SEPTEMBER 2007, President Vladimir Putin accepted the resignation of Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov and dismissed his government to facilitate the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. Whilst this move was expected, his nomination of the little-known Viktor Zubkov as acting prime minister confounded many. Will Putin continue wielding supreme power after his term ends next year, and if so, how and through whom?

Parliamentary elections are due on 2 December 2007, and the presidential election three months later. Putin last dismissed the government in February 2004, three weeks before he was elected to a second term. At that time, he replaced Mikhail Kasyanov with Fradkov, who was Russian's envoy to the European Union.

It had been thought that the new prime minister - and thus heir apparent to Putin, who is barred by Russia's constitution from running for a third term - would be one of his two deputy prime ministers. Before Zubkov's emergence, the front-runners in the presidential succession race had been First Deputy Premiers Sergei Ivanov and Dmitri Medvedev. Currently, neither man is assured of recovering those positions. Although Medvedev controls the economic powerhouse Gazprom, he lacks political heft. Ivanov, former KGB-FSB Colonel-General and close confidant of Putin, had appeared too smug with his ever-vigilant old friend's continued support for the top job.

Meanwhile, Zubkov has announced that he will be running for President. In a recent meeting with foreign experts, Putin also proclaimed that he thinks that five people stood a real chance of succeeding him. He identified three of them -- Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov, the Yabloko Party's leader Grigory Yavlinsky and Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov. Pundits were surprised at his initial failure to mention Ivanov and Medvedev. Could Putin also be hedging bets in the meantime? Nonetheless, what is clear at the moment is that the presumption of prime minister becoming president no longer holds.

Not so obscure, Not so surprising?

Putin's choice of Zubkhov, a former chief of the obscure Committee for Financial Monitoring, for the coveted position of acting prime minister may have baffled pundits and officials alike. However, Putin always had a penchant for surprises. This was evident when he had kept everyone in the dark prior to his naming of Fradkov to the premiership in 2004. In the first major pre-election cabinet reshuffle in January 2006, Putin promoted Sergei Ivanov to first deputy prime minister. This was followed by another 'surprise move' when the virtually unknown financial officer, Anatoly Serdyukov, was appointed head of Defence Ministry in Ivanov's stead. The move to name Zubkov on 12 September 2007 echoed such surprises.

Between 1991 and 1993, Zubkov was deputy head of the St. Petersburg city council External Affairs Committee. The head of the committee was Putin and both men were close. In 2001, Zubkov went on to become Deputy Finance Minister and as head of a committee on combating money-laundering, effectively responsible for securing Russia's removal from a money laundering blacklist of the Western-led Financial Task Force. This task was accomplished in 2002. More interestingly is that Serdyukov, the defence ministry's top man, is Zubkhov's son-in-law. Zubkov had also been instrumental in Putin's early assault on Russia's oligarchs. Putin's choice of Zubkov means that the future Russian government, and its economy, will effectively keep the oligarchs in check.

Putin positions himself for influence

Putin's choice as candidate dismantled analysts' accustomed scenario that whoever headed the cabinet would become the next president. The scenario that brought Putin to power – President Boris Yeltsin had named Putin as the Prime Minister prior to making him an acting president on the eve of 2000.

Putin looks as if he is positioning himself to play the role of arbiter in Russia's future political system, placing reliable allies in senior positions. In this, Putin is trying not to repeat the same scheme as Yeltsin and he wants both the next president and the next prime minister to be personally tied to him and ensure continuity in the Russian government. Furthermore, strong rumours of Putin slated to head the political party - United Russia - strengthens speculation that he will continue to wield great influence.

With close personal allies in charge of the government, Putin will likely continue to influence policy under the next president. Putin could divide his authority between both future president and prime minister, instead of transferring it all to the next president. Putin continues to leave his options open, regarding whom he will eventually back as his preferred candidate during the March 2008 elections. The guessing game was apparent on his naming of five possible candidates for the upcoming presidential election. The only thing confirmed at the moment is that the new president will have close links to Putin.

Zubkov – potential one-term leader?

The choice of Zubkov's appointment also lends credence to another theory that the next president could be a one-term leader before the possible return of Putin in 2012. Putin had repeatedly said that he intends to step down when his term expires in March 2008. Nonetheless, he retains approval ratings above 80 percent in public-opinion polls, and at 54 is young enough to remain a force in public life if he so chooses. Catapulted to power in August 1999, Putin has since overseen eight straight years of economic growth while reasserting government control over the state-security agencies and other industries, breaking the power of the oligarchs, clamping down on political dissent and tightening controls on the media. A poll in August 2007 found 64 percent of people questioned would re-elect him if he could run for a third term.

Theories about Putin's intentions include the notion that Zubkov would succeed him and then step aside to allow for a Putin comeback; that he would use Zubkov's appointment to buy himself more time to decide between Ivanov and Medvedev or groom another candidate; and that Zubkov might remain as prime minister under a new president in the next administration to guard Putin's interests or as a guarantor of stability when the nuclear suitcase is passed from one hand to another.

Russia is here to stay

All theories aside, Putin's 'surprise' moves are certainly made with much calculation on his side. It seemed to suggest that he is planning on a divide-and-control strategy, where he oversees the process to ensure smooth and effective transition. Unlike Yeltsin, Putin refuses to disappear under the fog

The ongoing Russian leadership transition will be of much interest to the Asia-Pacific region. Putin's policies towards this part of the world have been leaning towards greater participation and exercising Russia's potential as a regional power. With his clear intentions to continue wielding supreme power after his term ends next year, pundits can already postulate that whoever becomes the next Russian president will further Russia's objective to be a major player in the region. Putin had reaffirmed this prospect when he reverberated a message during the recent APEC summit in Sydney: Russia is here to stay, much like he will also be.

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