

RUSSIA

A Rising Putin Protégé Rocks the Kremlin

The new president's style of music—and politics—may be different, but who will call the tune?

By Alastair Gee

MOSCOW—On a stage in Moscow's Kremlin Palace, Ian Gillan of Deep Purple was barefoot as he sang the British rockers' celebrated track "Smoke on the Water." Staid, suited men from Gazprom made up the audience—the concert was in honor of the Russian gas firm's 15th birthday. And in the wings, yards from the group he has idolized since he was 13, was Dmitry Medvedev.

At the beginning of the concert in mid-February, two weeks before he was voted president of Russia in a one-sided election, an excited Medvedev popped backstage to be photographed with the group. "He explained that he's got all of our vinyl records at home," says Gillan. "He was positively beaming with pleasure," recalls bassist Roger Glover.

In tastes and temperament, Medvedev is no Vladimir Putin. An ex-KGB officer, Putin projects the image of an impassive man's man. He practices judo and was snapped fishing in a Siberian river without a shirt on. Medvedev wasn't in the secret service and isn't afraid to show a lighter, spontaneous side (in photos with Deep Purple, he has a daffy smile and two thumbs up). The tone of their presidencies may also differ. Under Putin, the press and opposition have been muzzled, but Medvedev is reputed to be a liberal, and some are predicting that his term will see more freedoms and less antiwestern rhetoric.

Perhaps. But as Putin's protégé, Medvedev may simply mask the Kremlin's darker realities with a sort of Potemkin village persona. After all, his victory with some 70 percent of the vote was only achieved while opposition figures were denied media attention or faced difficulties registering for the poll. His popularity rests largely on Putin's backing, and Putin himself has vowed to remain a powerful figure. Medvedev has said he will appoint him prime minister



Moscow policemen pass an election poster of Putin and Medvedev.

and that they will work as an "effective tandem." If Medvedev is not content to share power or take a back seat, conflict could arise. He recently told the Russian magazine *Itogi* that "there are not two, three, or five centers" of power. "The president governs Russia," he said. Putin, meanwhile, said at a February news conference that "the highest executive power in the country is the Russian government, headed by the prime minister."

Few call for change. Ultimately, even if Medvedev is a West-leaning reformer—and there is reason to doubt that—most Russians aren't hungering for change. The economy has prospered under Putin, and liberalism is tainted by its association with the chaos and corruption of the immediate post-Communist years.

Medvedev, 42, is from St. Petersburg, where he studied law. He worked in the

early 1990s as a city hall legal adviser to Putin, at that time head of a committee on external relations, and they bonded. "They're certainly very close, both in terms of their philosophy and view of the world, and also in their approach to politics," says Valery Musin, who taught Medvedev in law school and worked in the city government alongside him.

In 1999, after Putin became prime minister, Medvedev was appointed deputy head of government administration. Medvedev was made chairman of Gazprom in 2000. During his tenure, the company became one of the world's top five firms by market capitalization, though it has been accused of strong-arm tactics. Vice President Dick Cheney said Russia was guilty of energy "blackmail" after Gazprom cut off gas to Ukraine in January 2006 during a pricing dispute. Despite such problems, or perhaps because of them, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko praises Medvedev as "a most skillful and capable administrator."

Although Medvedev has called for better relations with the United States and Europe, recently his line has been increasingly hawkish—even Putinist. He told *Itogi* that "one could call the U.S. a financial aggressor and economic terrorist for forcing its currency and its business standards on the world." And he visited Belgrade in February, promising to support Serbia in its opposition to Kosovo's independence, putting him at odds with Washington, which backed independence.

Medvedev's presidency should, at least, see some glamour. His wife, Svetlana, is a minor society figure who has organized fashion shows. "She is not afraid to be stylish," says Anna Lebsak-Kleimans, head of Moscow's Fashion Consulting Group, a retail marketing research firm. With such a first lady, Lebsak-Kleimans hypothesizes, the Russian fashion industry could get a boost, and ordinary Russians might start dressing better. ●