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Dmitry Medvedev's underwhelming year as lapdog

Democracy, the rule of law and harmony with the West will not have a chance to flower in Russia as long as Putin remains in charge

By Jonathan Manthorpe, Vancouver Sun May 8, 2009

Western views of Russia and its leaders tend to veer violently from extreme optimism to the bleakest pessimism.

And as Dmitry Medvedev marked his first year as president on Thursday the West, led by new American president Barack Obama and his "reset" button, seems programmed to pounce on any signs of liberalization or reform emanating from the Kremlin.

The checklist of supposedly hopeful signs that Russia is destined to become more like one of us starts with the facts that Medvedev is young -- 43 -- a lawyer and unlike his predecessor, mentor and current prime minister Vladimir Putin, not a veteran of the KGB secret police and spy network.

Then it's noted that he recently gave an interview to one of the few remaining newspapers critical of the Kremlin, Novaya Gazeta, has met with human rights activists at the Kremlin, and has started "an affair with democracy" by launching a blog on the LiveJournal portal.

Much is also read into Medvedev's tentative overtures towards Europe and the United States.

But these are slim and tender shoots on which to base predictions that Russia is heading into a new spring of democracy, the rule of law, and harmony with Europe and the North Atlantic world. Indeed, after a year in office it is not even certain that Medvedev has independent authority, leave alone power.

Before last year's shuffle by which Putin, having completed the statutory two consecutive terms as president, slipped into the prime minister's job and Medvedev was plonked into the presidency, the script was obvious.

Real power would remain with Putin, who would return in 2012 for a further 12 years -- two terms -- as president.

One year on, there's no compelling reason to believe that scenario has changed.

The president remains surrounded in the Kremlin by Putin's cronies, all going about their business independent of Medvedev and awaiting the return of the master.

Medvedev has made little or no effort to assert himself. Even on issues where the Russian constitution gives clear authority to the president, such as foreign affairs, he has stood by as Putin plays the dominant role.

When Russian troops invaded Georgia last August and when Russia cut off natural gas supplies to western Europe in February in a dispute with Ukraine, through which the pipelines pass, it was Putin who spoke for Moscow.

And despite Medvedev's displays of civility to the West, relations have frayed over the Georgia invasion, and the eastward march of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into Russia's vassal states of the old Soviet Union.

Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has even cancelled a planned meeting of the NATO-Russia Council later this month aimed at reviving the relationship, though he is currently in Washington meeting with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and President Obama.

But there is little reason to think that Putin's Russia sees harmonious relations with the West as advantageous or desirable.

Russia has the world's largest reserves of carbon energy sources, primarily oil and natural gas, and the last decade of high prices has led Putin's Moscow to see itself as the capital of a great power, unencumbered by limiting relationships and defining its own social and political values.

Only a few months ago, Putin's brand of "managed democracy" was much talked of as the model for "authoritarian

capitalism" which looked attractive to many developing countries.

That vision has vanished with the global economic recession and the slump in energy prices. Like everyone else, the Russian government is facing severe deficits with the added headache that the Putin regime failed to use energy revenues to diversify the economy and invigorate the infrastructure when times were good. And now the government seems unable to respond to the crisis.

If Medvedev was really president, he would fire prime minister Putin and ask someone else to tackle the job. But he isn't and won't.

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