

Putin Reasserts Russia's Global Power

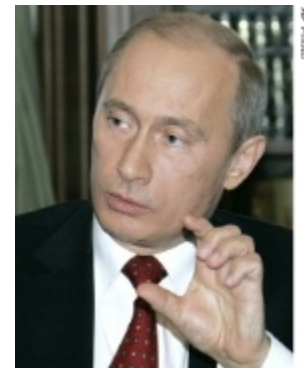
By Andre de Nesnera
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Russian voters have elected Dmitri Medvedev as their new president to succeed Vladimir Putin who has held that post for eight years. He will officially relinquish the presidency in May. What is Mr. Putin's legacy in foreign and military affairs?

Dmitri Medvedev inherits a country far different than the one Vladimir Putin faced when he was first elected Russian President in March 2000, several months after the resignation of Boris Yeltsin.

Analysts say that when Mr. Putin came to power, Russia was economically bankrupt and politically unstable. On the international scene, Russia was no longer a superpower capable of influencing world events -- it was still staggering from the collapse of the Soviet Union ten years before.

Dale Herspring, a Russia expert from Kansas State University, says that when Mr. Putin took over, he had two goals in mind. "He wanted to make Russia a country that the rest of the world would take note of, it was an important country instead of being laughed at. And second of all -- in order to do that -- he felt that he had to try to re-establish central control from Moscow over the regions," says Herspring.



Russian leader
Vladimir Putin

New Status

Analysts say that after eight years in office, Mr. Putin has achieved both goals. Domestically, he has consolidated political and economic power in the Kremlin. And he has reasserted Russia's role as an important world player after years of humiliation.

Robert Legvold, a Russia expert at Columbia University, says many Russians see that as a positive element of Mr. Putin's legacy. "Russia has reappeared on the map and as many will say - - politicians both in the United States and in Europe -- 'Russia is back.' For good or ill, Russia is back. It has to be taken account of and the Russians feel that. And the average Russian takes pride in that," says Legvold.

"I'm not sure that either the elite or the average Russian really knows what this new status is supposed to be for -- what the Russians are for in the world, what they really want to accomplish with it," says Legvold. "But at a minimum, it does ease the frustration, often the embarrassment - - even at times the pain -- of having lost so much in terms of status and standing, including some very practical parts of it: Russian empire, Russian influence, the notion of Russia as a superpower. After 1991 [the collapse of the Soviet Union], it was essentially a humiliated country in the eyes of many of its citizens and elite."

Energy Powers Foreign Policy

Many analysts say Russia's new robust foreign policy has been fueled by high oil prices that have given Russia an important role in a world worried about energy security. And Mr. Putin has not hesitated to use gas and oil as a foreign policy tool.



"There's an obvious aspect of coercion to this. I mean, there is no coincidence that Ukraine's oil and energy were suddenly cut off in the midst of last winter, which was the deepest, harshest winter Ukraine's had in 10 years," says Jason Lyall, a Russia expert at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. "He's clearly sending a message to Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus -- even to Europe -- that he can essentially cripple their energy and their economies if he needs to."

Gauging Russia's foreign policy

However, Michael McFaul with Stanford University says Mr. Putin's use of gas and oil as a foreign policy tool is a double-edged sword. "He thinks that he can turn on and off the gas and that will make other recipients of that gas behave in a certain way. And in fact, Russia is just as dependent on the buyers of its oil and gas as the buyers of Russia's oil and gas are dependent on Russia. So it's a two-way street," says McFaul. "And I think when you start messing around with interrupting those flows for political purposes, you begin to stimulate others to look for alternative sources. So I think it has been rather ineffective so far."

Pursuing Military Might

Analysts say Mr. Putin has used oil revenues not only to stimulate Russia's economy. Dale Herspring from Kansas State University says Mr. Putin has also used the windfall to modernize the Russian army that was in dire shape when he took office in 2000. "They are taking the older equipment, re-modernizing it and then they are buying some new equipment. They are selling an incredible amount of stuff abroad in order to pay for this. But they are putting incredibly more money in," says Herspring. "The Russian military will be back about 2020. In 2015, it will be in sort of a decent shape. But they say this openly, that before Russia will be in a position to be a military power, it will be 2020."

Experts say Mr. Putin has also used Russia's military to irritate the West. Herspring says one of the latest examples was in mid-February, when U.S. warplanes from an aircraft carrier intercepted a pair of Russian Tupolev-95 bombers as they were approaching the American fleet engaged in exercises near Japan.

"Why in heaven's name is he taking a 1950, 1955 aircraft that is basically propeller-driven, that has an incredibly big radar signature, and having them fly around the world and irritate people? The answer is simple," says Herspring. "He is like a small child, sitting there and saying, 'Look, here I am; here I am. I'm important. Look at me and pay attention to me,' because the [U.S.] Navy is not concerned about those [planes], they see them coming [from] 2,000 miles away. The only purpose is to say, 'I'm back. Here I am. And look how strong I am.'"

Now that there will be a new Russian president, experts such as Michael McFaul from Stanford University are asking: What kind of foreign policy will Russia embrace? "The real question moving forward for Russia is, as it becomes a regional hegemon [i.e., leader] -- and in that regard I think there is no question that Russia is the regional hegemon in Eurasia -- does it use that power in a coercive way or in a constructive way?"

The election of Dmitri Medvedev as president does not sideline Mr. Putin. The new president promises to name him prime minister. And analysts say it will be interesting to see whether Mr. Putin's policies will continue or whether the new president steers a course independent from his predecessor.