THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

Russia's Power Couple

By IVAN KRASTEV
May 16, 2008

Nicolas Sarkozy and Carla Bruni have to concede. They're no longer the first presidential couple in the world. Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev are. Their relationship is obviously close but also mysterious, secretive, open to various and contradictory interpretations. The pundits and ordinary Russians are obsessed. Can the country's new and former president live together? Will this end well, or badly?

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After Mr. Medvedev's inauguration last week and his older, taller mentor's move into the prime minister's office at Moscow's White House, the optimists hope that this duality of power could lead to the emergence of checks and balances and greater pluralism in Russian politics. The pessimists fear intense conflict inside the ruling class that, maybe, could bring civil strife. In Mr. Putin's own words, "Centralized power is in Russia's DNA."

Though Russia's state emblem is a double-headed eagle, history has taught its people to view two-headed power as a monster. Most recently in the early 1990s Boris Yeltsin faced off against the parliament, and ended up shelling it into submission. Today the potential for trouble, in spite of protestations by the two men from St. Petersburg, is bound to grow with time.

The ruling elite has learned in the Putin era that it is easy to ban competition from outside. What's harder is to keep the elite itself under control. Elections are held every four years, but

opinion polls all the time. The fight over polls will be more competitive than over votes. What will happen when President Medvedev's ratings surpass Prime Minister Putin's? It'll also be harder to control the media, which can easily be forced to stay loyal to a single czar, but two? Similarly, the oligarchs at the Kremlin -- in Russia the men who own the country happen to run it -- will now have more than one arbiter to settle their disputes. And what if Mr. Medvedev one day wishes to exercise his presidential powers, albeit bestowed on him by the grace of Putin? He can't do so if he is mere Mini-Me to the prime minister.

In short, mutual suspicions and intrigues between Medvedev's Kremlin and Putin's White House are inevitable -- and could turn out to be worse than between the Kremlin and Washington's White House. Messrs. Putin and Medvedev sound sincere today that a political war can be avoided. The war between their entourages has in fact already started.

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In planning this transition, the new prime minister -- and still the pre-eminent leader in the country -- succeeded in preserving political continuity in the short term. But he has manifestly failed to create a stable political system. In his years in power, the Russian state became richer (thanks to high oil prices), more repressive and more centralized; it didn't become better able to govern. It's one thing to curb dissent or put on huge military parades, another to rule properly this vast country.

The Putin system is a classical illustration of "the impotence of omnipotence." Today's Russia is a rising global power and at the same time a weak state with corrupt and inefficient institutions. Its army and educational system are straight out of the last century; its foreign and social policies out of the 19th century. Russia's economic growth is impressive but unsustainable. And this political regime, weighed down by so much ineffective authority centralized in the Kremlin, lacks the dynamism to push ahead Russia's transformation. Any shift in the power circles becomes a crisis. Any change of power brings about a brutal redistribution of property.

The inherent instability at the heart of Putinism helps account for the recent turns in its foreign policy. Moscow's aggressive stance toward the outside world, particularly the West, is needed to preserve the post-Putin regime's legitimacy. But that leads to a paradox: The Kremlin needs the West as a partner to develop Russia, but even more urgently the Kremlin needs the West as an enemy to keep its hold on power.

In looking at Russia, the West has held to a dangerous illusion that the power elite can be divided into two distinct factions: One liberal, pro-Western, Deep Purple fans like Mr. Medvedev; the other anti-Western and authoritarian, the KGB men (or "siloviky") around Vladimir Putin. In the West, the victory of liberals over authoritarians is what's seen as necessary to entrench democracy in Russia. We made the same mistaken judgment in the 1990s.

But the contradictory nature of the Russian regime is not the outcome of the unfinished war between "the liberals" and "siloviky." It is the result of the dual nature of Russian modernization. In the last decade Russia has become more Westernized but at the same time

more anti-Western. It has become more open and at the same time more nationalistic. The Kremlin's new confrontational foreign policy is neither circumstantial in its nature nor can be analyzed as Mr. Putin's personal choice. It is the expression of the new foreign-policy consensus in the Russian elite but also in the Russian society at large.

The change of personalities in the Kremlin is unlikely to change this consensus. The hope that economic growth, the emergence of a more numerous middle class and the change of generations will tame Russia's anti-Westernism is false. Although young Russians have embraced lattes, iPods and other consumer goods enjoyed by the youth in Western countries, their political views tend to be nether pro-Western nor pro-democracy. Educated males living in Moscow make up, in fact, the most anti-American segment of the Russian population, according to a recent survey.

The Putin-Medvedev regime comes onto an eerily familiar stage for Russia. In the last 150 years, Russia has implemented several liberal reforms that produced impressive economic growth, which were then followed by elite wars over the redistribution of power and wealth and the temptation to use the the newly acquired economic gains to achieve Russia's geopolitical ambitions. The unintended result was the escalation of social tensions, the end of reforms and social and political catastrophe at the end. The major objective of the West's policy toward Russia's new power couple should be in helping Moscow to avoid the repeat of such a scenario.

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