

Russia - Looking Both Ways?

Apparent tensions between Dimitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin suggest a deeper divide which will very likely have consequences for the future of the Gospel in Russia.

Walking Apart?

Watch very carefully the news coming out of the Kremlin these days. All is not well between the two top men in Russian politics walls right now. In another context, such apparent tensions might be put down to differences of style, personality, policies or ambition. But this is about something very different. These two men may not now be singing from the same hymn sheet. In fact, the hymns themselves may be different. These differences are about a man who is trying to step out of the shadow of his mentor, and more importantly, diverging visions of Russia's future. Its importance for the future of Russia and the church there should not be understated.

Next year, 2012, there will be a presidential election. Recent signs of a split at the top of Russian politics mean that popular expectations of another Putin presidency will need to be revisited. At the beginning of Dimitry Medvedev's tenure, it was safely - and widely - assumed that Medvedev would step aside for Vladimir Putin to run again next year. And in those early days, Medvedev's body language on camera clearly suggested someone whose boss was in fact his prime minister and mentor. Now things appear rather different. Up to now, neither Putin nor Medvedev have been expected to run against the other for the top job. But an increasingly confident Medvedev seems now to be setting out his vision of Russia's future: of multi-party democracy, of new plans to crack down on Russia's rampant corruption, to dialogue Russia's way out of its monumental problems in the Caucasus (many of these caused by Putin's policies there), and to present a fresh and friendly face to the wider world. All this is a far cry from the direction that Putin would wish to take the country.

Consider:

1. ***Mr Medvedev's recent slapping down of Vladimir Putin's remarks over the international intervention in Libya.*** The latter had compared this to 'medieval calls for crusades,' a sentiment which was later clarified by his office as his personal views. Mr Medvedev, however, countered that 'under no circumstances is it acceptable to use expressions... such as 'crusades' and so on.' Strong language from a former protege, and unthinkable two years ago.
2. ***Mr Medvedev's approach on the Caucasus,*** a geographically small area where Russia's writ has never run deep, but which now as much as any time in Russia's recent history stands to determine her future direction. Remember the bombs at Domodedovo Airport in January, and the suicide attacks on the Moscow Metro last year? In a visit to the Caucasian Republic of Ingushetia recently, Medvedev said: 'You have to talk to all categories of people, with their misconceptions, with their views on life, often disorientated and ready to commit a crime...' This is a substantial departure from Putin's policy, as he himself put it, of wasting Caucasian rebels 'in the shithouse,' a policy which has cost around as many Russian soldiers' lives last year, as the British have suffered in 10 years in Afghanistan. The differences between Mr Putin and Mr Medvedev can be seen on the ground in the Caucasus.

- On the one hand, there is **Chechnya**, grudgingly pacified after two ruinous wars with Russia in the last two decades. Chechnya is led by Ramzan Kadyrov (himself a former rebel and now devotee of Mr Putin). Kadyrov's thuggish rule has kept an unruly and often dangerous peace in that part of the world.
- **Ingushetia**, on the other hand, was in ferment just two years ago following the disastrous rule of its president, Murat Zyazikov, who had just been sacked by Mr Medvedev. Enter Medvedev's new appointee, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov who is at least trying to operate within the law and through dialogue, with notable positive results, including crowd-sourced intelligence which led to the recent arrest of two suspects in the Domodedovo bombing.

All that said, however, there is still much to play for in the rest of this restive region on Russia's southern edge.

3. ***The quiet but no less significant removal of government ministers*** (many of them Putin's men) from the boards of state-owned companies. According to *The Economist*, the ministerial casualties included Igor Sechin, one of Putin's closest confidantes, chairman of Rosneft and one of the main architects of Putin's destruction of Yukos and its head, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Rosneft, surprise surprise, was one of the beneficiaries Yukos' demise.

Now it is possible to read too much into these apparent differences, especially given the murky world that is Russian politics today. And all this may seem remote from questions about the playing field for churches in Russia. But the differences between Putin and Medvedev go to the heart of the historic dichotomy in Russian statecraft. And on that level, they are significant, since whoever becomes president next year has the opportunity to shape Russia's politics for a minimum of six years.

An Eagle With Two Heads



The double-headed eagle in Russia's coat of arms has at various times been said to signify the reach of Imperial Russia, spanning both east and west on the one hand, and the unity of church and state on the other.

On the former, down the centuries, Russia has looked east, then west, then east again, as it tries to work out its destiny. The pendulum may be about to swing again. On the latter, it should be noted that while Russia's constitution guarantees equality of all religions and confessions before the law, the drift of policy since the passage of the law on religion in 1997 has tended to favor the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church over other Christian confessions. The 1997 law cannot even pretend to be constitutional, never mind

fair. Yet despite attempts, it has never been struck down.

Moreover, this observer can reveal that at the highest levels of policymaking, Russia's emblem is held to be the model for the direction of policy regarding church and state: one head of the eagle represents the state; the other, the Russian Orthodox Church. In this scheme, there is no place for other churches on Russia's soil. After all, the eagle cannot have another head.

The last century points to what may be up ahead for those who dissent from this plan. If Mr Putin returns to the presidency in 2012, this drift can be expected to continue. If Mr Medvedev gets a second bite of the cherry, things may well be different, just as differences have emerged over their respective foreign, Caucasian and economic policies. The doors may not close as quickly as some expect, and that should be cause for rejoicing - and prayer!

Gareth Davies
April 2011

Copyright Radstock Ministries 2011. All rights reserved.