

The tsar's old clothes. Putin's fourth inauguration

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The ceremony of swearing in Vladimir Putin for a fourth presidency took place on 7 May at the Kremlin. In compliance with the constitution, after the inauguration, Dmitri Medvedev's cabinet handed in its resignation, and a few hours later Putin again presented Medvedev as his candidate for the head of a new cabinet. On 8 May, this candidacy was accepted by the State Duma, and Medvedev presented candidates for deputy prime ministers. Following the inauguration, President Putin announced a decree concerning strategic state development tasks until 2024 which included an extensive, detailed but also unrealistic list of tasks primarily in the areas of welfare and the economy. The government will be put in charge of carrying out these tasks. Putin used a now already traditional distribution of tasks which sees him taking on the role of the leader who is close to the people and understands their needs, while the government is responsible for improving the difficult and at times catastrophic condition of welfare and the economy.

The swearing in of the president was preceded by street protests that were organised on 5 May by Alexei Navalny in which more than ten thousand people participated, predominantly teenagers. The street protests were pacified by special troops of the National Guard; numerous protesters were arrested, and they may face fines and court trials, which may give rise to analogies to the widely publicised Bolotnaya Square case of 2012. While the use of violence by official law enforcement services against demonstrators is already part of the scheme of the standard government reaction to street protests, the additional engagement of Cossack and nationalist formations backed and financed by the state in pacifying opponents of the regime is something new.

The ceremony of swearing in the president, which has an important symbolic function in Russia as a demonstration of the power of the president's position, this time was more modest than usual. The presidential motorcade did not pass through the city (in 2012, scenes of the motorcade passing through an empty city filmed from a bird's-eye view met with criticism), and no banquet for participants of the ceremony was held. In turn, the television coverage showed the inside of the president's working office, thus emphasising how hard he works and that he needs to spend nights at the office. All this was clearly aimed at highlighting the responsibility of managing the country that rests with the president rather than the splendour of the presidency. Putin's approach to the people was also emphasised in a carefully orchestrated meeting with 'enthusiastic' young people immediately after the inauguration – it was intended to demonstrate that most young people in Russia support the president and that those protesting in the streets are only marginal troublemakers. After the meeting, the president took part in a prayer of gratitude celebrated by Patriarch Kirill at the chapel of the Cathedral of the Annunciation at the

Kremlin. Praying for the president, the patriarch emphasised that he saw Putin as not only a successful leader but also a man devoted to Russia, cherishing the spiritual traditions and caring for the nation's spiritual well-being. The ceremony was reminiscent of that of the anointment of a monarch.

Pro-welfare tasks for the government

The presidential decree passed after the swearing in ceremony sets new tasks for the government for the next few years and was intended at highlighting the pro-welfare dimension of the new term. The lengthy decree with dozens of issues on the agenda sets tasks for the government regarding the strategic development of the country to 2024, covering such areas as the economy, welfare, ecology, education and culture. By 1 October, the government is expected to adopt action plans in each of the spheres and to find funds for their implementation – these areas will be given special priority during the work on draft budgets in the coming years.

The tasks in the presidential decree include making Russia one of the world's top five economies (by 2024), improving the investment climate, modernising and digitalising the economy and significantly developing transport infrastructure. Most of the proposals concern welfare – improving the accessibility of healthcare centres, increasing life expectancy to 78 years (from the current level of 72 years), massive housing development, and improving the condition of the natural environment, especially in industrial centres. The proposals formulated in the decree are both general (becoming one of the world's top five economies, strengthening citizens' identity on the basis of spiritual and moral values) and highly detailed – the president pointed, for example, to the need to provide music schools with instruments, to establish a youth symphonic orchestra and to increase the ratio of people who do sports on a regular basis to 55%.

The tone of the presidential decree contrasts with the presidential address in March this year, at the core of which was the demonstration of Russia's military potential. The president had argued that it must be developed to withstand hostile encroachments from the West. The current decree is intended at demonstrating that Putin is also taking systemic action to improve citizens' living standards. The document sets numerous goals which appear to be entirely unrealistic to achieve considering the scale of the problems and negligence in these areas, the poor effectiveness of state structures and the scale of investment required (Medvedev has estimated that they will cost 8 trillion roubles, i.e. US\$125 billion). Furthermore, in some areas the goals declared by the president contradict actions taken over the past few years. The proposal to improve the accessibility of healthcare centres is at contrast with the policy of pooling them together which has been underway for many years, resulting in the reduction of healthcare centres in the provinces and in practice depriving many residents of even medium-sized towns of access to specialist healthcare. Moreover, the binding budget plan for 2018–2020 provides for cuts in social spending. Finally, the presidential decree contributes to the entrenchment of the traditional mechanism of the Kremlin assigning tasks to the government and making it accountable for the implementation of the tasks assigned. Given the numerous unrealistic demands, this will give Putin the right to ostentatiously call the ministers and the prime minister to account.

The first nominations

According to the constitution, once the prime minister is approved by the Duma, he has one week to announce changes in his cabinet. For the time being, Medvedev has presented his candidates for the deputy prime ministers; there will be nine of them (as in the previous cabinet).

The position of the first deputy prime minister is expected to be taken by Anton Siluanov who has so far served as the minister of finance and who is likely to maintain his ministerial post, significantly strengthening his position in the government. The incumbent head of the Accounting Chamber, Tatyana Golikova, is expected to become the deputy prime minister for social policy, healthcare and education. In turn, the former deputy prime minister for social issues, Olga Golodets, will be in charge of culture and sport. The controversial Vitaly Mutko (who once served as the minister of sport and the president of the Russian Football Union, on whom the International Olympic Committee imposed a lifelong ban on attending the Olympic Games due to doping scandals) is set to be nominated for deputy prime minister for construction. Yuri Borisov, who has so far served as the minister of defence, will be the deputy prime minister in charge of the arms industry. The industrial and energy sectors will be coordinated by Dmitri Kozak, previously the deputy prime minister for construction and Moscow's contacts with the regions. In turn, Maksim Akimov (previously first deputy head of the government executive office) is set to become the new deputy prime minister for transport and communication. Alexei Gordeyev, the former governor of Voronezh Oblast, who previously served as the minister for agriculture, will now be the deputy prime minister in charge of agriculture. Medvedev nominated Konstantin Chuychenko, who has so far served as the head of the control department of the Presidential Administration, for the head of his executive office. Chuychenko is Medvedev's friend from college but also a trusted aide of Putin.

The further career of the officials who are losing their positions (Arkady Dvorkovich, Dmitri Rogozin, Sergey Prihodko and Aleksandr Khloponin) is not yet clear. However, it may be presumed that they will be nominated for governmental positions, albeit less prominent. A reshuffle is also expected in the Presidential Administration. Recent comments include speculation about the further career of Alexei Kudrin, the former minister of finance and the main Kremlin-linked 'liberal'. According to some reports, he may become the president's special representative for contacts with Western business and will be tasked with improving Russia's image in the West.

Many commentators predicted that Putin would maintain Medvedev as the prime minister. Both due to Putin's desire to preserve the balance of power between the Kremlin and the government (experienced, loyal but weak prime minister) and to avoid the interpretation that a new person assuming the prime minister's position might eventually become Putin's successor. In turn, there seems to be no clear key according to which the other personnel decisions concerning the deputy prime ministers announced so far have been made. While some nominations suggest that the role of the financial bloc (Siluanov, Golikova) will grow – as this bloc will be responsible for financing the president's exorbitant proposals, – other decisions seem to have been quite random (Kozak as the coordinator of the energy sector to which he is a newbie) or even controversial (entrusting Mutko, who has a bad reputation

not only among independent circles but also inside the state administration, with coordination of the corruption-generating construction sector).

The mobilisation of Putin's opponents continues

The president's inauguration was preceded by street protests in around 90 Russian cities, with more than ten thousand demonstrators taking to the streets, predominantly young people. The protests under the slogan 'He's no tsar to us' were organised by the opposition activist Alexei Navalny, who appeared at a street action in Moscow but was soon detained. The protests met with a violent reaction from the law enforcement agencies – special troops of the National Guard brutally pacified the crowds in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. A total of around 1,600 people were detained (700 in Moscow alone). Photographs of teenagers beaten with nightsticks and arrested by law enforcement officers quickly spread online. Many of those arrested are likely to face charges of active assault on officers and, as a consequence, criminal trials, as with the Bolotnaya Square case in which participants of the street protests during the preceding inauguration of Putin in 2012 were sentenced.

While the use of force is already a standard in the government's response to street protests, the engagement of Cossack and National Liberation Movement (NOD) formations backed by the state on such a scale is something new. The media reported that the Cossack formations engaged in pacifying the protests had been trained in 'safeguarding law and order' for the money of the Moscow city council. Activists of nationalist organisations such as NOD and SERB were used to physically assault the opposition and civil activists – they threw a green dye in the face of Navalny (which put him at risk of partly losing his eyesight) and the writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya (who is known for criticising the regime) and assaulted the members of the Pussy Riot band. However, despite the violent reaction from the government and the affiliated militant troops, the 5 May protest has shown that the mobilisation of the opponents of the regime in Russia continues, even though their numbers are still small, especially given the passiveness and apathy predominant among the Russian public at large.