Crisis and Understanding in Russian Democracy and Politics

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Stephen White, *Understanding Russian Politics*.
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Less than a year after publication of Richard Sakwa’s new book on contemporary Russian politics, the Russian Federation’s Central Electoral Committee published the results of the 4 March 2012 RF Presidential elections: the turnout had been a little over 65%, of which 63.60% had voted for V.V. Putin to become, in a way, his own successor. Yes, D.A. Medvedev had succeeded Vladimir Putin in March/April 2008 as Russia’s president. But no, Medvedev never was—and, moreover, never has become—his own man. He was Putin’s go-between, Putin’s stand-in, Putin’s caretaker, if one prefers, from 2008 and 2012. The then RF Constitution limited RF presidential tenure to two consecutive four-year terms. By stepping down after eight years, Putin did honor the 1993 Constitution, of which he had proven to be the ‘garant’—not having changed its content, well, not formally, although he could have. He had even been invited to do so, among others by Sergei Mironov, the then president of the Council of the Federation (and a presidential candidate in March 2012, who finished last with less than 4% of the vote). One of the suggestions had been to change Article 81 of the Constitution and extend the RF presidential tenure to two consecutive seven-year terms. President Putin could have arranged it, with well over two-thirds of the seats ‘taken’ by United Russia (315 to be exact), and the Federation Council undoubtedly willing to cooperate as well. After such substantial change of the terms of the 1993 RF Constitution, the President could then have claimed that...
he would be in for his first term according to the new Constitution, and so Putin's presidency could have lasted uninterruptedly from 2000 to 2022. Putin would not go for that—being the garant of the Constitution and all. He left it to his successor Dmitrii Medvedev (one feels tempted to write 'successor' and 'Medvedev') to propose changing Article 81(1) of the RF Constitution and turning the RF presidential tenure into two consecutive six-year terms while, at the same go, arranging for an extension of the State Duma's term from four to five years (Art.96(1)). Putin has been respecting and disrespecting the Constitution at the same time; or is it: not respecting it and not disrespecting it either? (Modal logic is required here, or rather the unironic irony of the late Alexander Zinoviev.) Without touching the text of the 1993 RF Constitution, Putin—as previous president (2000-2008)—already had changed what one could call the actual constitutional order by means of (Federal) laws and presidential decisions. But he left it to his 'go-between' to act as quartermaster and formally amend the RF Constitution. Indeed, there can be little doubt that Medvedev's initiative to extend the RF presidents tenure was intended to prepare the way for the 'second coming' of his mentor and master. Twelve more years, if his chief so desired. And, formally, there was no abuse of power: no president presiding over a change of the written constitution enabling him to prolong his own (personal) stay beyond the confines set by the (previous) constitution.

One could have expected that Putin also had a come-back of his own person in mind by helping install Dmitri Medvedev as president. I was among those who, at the time, thought this a plausible scenario. Nevertheless, it was a bit of a shock to hear Putin say—confess—as much at a convention of United Russia in September 2011, when President Medvedev proposed Vladimir Putin as the party's candidate for presidency, and when Putin, accepting this nomination, told his audience that this—Putin, again, for president and Medvedev as his candidate for the premiership—was in accordance with an agreement reached among them “several years ago”, which had not been “politically expedient”, Putin said, to disclose earlier. Putin may have been lying, politicians lie often. But this probably was true, and its likely being true in this case was perhaps the more shocking. The electorate was now publicly reduced to the role of having to make formally happen what had been agreed by 'state leaders' should happen several years previously. The people had to play its preconceived historical role. They were taken for granted—well, not quite. The powers-that-be, of course, ‘facilitated’ both in (preparation for) the 4 December 2011 State Duma elections as well as in (preparation for) the 4 March 2012 RF presidential elections the outcome that the people in their majority did what they were supposed—or should we say, were destined—to do.

In the preface of his book, Richard Sakwa announces that it “will seek to analyse the features of the crisis in Russian democracy as revealed in the transition from Putin to Medvedev” (p.viii). Knowing now that the ‘arranged succession’