



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk

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The Russian *Vertikal*: the Tandem, Power and the Elections

Andrew Monaghan

Nato Defence College

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Introduction

From among many important potential questions about developments in Russian politics and in Russia more broadly, one has emerged to dominate public policy and media discussion: who will be Russian president in 2012? This is the central point from which a series of other questions and debates cascade – the extent of differences between President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and how long their ‘Tandem’ can last, whether the presidential election campaign has already begun and whether they will run against each other being only the most prominent.

Such questions are typically debated against a wider conceptual canvas – the prospects for change in Russia. Some believe that 2012 offers a potential turning point for Russia and its relations with the international community: leading to either the return of a more ‘reactionary’ Putin to the Kremlin, and the maintenance of ‘stability’, or another term for the more ‘modernizing’ and ‘liberal’ Medvedev. After the dissonance between Russia and the West of Putin’s second presidential term, much hope for resetting the various relationships between Russia and the Western community has been invested in Medvedev and his modernization project by those who see him as a man of the future, and one with whom business can be done.

‘The Question’ of the presidency has become so prevalent that, with still nearly a year to go until the elections, it features more or less weekly, if not daily, in Russian and international media – most recently in Medvedev’s press conference on 18 May 2011. For over a year, almost every major event attended or interview given by the president or the prime minister has been compared, contrasted and considered to outline an agenda contradictory to the other’s or as hinting that one or the other has already chosen to run for the presidency. Responding to ‘The Question’ (posed by Chinese media) on 12 April 2011, Medvedev replied that it was ‘not the most original question’ asked of him and that he did not rule out the possibility of his running for a second term, a decision that would be taken very shortly.¹ The following day, replying to the same question posed by Russian media, Putin also stated that this was a ‘really unoriginal question’, since it had been posed to him and Medvedev more than one hundred times in the last couple of years. He continued, ‘I think by now we have learned to answer it in the same way. Let me repeat: neither of us rules out the possibility that either of us may take part in the election campaign.’²

A small but telling episode, since their responses were taken as further evidence of disagreement. By stating that, while a decision must be made, the elections were almost a year away and it would not be appropriate to give off signals now, since half the administration and more than half of the government would stop working in anticipation of change, Putin was interpreted to be disagreeing with Medvedev, who had stated that the decision would be taken soon.

Yet ‘The Question’ is the wrong question. This is neither because the positions of Putin and Medvedev are unimportant nor because rejecting it is to be dismissive of the importance of elections. It is wrong for two reasons. First, despite what has become orthodoxy, there are no major gaps between the political agendas of Medvedev and Putin. Russian presidential aide Arkadiy Dvorkovich has emphasized his conviction that there is ‘no difference between the Kremlin and the government with respect to the goals of economic development of the country’ and the main instruments of achieving it. Mikhail Delyagin, President of the Institute of Problems of Globalization, concurred: ‘The difference in the collection of ideas in their two programs is insignificant. There is no ideological divergence.’³ Stanislav Belkovsky regularly reiterates that

¹ ‘Interv’yu Dmitriya Medvedeva tsentral’nomy televidenyiu Kitaya’, Kremlin, 12 April 2011. <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/10911>.

² ‘Po zavershenii Vserossiiskovo foruma meditsinskikh rabotnikov V. V. Putin otvetil na voprosi zhurnalistov’, 13 April 2011. <http://premier.gov.ru/events/pressconferences/14854/>.

³ ‘Mezhdru liberalom Medvedevim i konservatorom Putinim’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 25 April 2011.

there are no ideological differences between them, as proved by the first three years of Medvedev's presidency.⁴

Some Western analysts argue likewise. If there are some 'differences in world view, temperament, style, and occasional unscripted moments', according to Don Jensen, 'there is no evidence that Putin and Medvedev disagree on key policy issues'.⁵ Andrew Wood argues that if Medvedev has articulated the need for Russia to change direction, it remains unclear whether he would pursue a significantly different course from that set out over the last few years. Furthermore, his position on numerous domestic and international issues is conservative and in a similar vein to that of Putin in that he advocates slow and stable political evolution. His language, though less often delivered in a dramatic way, is as vivid as Putin's, particularly, for instance, regarding terrorism.⁶ Medvedev's roles in the Georgia war in 2008 and the gas dispute in early 2009, along with his less prominent but nonetheless emphatic approach to Belarus, should not be underestimated, nor should his statements about the beginning of a new arms race if cooperation with NATO on missile defence should fail.

The main focus of this paper is the second reason why 'The Question' is wrong – the 'undersides' of Russian politics. This is framed below in two main parts, exploring the two terms central to the current Russian political lexicon. It begins with a discussion of 'The Tandem', a word coined in 2008 to describe the leadership arrangement between Medvedev and Putin, before considering its evolution and some limitations. The paper then turns to consider 'The Vertical', usually understood as the 'vertical of power', meaning the top-down command structure established by Putin during his presidency. Here again the paper explores the origins of the term before considering some of its limitations and then reflecting on some useful variations in meaning.

The undersides of Russian politics suggest that, whoever becomes president in Russia in 2012, Putin, Medvedev or indeed another candidate as yet unnamed, there is unlikely to be major change in Russian domestic or foreign policy in the short to medium term. Furthermore, both 'The Tandem' and 'The Vertical' have lost their original meanings. The tandem has become outdated – not because of a split between the two men, but because of the emergence and emphasis on a unified team, albeit one with some internal rivalries. Interestingly, it is this team that is the real '*vertikal*', a reference to a group of close people striving towards a common goal. The term 'vertical of power' is misleading – because instructions from both the Kremlin and the (Russian) White House are poorly implemented – and thus needs to be replaced by 'manual control' (*ruchnoe upravleniye*), discussed below.

The growing obsolescence of 'The Tandem' – and the emergence of 'The Team'

'The Question' has emerged from the origins of the tandem in 2008. It came about as a somewhat nebulous arrangement of power between Putin and Medvedev, his former chief of presidential staff and first deputy prime minister. The arrangement itself has proved something of a rolling surprise for analysts, many of whom expected that then President Putin would change the constitution to allow him to take a third consecutive presidential term. Even following the 2008 elections and Medvedev's inauguration, many continued to assert that Putin was in effect the 'real' president, Russia's 'national leader' ruling Russia as the prime minister and as the figurehead of United Russia, the 'party of power' in parliament.

Medvedev, some argued, would soon step aside to allow Putin to return almost immediately to the Kremlin, perhaps as the result of a manufactured emergency situation. Even if he remained in

⁴ 'Zakat Rossii', *Novaya gazeta*, 15 March 2011. Belkovsky argued a year ago that the question of who will go to the elections in 2012 is a 'system of false questions': 'who will stand for elections in 2012? Correct answer: who cares? There is no ideological difference between them.' Belkovsky, S., 'Strana 'Medvedev'-2', *Grani.ru*, 11 May 2010.

⁵ Jensen, D., 'Crossfire: Libya and Presidential Politics', *Voice of America Russian Service*, 23 March 2011.

⁶ Wood, A., 'Would the Real Medvedev Please Stand Up', *Moscow Times*, 4 May 2011. For Medvedev's remarks on terrorism, see Monaghan, A., *The Moscow Metro Bombings and Terrorism in Russia*, NDC Research Paper, No. 59. June 2010.

office, he would be a one-term president, a place-holder for Putin until the constitution allowed him to return in 2012. In such circumstances, Medvedev, despite enjoying significant support from Putin himself, could only be considered a junior partner in a temporary arrangement, not least since he is considered by many to have a negligible political support base.

Such views were underscored by those who drew on widely accepted historical opinion to argue that a tandem runs counter to the whole weight of Russian history, in which Russia has had only one ruler acting as the supreme arbiter to resolve conflicts within the Russian elite. According to much debate in Russia, echoed by many in the West, the tandem (and its off-shoots such as 'Tandemocracy') was therefore a novelty that could not work. Inevitably, differences and rivalries would emerge, either because one of the men would strive for the position of Russia's only ruler or because the conflicts within the elite would become unmanageable by two people instead of one – and as a result would undermine the new duumvirate.

These, in shorthand, are the roots of the ideas behind 'The Question': that a forward-looking Medvedev is vulnerable in the shadow of a regressive Putin, and that any move he makes would be an assertion of independence conflicting with Putin – and that in any case it will be Putin making the decision of who will be president. The belief that their arrangement cannot last is the intellectual underpinning of the search for fault-lines in the relationship. Beyond the comparison of every speech made by the two men for evidence of counter-campaigning, almost every discussion of domestic or foreign policy is now examined through this prism. In domestic affairs, the Khodorkovsky trials and verdicts, and the firings and appointments of senior officials – notably that of Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov in 2010 and Medvedev's recent order that state officials stand down from positions in companies – are judged to the extent that they highlight disagreements between the two.⁷ In foreign affairs equally, divergences and conflicts that are interpreted by many to illustrate splits in the tandem are prominent. These include different views over the deals reached on gas prices to Ukraine and the presence of the Russian Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol, and, more recently, their apparently different approaches to international intervention in Libya. Yet many of the debates this year simply echo those of the last three years. The tandem has been splitting in front of our eyes since 2008; on numerous occasions commentators have announced that Medvedev has 'finally' initiated his election campaign; equally frequently over the last three years Putin has been seen to have made his final decision to return to the Kremlin.

The problem is how this chimes with actual developments, which show that the tandem has proved remarkably solid. Such an approach also poses too few questions of why the Russian leadership might be doing what it does, and seeks contradiction even in ambiguous circumstances. A form of confirmation bias has taken hold, creating a template into which new developments are slotted. In focusing on apparently conflicting details of speeches – such as the one noted above about the timing of a decision regarding the election, or when Medvedev announced in Yaroslavl in September 2010 that modernization was a long-term project – the wider picture is missed. In discussing the timing of the election decision, both men emphasized the importance of responding to the social and political situation and the need for stability before making the decision about the presidential candidate. Medvedev's statement about modernization simply echoed what Putin had already said in August: that the task is to create a sustainable Russian statehood and that this is a long-term process.⁸

It is worth considering that the question of the race for the presidency in 2012 and the split in the tandem appears to be out of kilter with the views of Russian public opinion and senior figures in Russian politics. In October 2010, the Levada Centre published results suggesting that 71% of Russians believed there to be no disagreements between Putin and Medvedev, while just 15% thought conflicts could emerge. In December, VTsIOM published results of polls taken in August and September 2010, suggesting that 67% of Russians thought the tandem unlikely to collapse in

⁷ Many saw the second trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky as a test of Medvedev's liberal convictions, with a persistent widespread impression that he would release or pardon Khodorkovsky on the basis of numerous complex intellectual contortions. But in interviews, Medvedev has stated that the evidence against Khodorkovsky was solid and the sentence (of the first trial) fits the crime. Plater-Zyberk, H., *Review of Nikolai and Marina Svanidze's Interview-Biography 'Medvedev'* (Rome: NATO Defence College, April 2009).

⁸ 'Vladimir Putin: Vam dayu chestnoe partiinoe slovo', *Kommersant*, 30 August 2010.

the near future (compared with 63% in December 2009), 60% thought that Medvedev and Putin govern the country in an effective way and just 15% see their relationship as unstable. In April this year, Levada published another set of results (from polls taken in March), again suggesting that 71% saw no differences between Putin and Medvedev.⁹

Beyond Medvedev and Putin and their staffs, who might be expected to assert that their agreement works,¹⁰ and officials such as Arkadii Dvorkovich, senior figures of different political persuasion often state that there is no significant split between Medvedev and Putin or substantial difference in ideology between them. In his recent book, for instance, Dmitri Rogozin wrote that there are 'no two people more psychologically compatible' than Medvedev and Putin. He stated that the notion that Medvedev is more liberal than Putin is just a 'journalistic ruse'.¹¹ Communist Party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov stated that 'this is the same team, with the same policy [...] therefore they are very much the same'.¹² Sergei Mironov also stated that 'they are friends and of one mind', ruling out a situation in which both ran against each other, because this would mean a split.¹³

It should also be noted that, according to Mikhail Remezov, Director of the Strategy-2020 Forum, the majority of the business and political elite wants to maintain the political status quo and the duumvirate.¹⁴ This raises the possibility, already posed by some Russian observers, that the struggle between Medvedev and Putin is taking place 'mainly in the minds of dreamer political analysts, rather than reality'.¹⁵

An alternative narrative to the split in the tandem and the race to the presidency in 2012 can be discerned. Any discussion of the relationship should remember their long-standing close personal ties. Both men often reiterate this point. Recently, Medvedev, for instance, drew attention to the fact that he has known Putin for almost half of his life and that their friendly, 'warm and comradely' relations have developed over two decades. According to the commentator Vladimir Solovyov, therefore, Medvedev may be younger, but his way of thinking was formed under same circumstances, his outlook formed in the 'same school' as that of Putin, and therefore they think in one and the same way.¹⁶ Medvedev worked with Putin when the latter was in charge of attracting foreign investment to St Petersburg in the 1990s, and importantly they went through extremely hard times together during the defeat of Mayor Anatolii Sobchak. When Putin became prime minister in 1999, he brought Medvedev to Moscow, appointing him deputy head of the presidential administration (under Alexander Voloshin) and for the 2000 presidential elections Medvedev was Putin's campaign manager. In 2003 Putin appointed him chief of the presidential administration. The reason why Medvedev never voiced contradictory views to Putin's when he was in the presidential administration (unlike some such as Voloshin or Andrei Illarionov), according to Solovyov, was that he agreed with them. He was also appointed to senior positions in Gazprom. He subsequently became first deputy prime minister in 2005. Therefore, in many ways, not only

⁹ Over two years, this figure has remained high. In February 2009, 78% thought that over the next two or three years Medvedev and Putin would act together. A year later 75% still thought this. Those who think that conflicts will emerge between them have increased in number from 9% in February 2009 to 12% in February 2010. While 33% thought that Medvedev would be president in 2012, 36% thought Putin would be president. For Levada centre polls, see: <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011041304.html>. For VTsIOM see <http://www.cdi.org/russia/Johnson/russia-medvedev-putin-tandem-dec-482.cfm>.

¹⁰ In April 2010, Medvedev stated 'Mr Putin and I represent the same political force and our approaches to the country's general development are very similar. [...] He and I share the same political convictions, so between us coordination and consultation are essential'. Interview with Steffen Kretz, Moscow, 26 April 2010, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2010/04/22/2300_type82916_225609.shtml.

¹¹ Rogozin, D., *NATO tochka ru* (Moscow: Algorithm, 2009), p. 88.

¹² 'Putin, Medvedev "very much the same", Russian Communist Leader tells TV', 'Pozner', Channel One TV, 17 April 2011, cited in BBC Monitoring.

¹³ 'Politiki o vuiborakh: menea chem cherez god tandemu nastupit konets', *RBC Daily*, 19 April 2011.

¹⁴ Mikhail Remezov, quoted in 'Elitam propisali tandem', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 15 April 2011.

¹⁵ See Latynina, Yu., 'Twitter'-Prezident i vostorzheniye liberali', *Yezhenedel'ni Zhurnal*, 4 April 2010. This is a regular feature of Belkovsky's commentary.

¹⁶ Therefore, he added, expecting that the arrival of Medvedev heralded some kind of liberalization was naïve.

have both men gone through much together, forging a ‘well-tested comradeship’ (in Russian: *‘vyverenni tovarishcheski otnoshenie’*), but Medvedev’s career largely echoes Putin’s.¹⁷

In his ‘campaigning’ speeches in late 2007, Medvedev often spoke of his readiness to continue the course set by Putin. And in many ways the strategic overhaul that Moscow has conducted under Medvedev encapsulates the same ideas of slow, stable evolving development, and continues the policies of Putin’s presidency. The ‘Medvedev’ proposals to reconsider the European security and energy architectures illustrate this.

To be sure, suggesting that the two men are of similar mind should not be interpreted as static or to mean that both men are identical, or that they have wholesale agreement on each and every issue. Medvedev is not simply Putin cloned, and there are bound to be issues over which there are disagreements, even if they are not visible. But here it is a question of the wider context, which is one of overall accord. Indeed, if some of the disagreements are ‘improving’ variations along the same overall lines, it also appears that Medvedev is attempting to reignite some of the ideas that Putin initiated but failed to implement, perhaps most obviously in his anti-corruption drive.

Moreover, their approaches may be more complementary than assumed. One of the reasons why the duumvirate appears to disagree is that it is seeking to appeal to different audiences, both in Russia and abroad. While many saw one of Medvedev’s speeches in December as critical of Putin, some leading Russian commentators such as Mikhail Rostovsky argued that in fact it showed the tandem working rather well.¹⁸ While Medvedev corrected Putin, it did not threaten Putin’s reputation – but the correction enhanced Medvedev’s. In fact, according to Rostovsky, it was an example that the tandem is successfully ‘simultaneously feeding two different audiences’: Putin cultivates an image of brutal machismo to speak to the ordinary, simple Russian citizen, while Medvedev, the strict manager and lawyer, appeals to the intelligentsia and business class. The tandem may correct the details of its course, but the wider course will remain the same.¹⁹ A similar understanding may be taken regarding the apparent dispute over Putin’s ‘crusade’ comments on international intervention in Libya.²⁰ Such an understanding throws interesting light on Putin’s often overlooked remarks that electoral campaigning never ends. Campaigning for the next electoral cycle starts from the moment the previous one ends and ‘we’ remain in constant contact with the voters, he stated.²¹

Since the duumvirate has survived, how it has evolved is important to consider. While neither Putin’s public reputation nor his overall weight in Russian politics has substantially subsided, it is clear that Medvedev’s political weight has increased without causing a major split. The year 2010 was one in which Medvedev was seen to emerge as a real candidate in Russia – but alongside Putin. Although some saw him as setting out presidential ambitions in the summer, leading Russian commentators saw the trend becoming clearer first with the firing of Luzhkov, and then in Medvedev’s (third) address to the Federal Assembly in November, interpreted as his first as real president and signalling his presidential ambitions.

As a result of this emergence, one Russian analyst stated that the Luzhkov affair showed that Russian politics now has two interconnected centres of decision-making. Tatiana Stanovaya suggested that the development of the duumvirate into a fully-fledged ‘two key’ operation, in which

¹⁷ ‘Interview Dmitriya Medvedeva tsentral’nomy televidenyiu Kitaya’, Kremlin, 12 April 2011; Solovyov, V., ‘Putin i Medvedev uzhe obo vsyom dogovorilis’, *Argumenti Nedeli*, No. 16. 28 April 2010. See also Shchegolev, K. A., *Kto est’ kto v Rossii: ispolnitel’naya vlast’* (Moscow: Astrel, 2009), pp. 559–60.; and Zenkovich, N., *Putinskaya entsiklopediya. Semya, komanda, opponenti, preemniki* (Moscow: Olma media group, 2008). Zenkovich cites *Expert* magazine in 2005 (p. 327) to state that the struggle between groups in the administration is a political cliché. The president’s apparatus exists of one group, a team.

¹⁸ Putin had asserted that Khodorkovsky was ‘guilty on all counts’, before the court’s verdict had been given. Medvedev stated that no official should voice opinions about a legal case until the verdict was delivered.

¹⁹ ‘Dvoika-Rus’, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 25 December 2010.

²⁰ It should be remembered that many Russians opposed NATO’s intervention in Libya.

²¹ Cited in ‘Predvubornaya kompaniya dlya Putina nikogda ne prekrashalas’, *Newsru.com*, 25 July 2010.

the authority of both members is needed for a decision, one giving sanction to the decision of the other, emphasized the stability of the tandem.²²

In this context it is worth reconsidering the words of both Medvedev and Putin and their repeated focus on the development of a unified team (*edinaya komanda, edini sili, blizki sili*). In 2010, for instance, Medvedev spoke about the development of 'unified power', and it is worth drawing attention to his point that 'people should be able to agree on something that has not happened in Russian history before', emphasizing that the nature of the common task is larger than individual interests.²³ For his part, during his end-of-year speech in 2010, Putin stated that Medvedev's office and the government are a single team. 'In fact, we have succeeded in establishing a united team. Yes, different points of view emerged, but not differences in the presidential administration separately, or the government separately, but within what is a common team.' Different approaches there may have been, he continued, to one problem or another, but they were 'resolved together'.²⁴

Seeing only a duumvirate narrows analytical horizons, however, for two reasons. First, as sometimes hinted by Russian political observers, and occasionally by Medvedev himself, a third presidential candidate may emerge.²⁵ The 'Tandem' would thus become a 'Troika'. Such a development is advanced by those who assert that, as with the tandem in 2008, a third candidate would be a compromise candidate, one agreeable to both Medvedev and Putin to prevent a clash. While this is possible, it currently seems unlikely. Nevertheless, it is a useful formulation, drawing attention to the idea that the summit of Russian power is not a 'duumvirate', but a 'triumvirate' – with Igor Sechin as the third man.²⁶

Furthermore, one of the most salient features of Russian politics is the wider stability and continuity in the policy formulation and implementation landscape. This is reflected in the longevity of tenure of the senior figures, almost all of whom have held positions of authority for many years. Real reshuffles or 'shake-ups' are rare, and usually constitute little more than the same people taking up slightly different positions. This draws attention to the evolution of the particular structures which bring these senior officials together, such as the presidential administration, in which Medvedev retained almost all the officials when he became president. Equally noteworthy is the emerging role of the Security Council as an important reservoir of experience, authority and decision-making with regard to the formulation of the strategic overhaul that Moscow has conducted in recent years. The Security Council has provided the main forum for reviewing and improving the framework documents such as the National Security Strategy to 2020.²⁷

Medvedev and Putin do not appear to be firing and appointing personnel in competition; rather than appointing members of their own groups, they appear to be making 'joint appointments' to senior positions. These include Moscow's new mayor Sergey Sobyenin, presidential envoy to the North Caucasus (and deputy prime minister) Alexander Khloponin, head of the Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin, and Alexander Voloshin, recently appointed to lead the taskforce to turn Russia into an international financial centre. Other senior figures who appear to enjoy 'joint' blessing from both Medvedev and Putin include Vladislav Surkov, first deputy chief of staff of the

²² Stanovaya, T., 'Ot bitvoi Moskvui k bitve za Moskvu', *Politcom.ru*, 16 September 2010. Idem, 'Moskovskaya sdelka tandema', *Politcom.ru*, 4 October 2010. The firing of Luzhkov was widely interpreted as Medvedev acting against a Putin ally. But as Stanovaya reminds us, while he had been co-opted into United Russia, in fact Luzhkov was not a close Putin ally or 'favourite'. He was one of the leaders of the political opposition in 1999 (of the Fatherland-All Russia bloc), and his leadership as Mayor of Moscow was too independent from the Federal Authorities. And at 74 years old, he was also nearing the end of his term.

²³ Quoted in 'Kandidat bez konkurentov', *Moskovski Komsomolets*, 4 August 2010.

²⁴ Putin speaking to the meeting of the Russian government, Moscow, 29 December 2010, <http://premier.gov.ru/events/news/13666/>.

²⁵ Various names have featured in this regard – among them current Head of Presidential Administration Sergei Naryshkin, current Mayor of Moscow Sergei Sobyenin, current secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, and current Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin.

²⁶ For instance, Pribilovsky, V., *Vlast' 2010. 60 Biografii* (Moscow: Centre Panorama, 2010), p. 5.

²⁷ For discussion of this continuity, see, for instance, *Politics Without Strategy? Decision-making in Russia*, Immediate Report (Rome: NATO Defence College), October 2008; Cooper, J., Bacon, E. and Monaghan, A., *'Muddling Down': the Economic Crisis in Russia and its Political Impact*, Report (Rome: NATO Defence College), September 2009. For the role of the Security Council, see Giles, K., *Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020*, Review (Rome: NATO Defence College), June 2009.

presidential administration. Currently less publicly prominent, but nevertheless important others include Konstantin Chuichenko, head of the Kremlin's Control Department.²⁸

Though it is sometimes argued that some of these individuals are allied to either Putin or Medvedev, in fact, all have deep connections with and lengthy experience of working with both men. It is often claimed, for instance, that Sobyenin is an ally of Putin, having known him since the early 1990s and being one of those who initially proposed Putin for the presidency in 2000. Equally, he has served as deputy chairman of Medvedev's Commission for Modernization and ran Medvedev's election campaign in 2008.²⁹ As one Russian source has it, 'it is not even just St Petersburgers, but classmates and personal friends and acquaintances of the president and prime minister who occupy all the key positions' in the country.³⁰

This is an important development to which the paper will return. Even without looking to the future and the elections, however, it is evident that so far, the longevity – and, it seems, the aim – of the tandem has been underestimated. It is also clear that it is evolving, and that while Medvedev and Putin are still a *dumvirate* appointing and coordinating, they are doing so as the centre of a wider unified team. It also means that the emphasis now should move away from trying to understand the tandem towards understanding this team (*komanda*) – since whoever is president in 2012 will come from it.

Variations on 'The Vertical'

Although the origins of 'The Vertical' can be traced to the early 1990s, it is most associated with Putin's presidential approach and his establishment of a vertical chain of hierarchical authority, establishing strong government from the top, instilling unconditional discipline and responsibility to fulfil tasks.³¹ Alexander Goltz adds that the need for it was highlighted by the *Kursk* tragedy in August 2000; and that this had a profound impact on Putin's management style because of the way he was 'systematically misled' by the military authorities who told him that the *Kursk* was in the process of being lifted and that the sinking was the result of a crash with a NATO submarine. This convinced Putin that there was no subordination among high-ranking officials, prompting him to construct his 'now famous and ubiquitous power vertical'.³² The abolition of gubernatorial elections following the terrorist attack in Beslan in 2004, replacing directly elected governors with appointees on the basis that effective and reliable administrators rather than elected governors were needed to combat terrorism, was seen by many to be the culmination of this process.

Putin's specific appointments to create a loyal support group throughout the Russian business and bureaucratic elite³³ and the anti-democratic nature of this process has drawn most attention. It has also become part of the debate about a split between Medvedev and Putin, since, by being seen to attack Putin's allies, Medvedev is considered by some to be attacking this very system of appointed hierarchy established by Putin. Whether the vertical of power works as a tool for the implementation of instructions or not is only rarely questioned.

It seems that Medvedev intends to maintain the system. Regarding the structure of government authority itself, Medvedev, even in replacing approximately one-third of regional governors, appears to have a similar view to Putin about the need to appoint governors and enhance the chain of command with loyal subordinates. Interviewed at the end of 2010, he stated that 'the system of

²⁸ The role of Mr Chuichenko is particularly noteworthy. He is a leading St Petersburg lawyer, with long experience working as head of Gazprom's legal department (2001–02) and as a member of the board of directors (2002–08). He was also an Executive Director of RosUrkEnergo AG. See Shchegolev, *Kto est' kto v Rossii: ispolnitel'naya vlast'*, pp. 559–60.

²⁹ See, for instance, Mefodeva, O., 'Moskva: den' surka kakoi-to', *Politicom.ru*, 18 October 2010.

³⁰ Ptashkin, O., 'Zakon o bespredeli', *Gazeta.ru*, 18 June 2010.

³¹ See Ryazanova-Clarke, L., 'How upright is the vertical? Ideological norm negotiation in Russian media discourse', in Lunde, I. and M. Paulsen (eds), *From Poets to Padonki: Linguistic Authority and Norm Negotiation in Modern Russian Culture* (University of Bergen, Department of Foreign Languages, 2009).

³² Goltz, A., 'Putin's Power Vertical Stretches back to Kursk', *Moscow Times*, 17 August 2010.

³³ Kryzhanovskaya, O. and S. White, 'Putin's Militocracy', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 19: 4, 2003; Renz, B., 'Putin's Militocracy? An Alternative Interpretation of Siloviki in Contemporary Russian Politics', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58: 6, 2006.

installing governors that we have now is the most appropriate in the current situation'. 'At this point', he continued, 'and in the foreseeable future we need to maintain unity in governing the state when everybody is part of the same executive chain of command, the president, the government and the governors.'³⁴ Indeed, according to some, Medvedev has worked to complete the power vertical process, replacing political leaders with technocratic managers to improve the effectiveness of the state. The aim to establish an integrated and disciplined bureaucracy is intended to enhance the manageability of the state apparatus.³⁵

Yet if the vertical of power is about the ability to ensure the fulfilment of the leadership's instructions and goals, it has become apparent that it does not function. As one newspaper editorial noted in early 2010, the handpicked officials are not effective and often 'quietly sabotage the orders of the prime minister and president'. If the shortcomings in the vertical of power could be ignored before the financial crisis (a good indication that it did not work under Putin either), the inefficiency of state officials now not only dissatisfied Medvedev and Putin but posed a threat to the budget.³⁶

This is conceded by official sources. At a meeting convened to discuss the execution of presidential orders on 16 March 2010, Medvedev stated that the situation with regard to the execution of instructions was difficult. He asserted that strengthening managerial discipline – which has always been poor in Russia – was a necessity and that he often found himself signing orders that would change nothing, nor bring about anything new, but simply reiterate something already ordered. In June, a second meeting was held at which Medvedev demanded to know which officials were not fulfilling presidential orders and a list of those to be punished. At the meeting, Chuichenko stated that since the beginning of 2010, the number of presidential instructions completed on time had risen by 68% and that every fifth instruction was now fulfilled by the deadline.³⁷

Others, including Ella Pamfilova, have stated that the president's attempts to distribute compensation for those widowed by terrorist attacks, for instance, were ineffective because his orders were ignored. Equally, his order to investigate corruption does not produce results for the same reason. The president was drowning in the total indifference of his men to his orders, she stated: his system was failing him and 'we saw no outcome from his measures'.³⁸

Further striking evidence of this emerged after the terrorist attack at Domodedovo airport in January 2011. Not only did reports surface that senior officials were deceiving Medvedev about firing officials as demanded.³⁹ It also emerged that security plans were not being implemented and the president's orders to increase and enhance security at major transport hubs in Russia were being ignored. At a meeting on transport security on 26 January, Medvedev stated that plans may have been developed – but whether they were being carried out was the question.

He subsequently conducted a series of inspections at railway stations and airports, visiting Kievsky station on 10 February and Vnukovo airport on 11 February. At Kievsky, he announced that the security situation was completely unacceptable, and that nothing had been done, despite all the instructions issued and the emergency circumstances. Some Russian observers thus said that Medvedev's visit to Kievsky station will have confirmed to him that if his orders were fulfilled, they were done so in an incomplete manner.⁴⁰ It is unlikely, however, to have surprised him. According to Kremlin sources cited by Russian journalists in October 2010, Medvedev is 'particularly annoyed' by the length of time it takes to prepare the paperwork for one or other activity, and often marks the paperwork with indignant personal observations about the need to work more quickly.⁴¹

³⁴ 'Itogi goda s prezidentom rossii', televised interview with Dmitri Medvedev, 24 December 2010, <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/9888>.

³⁵ Agarkov, M., 'Modernizatsiya vertikali', *Expert*, No. 4, 1 February 2010.

³⁶ 'Vertikal' loyal'nosti', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 24 March 2010.

³⁷ Chuichenko cited in 'Kremlin Seeks List of Punished Officials', *Moscow Times*, 23 June 2010.

³⁸ Ella Pamfilova, 'A "Hopeless" Cause' (The Last Word Interview), *Newsweek*, 16 August 2010.

³⁹ 'Nurgaliev obmanul prezidenta', *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 7 February 2011.

⁴⁰ Samarina, A. and R. Tsvetkova, 'Stranu khvatil paralich upravlenie', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 11 February 2011.

⁴¹ Bilevskaya, E., 'Prezidentski kontrol v rezhime onlain', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 28 October 2010.

An impression that Medvedev's orders are being ignored while Putin's are fulfilled would, however, be incorrect. This was perhaps most recently illustrated by the AAR consortium blocking the BP-Rosneft deal to explore the Arctic, a deal which had been blessed by Putin (and Igor Sechin).⁴² Other examples also emerge. In March 2010, Putin was reportedly deeply frustrated on discovering the costs of construction for major projects such as the Sochi Winter Olympics and the APEC summit in Vladivostok. Despite all orders and promises, these costs keep increasing and Putin made plain his desire for the resignation of those in charge.⁴³ In her vivid style, Yulia Latynina noted that despite a demand from Putin in February 2008 to build a military highway, it was still not begun in August 2008 (because the money had been stolen). She also suggested that senior officials ignore Putin's orders. Following a power cut in the Moscow region over new year 2010/11, Putin ordered Moscow region governor Boris Gromov and energy minister Sergei Shmatko to the affected area. They did not go, however, thereby showing that these officials could not care less about Putin's instructions and that the elite does not listen to Putin much more than to Medvedev.⁴⁴

The clearest illustrations of the failure of the vertical of power, however, emerged in the summer fires of 2010. Medvedev stated that the 'evidence suggests a neglect of duty and criminal negligence'.⁴⁵ According to Stanovaya, the fires showed the inability of the system to protect strategically important objects, blurred responsibilities and the disorientation of the bureaucracy.⁴⁶ They also revealed many of the same problems that the vertical was created to resolve; authorities, including governors and senior military officers, failed to report the spread of fires to the federal authorities, maintaining instead that they were under control (this resulted in considerable damage, including the burning down of a military base).⁴⁷

Criticism of the vertical of power has become increasingly prominent as the federal authorities have failed to address other problems. The mass killing at Kushchevskaya in 2010 and the consequent emergence of evidence of long-term local crime further demonstrated the inability of the federal authorities to exert control. The most recent example to emerge is the failure to fulfil the state defence order for supplies and military equipment in 2010.⁴⁸ One prominent commentator therefore stated he did not believe in the vertical of power, asserting that instead 'there is chaos'.⁴⁹ Another stated that 'the authorities, in building the vertical of power, have created a system which cannot be effective. If they do not draw the necessary conclusions, a crisis of state administration will grow'.⁵⁰

The reasons for the failures of the vertical of power as a tool for the implementation of instructions and managing the state are numerous and unsurprising. They comprise bureaucratic rivalries and blurred lines of responsibility between institutions and ministries, including the White House and Kremlin,⁵¹ widespread (even systematic) corruption, incompetence and a bureaucracy so unwieldy that exactly where instructions fail is unclear.

The leadership has responded by launching another anti-corruption drive and demanding the firing of incompetent officials. Medvedev signed an executive order on 3 January 2011 to reduce the number of federal civil servants in central offices and territorial agencies by 20% between 2011 and 2013. Nevertheless, the plan has faced criticism, with commentators observing that it is a myth that there are too many bureaucrats – that the problem is not the numbers of federal bureaucrats, but

⁴² See, for instance, 'TNK-BP blocks BP Russian Arctic Venture with Rosneft', *Financial Times*, 24 March 2010.

⁴³ 'Vertikal' loyal'nosti'.

⁴⁴ Latynina, Yu. 'Roi ili antibulochnik', *Novaya gazeta*, 25 January 2010; Idem, 'Zastupnik eliti', *Ezhednevni Zhurnal*, 14 January 2011. The incident showed that bureaucrats 'can spit on Putin's orders', she stated.

⁴⁵ Medvedev speaking at Expanded Security Council Meeting on Fire Safety Measures for Strategic Facilities, 4 August 2010, www.kremlin.ru

⁴⁶ Stanovaya, T., 'Pozharotushenie v ruchnom rezhime', *Politcom.ru*, 6 August 2010; Goltz, 'Putin's Power Vertical Stretches back to Kursk'.

⁴⁷ 'Ispuitaniye ognom', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 12 August 2010.

⁴⁸ <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/11257>.

⁴⁹ 'Aleksei Navalni: Medvedev tozhe 'plokhoi politseiski'', *Radio Svoboda*, 13 May 2011.

⁵⁰ Nikolayev, I., 'Vsekh uvolit', *Gazeta.ru*, 4 August 2010.

⁵¹ *Kommersant*, 17 March 2010.

rather the effectiveness of the personnel, essentially a result of what Russian commentator Vladislav Inozemtsev calls the ‘galloping de-professionalization of the Russian elite’.⁵²

Beyond this, the leadership is obliged to adopt ‘manual control’ methods to ensure that tasks are fulfilled. Medvedev gave an indication of this speaking at the end-of-year meeting with the government. He drew attention to the need for the leadership to become involved in regional or local matters to resolve problems. ‘Perhaps’, he lamented, ‘we will live to see the day when the government can address only strategic questions, but unfortunately, for several very strong reasons, the government has to deal with operational questions, even those themes that in fact should be dealt with by regional authorities’.⁵³

Manual control means that the executive leadership has to micromanage even day-to-day matters, and is obliged to assume the responsibilities of lower-level officials. According to Aleksei Makarkin, deputy president of the Centre for Political Technologies, manual control ‘permeates all branches of government’: ministers and governors will not act until the president himself ‘leads them by the nose’ to the problem, mayors and district heads wait for instructions from the governors and so on down the chain.⁵⁴

Such manual control was exemplified by Medvedev’s personal intervention in the Magnitsky case and delegation of an investigation to the prosecutor general. Equally, ministers are dispatched from Moscow to take personal command of the local situation. No doubt, and as many noted at the time, Putin’s active response to the fires, including flying emergency aircraft, provided him with a PR opportunity. At the same time, his intervention was a practical demonstration of the necessity of manual control. Another particularly mobile official in this regard is Alexander Bastrykin, head of the (newly independent) Investigative Committee, regularly dispatched to take personal charge of criminal and terrorist investigations that cannot be entrusted to local officials.

Second, both the president and prime minister have established mechanisms for monitoring the progress of their instructions. Following the summer fires last year, Putin ordered the installation in his office of a live-feed video system to monitor the fulfilment of his instructions regarding the construction of buildings. One of the results of the series of meetings Medvedev has chaired on the implementation of presidential instructions is the establishment of an online monitoring system feeding information directly to the president’s desk. He has also signed legislation reforming the system for fulfilling orders, and all decisions about granting further extensions to orders which have already been extended three times will now be taken by the president.

Even so, officials fired by either Putin or Medvedev often remain in place or are subsequently redeployed, even promoted. Manual control works best when the senior official is present, but the effect wears off after his departure. Such procedures also devour the leadership’s time, reducing effectiveness and even coherence across a wider range of issues. In any case, manual control is no easy task, as dealing with the fires showed. Indeed, it reveals some weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the system. It was during one such manual control episode that Bastrykin, leading the investigation into a terrorist attack on the Nevsky Express train in November 2009, was hospitalized as a result of a secondary attack. Despite the live-feed connection, Putin was frustrated with the flawed results of building construction.⁵⁵ It remains to be seen how the presidential monitoring mechanism works.

The meaning of the vertical of power, however, has evolved to the extent that some see it more as a networked group mechanism to eliminate the negative effects of mistakes and crises for the authorities themselves – a version of a ‘circle of shared responsibility’ (*krugovaya poruka*). This is especially so for the upper echelons of power, but also for those in the other ranks for whom the vertical of power is about the ability to formulate reports that will convey an impression of reliability

⁵² For instance, ‘Mif o burokratii: nevernaya problema’, *Vedomosti*, 17 February 2010.

⁵³ Medvedev speaking to the meeting of the Russian government, Moscow, 29 December 2010.

⁵⁴ Makarkin, A. cited in ‘Strane nuzhen glas da glaz’, *Izvestiya*, 14 September 2010.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Filatova, I., ‘Anti-Graft Cameras Show Fields’, *Moscow Times*, 13 August 2010.

to superiors.⁵⁶ This is emphasized by Inozemtsev's argument that in the vertical as built under Putin, 'at every level of the hierarchy a certain degree of bribery and clientelist parochialism is not only tolerated but presupposed in exchange for unconditional loyalty and a part of the take for one's superiors [...] The weak pay tribute up, the strong provide protection down'.⁵⁷ Such an understanding draws attention to inefficiency, even ineffectiveness, in the implementation of tasks. Perhaps it also provides a means of understanding both the longevity of senior figures who, despite regularly swirling rumours, neither resign nor are fired for numerous high-profile scandals, and the survivability of lower-level officials in their posts despite the demands for their firing by Medvedev and Putin.

Another understanding, drawing on a more cultural background – specifically the 1967 film '*Vertikal*', a favourite of Putin, who knows all its songs by heart⁵⁸ – is that the vertical describes more the task to be accomplished, rather than just the means to do so. This is in no way intended to suggest that the Russian leadership somehow wishes to rebuild the Soviet Union or take Russia back to the politics of the late USSR. Instead, it is more in line with what the drama of the film portrays: an adventurous team of climbers, testing themselves by choosing the difficult path up a mountain, one full of risk and danger and in which they relied on their own skills to carve the steps up the mountain, the hands of their friends in the team to help, and the safety line binding them to each other holding good. On such a mission, only trusted friends are taken, and if a friend betrays you, he is left behind. The loyal, skilled team creates the forward and upward movement to achieve the task. The Russian *vertikal* is therefore the combination of task and team.

And it is here we return to the establishment of a team discussed above. Both Putin and Medvedev repeatedly state that the creation of a sustainable Russian statehood, built on continuity and stability, is the long-term task, and they appear to have built a loyal team over 20 years to try to achieve it. This team cuts across the often assumed divisions between state and 'oligarchy' (neither of which is as coherent or united as often made out). Putin is the appointed figurehead of the team, with Medvedev as his colleague. But around them exists a collective leadership centred around perhaps some 10 or 11 people. Specific interpretations may vary slightly, but these include Sechin, Naryshkin, Surkov, Sobyanin, Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, and businessmen Yuri Kovalchuk, Gennadi Timchenko, Roman Abramovich and Alisher Usmanov. Such a team ripples out on a scale, according to some Russian observers, of a couple of dozen members of government administration, including deputy prime ministers, party heads such as Boris Gryzlov, and other leaders of big business and the security services.⁵⁹

There are well-publicized, but sometimes exaggerated, rivalries and tussles for influence among elements of the team. And to be sure, the nuances and subtleties within this wider team should not be overlooked or ignored. Within it there are those who are direct rivals for power, for instance, and those who, while not direct rivals, nonetheless hold somewhat different views about specific priorities or how to achieve goals. Equally, occasionally some may enter or indeed fall out from the group, particularly around the fringes – Yuri Luzhkov being one example.

But the *vertikal* as a team with a task serves both to co-opt and balance competing interest groups as a whole and to constrain the power of both Putin and Medvedev. Some, such as Yevgeniy Minchenko and Gleb Pavlovsky, therefore argue that in fact neither Putin nor Medvedev will decide

⁵⁶ 'Putin kak chast naroda', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 10 August 2010; Ptashkin, 'Zakon o bespredeli'.

⁵⁷ Inozemtsev, V. 'Neo-Feudalism Explained', *The American Interest*, March–April 2011, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=939>.

⁵⁸ *Ot Pervovo Litsa: razgovory s Vladimirom Putinom* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), p. 20. A further, perhaps fanciful, connection is that in the film the radio operator, a key member of the group, is named Volodya (the diminutive for Vladimir), and is played by Vladimir Vysotsky, a cult hero.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, the list drawn up by Yevgeniy Minchenko, *Problema 2012 i Politburo*, http://minchenko.ru/blog/ruspolitics/2010/12/09/ruspolitics_468.html. He notes the numerous people on the fringes of this permanent group. Again, the use of the term 'Politburo' should not be assumed to equate to ideas of a reconstituted 'Politburo of the USSR'.

who runs for the presidency, but instead this collective leadership will choose a candidate to suit and secure its interests.⁶⁰

The election, or scaling the *vertikal*?

'The Question' is all about the future – a subject that has given rise to many pithy quotes. Some of these are endlessly recycled, not least 'going back to the future'. Here, though, Eric Hoffer's line that 'a preoccupation with the future not only prevents us from seeing the present as it is, but often prompts us to rearrange the past' seems apposite as many seek to second-guess the Russian leadership in its preparation for an election still months away. The Question is usually formulated as a bellwether of change, and it serves to magnify long-sought distinctions between Medvedev and Putin. Some of these assumed distinctions, if followed through to their conclusions, may appear absurd: for instance that Medvedev could, with nothing but a small team of his own, run for president independently, win and dramatically alter Russia's course, more or less in opposition to the rest of the Russian elite.

Yet the question is the wrong one. The distinctions between Putin and Medvedev are slight, and emphasizing them draws attention away from the team they have established together, some of whom are rivals, perhaps, but with much the same overall approach. Putin will remain an important figure in the 'undersides' of Russian politics, and so will Medvedev, whoever wins the next election. Indeed there are no substantial *alternatives* to them: even if a third candidate emerges, to the position of either presidency or prime minister, he will be drawn from this same team. This will mean that the overall goals and broad priorities will remain the same, evolving slowly over time to meet the dynamic of domestic and external conditions. Within this context, it will be important to examine the reasons for each move by the leadership: as Russian commentator Kiril Kabanov has suggested, further reflecting the mountaineering image, the question should be 'for what purpose? did the president make this step?' since Medvedev will 'carefully position the holes into which he will put bricks which he can use as footholds to climb further'.⁶¹

These points alone serve to alter the analytical horizon with regard to Russia, moving away from personalized presidential terms, from 2008–12, for instance, towards the longer view. This would begin in the early 1990s, the starting point for the careers of most of today's senior officials. It would also extend beyond 2012, perhaps to 2020, the forecast date set in much of the new strategic documentation that the Russian leadership has rolled out over the last three years. The anticipated 'realization' of Strategy-2020, the framework for the slow, stable, evolving development of Russia, lies still two electoral cycles away.

A second point to emerge is that it seems many have 'invented' Putin too well: rising quickly to the presidency, (not really, but as if) from nowhere, he made a series of appointments to establish a vertical of power and was deemed to hold the country under firm control, having established dominance over business and the media. And there is much to the latter part of that argument. But if the development of a leadership team runs counter to the idea of a 'vertical split' within the duumvirate, a series of 'horizontal splits' exist between the leadership above and those who implement policy below. The vertical of power clearly does not work for either Putin or Medvedev – and is not likely to work for Putin if he returns to the Kremlin – nor for any other candidate, who will also have to resort to manual control methods.

Manual control reflects certain vulnerabilities in the system, which may trigger some unforeseen crisis. Nevertheless, there are some developments that should not come as a surprise, appointments and official policy being two examples. In these cases, as Somerset Maugham wrote, 'the future is here. It's just not widely distributed yet.' The short- to medium-term future in Russia is already here, regardless of who is president in 2013, in the shape of an increasingly unified

⁶⁰ Pribilovsky, *Vlast' 2010. 60 Biografii*; Minchenko and Pavlovsky cited in Treshanin, D., 'Putin uzhe ne mozhet konsolidirovat' elitu', *Svobodnaya Pressa*, 2 March 2011.

⁶¹ Speaking on 'Mozhno li doveryat' deklaratsiyam o dokhodakh vuisshikh goschinovnikov', *Grani Vremeni*, *Svobodanews.ru*, 11 April 2011.

leadership team that struggles to have its orders implemented because of a crisis of administration. To grasp this, it will be necessary to alter our vocabulary and to think in terms of a team or *komanda*, and 'manual control'.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Monaghan is a Research Advisor in the Research Division, NATO Defence College, Rome. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or the NATO Defence College. The paper builds on remarks given to the Scotland–Russia Forum in February 2011. The author can be contacted at a.monaghan@ndc.nato.int.