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Opinion

Knowing Who but Not Why

By Scott Gehlbach and Konstantin Sonin

The surprise came a bit late. Usually the Russian political system is upended in August, but this year we had to wait until the second week of September to discover who would replace the inevitably outgoing prime minister, Mikhail Fradkov. But a surprise it was, nonetheless.

Although nobody expected Fradkov to survive the fall, the nature of the replacement had political analysts scrambling late Wednesday to answer a question that has been asked before, only this time with a different name attached: "Who is Zubkov?" The real question, however, is not who, but why?



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The Moscow spin doctors will certainly claim that President Vladimir Putin, who is prohibited by the Constitution from serving past March, has no desire to be a lame duck and so has chosen a political unknown to maintain the balance of power among rival camps at the top until the last possible moment.

But the easiest way to maintain the balance of power would simply have been to maintain the status quo. When Fradkov was appointed out of nowhere 3 1/2 years ago, it was the absence of presidential potential and ambitions that seemed to make him such a good candidate for the position of prime minister. What was said then could also be said today.

Others will suggest that Putin intended for First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov to be the prime minister but that Wednesday's leak to this effect in *Vedomosti*, necessitated a change in plans so that Putin could retain the political initiative. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, however, Putin has demonstrated very little tendency to second-guess decisions already made.

So what is the meaning of Wednesday's nomination of Viktor Zubkov, the retirement-age (he turns 66 on Sunday) head of a relatively unknown government agency with responsibility for preventing money laundering and the financing of terrorism, to head the government in advance of December's State Duma elections? One possible answer is that the path of succession has been decided, and that it does not run through the prime minister's office.

By choosing Zubkov, a figure even less known to the public than Putin himself was when he was nominated as prime minister, the president may be signaling that he expects his successor to be the leader not of the government, but of a party. In this interpretation, an electoral victory by United Russia would pave the way for a successful presidential run in 2008 by whoever is chosen next month to head the party list. That would be not Zubkov, but one of the more obvious successors, like Ivanov or Dmitry Medvedev, the other first deputy prime minister.

Always attuned to the examples of history, the Kremlin may thus be attempting to create the Russian equivalent of Mexico's Institutionalized Ruling Party or, PRI, an organization that outlives any particular president and keeps political competition within manageable limits. Such a system would be highly stable if it could be created, thus assuring that those close to power have little to fear from constitutionally mandated elections every four years.

Yet it is far from clear that Putin will be able to pull it off, if, in fact, this is what he has in mind. Establishing a precedent for orderly succession requires a careful balancing of interests within the party elite. Whoever is at the top of the pyramid must have more to lose from hanging on than stepping down when his time is up, and those further down must invest in the success of those further up, knowing that their time will also come. Even if Putin is shrewd enough to start the process of institutionalization successfully — and Putin is nothing if not shrewd — it will take another few presidents acting in a similar manner before people know what to expect come August or September and adjust their actions accordingly.

Moreover, the PRI that governed Mexico for seven decades was not merely a “party in government,” in the language of political science, but also a “party in the electorate.” It assured that the president’s handpicked successors would actually win elections by exploiting the party’s deep integration into the electorate and control of pork-barrel spending. United Russia is more of a party today than it was four years ago, but it has a long way to go before it matches the electoral machinery of the PRI.

Yet there is another lesson to be learned from the Mexican experience. In 1880, Porfirio Diaz, having promised to serve no more than one term when assuming the presidency four years before, stepped down to steer the election of his chosen successor — a political unknown. After four years of a weak and corrupt presidency, Diaz was back, and served seven more terms until finally deposed during the Mexican Revolution. It was the subsequent 20 years of civil war that taught Mexican politicians the value of an institutionalized authoritarian regime.

Although Wednesday’s development is hard to interpret, it does clear the horizon. If Ivanov or Medvedev acquires the coveted first place in the United Russia list ahead of parliamentary elections, this will indicate that Putin has opted for the more modern Mexican path, the path toward institutionalized succession. If not, then we may witness a figurehead successor and — probably less than seven, but perhaps still many — future Putin terms.

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