

## Medvedev's new agenda for Russia – reforming a system that can not be reformed?

By Arto Luukkanen

The newly elected president of Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, is now fervently supervised by specialists for Russian studies all over the world. His political agenda for the future is examined by politicians and think-tank specialists. The dilemma under the scrutiny is the obvious unbalance between the hard rhetoric's of old the president and conciliatory speeches given by newly elected president.

Mr. Medvedev - 42-year-old protégé of Mr. Putin - has promised to fight against corruption and has highlighted the need for a long period of construction inside Russia. Together with these fresh openings, Medvedev has promised friendly cooperation with its neighbours including USA and China.

Speaking to foreign reporters, the president elect said that Russia and the United States share common values and have no choice but to cooperate with each other. Moreover, Medvedev has emphasized the need to concentrate to 4 major i's (innovations, institutions, infrastructures, investments) and has promised to transform Russia as a 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy after 10 years.

But what is more significant is his respective tone towards the civil rights. *"The talk here is about freedom in all of its manifestations: about personal freedom, about economic freedom and at last about freedom of self-expression,"* Medvedev said in his famous speech at Krasnoyarsk, Siberia last February. He added, *"Freedom is inseparable from the actual recognition of the power of law by citizens."* According to Medvedev, freedom, private property and an independent judiciary would be the central planks of his administration. This is something new compared to Putin's sarcastic attitudes towards civil rights and cold interviews with Western reporters.

Then how seriously we should take this? Should we take it as a face value? Are these nice openings made by the president-elect fabricated in order to lure the Western audience or are they just trumped-up stories for the Western armies of think-tank specialists who are busy in making their first deep political analysis concerning the new leader?

A famous Russian historian - Vladimir Shlapentokh - mentioned in his excellent analysis on Soviet system<sup>1</sup>, that too eager reformers of the society may put in jeopardy the entire system. Nevertheless, being a true reformer requires bold assumption and true beliefs that there are real alternatives for the existing society. Shlapentokh's speculations and dilemmas dealt mainly with Mikhail Gorbachov and his reforms that destroyed the Soviet Union. As he aptly remarked, Soviet Union enjoyed firm content of its populations and only a small minority demanded changes in the Soviet economic system. According to Shlapentokh, it was Gorbachov and his personality that evidently killed the Soviet beast.

To put it short, Soviet people at large directed their discontent towards bureaucracy but still accepted the Soviet dogma. Also the Western political leaders in 1990's tried, peculiar enough, to preserve the Soviet system. For example, when inspecting the famous speech made by US President George Bush Sr. at Minsk in 1991 it is quite clear that West was not searching moment for a violent vendetta or planning to attack against its weary arch-enemy. On a

contrary, it was looking forward to peaceful coexistence with the second nuclear power.

It is therefore rather fascinating to compare striking similarities between the gorbachovian reforms and the reformist rhetoric of Medvedev. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power his first initiatives continued the political line adopted by Jury Andropov. For example, Gorbachev followed Andropov's policies of cleaning up the party bureaucracy and he also instigated certain neo-Stalinist reforms, which were dedicated to increase workers productivity. When considering the rhetoric and bold initiatives made by Medvedev, it is quite likely, that in the short run, the practical agenda of the new president will follow above mentioned gorbachovian models.

Nonetheless, new demanding openings such as fight against the corruption and tackling with bureaucracy require tightening of the political control. However, the fight against the some part of the new elite requires the policy of involving intelligentsia for a new ally for policy-makers. This will open new perspectives to free media. If and when this happens, it will take place perhaps at the same time when Medvedev does his symbolic "patricide" and dissociates from his predecessor's policies. Perhaps Hodorkovski will be released due to Medvedev new policy.

Gorbachev himself moved from neo-Stalinist reforms to liberal reforms by the beginning of 1987. The reason why this new policy was adopted was linked with the earlier failures of reforming Soviet economy. It was then widely believed among the gorbachovian spin-doctors that the essential modification of the Soviet system would boost the economy thus saving the system itself.

The most burning quandary for nowadays spectators will be: shall Medvedev try to reform system that can not be reformed? Any attempts to adopt real principles of liberal reforms may cause mayhem to the fundamentals of the political system he inherited from Putin. The pillars of the contemporary Russia were cemented to build up new elite - "securocracy" – new ruling elite derived from the security organs. To introduce real democracy to Russia would be a death-blow to the new political order prevailing in that county.



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<sup>1</sup> A Normal Totalitarian Society. How the Russian Union functioned and How it Collapsed". 2001, London.