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Fray Between Putin and Medvedev to Get Uglier

By Vladimir Frolov

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The continuing uncertainty about whether President Dmitry Medvedev or Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will run for president in 2012 is becoming a source of political instability.

The mounting tensions between the political courts around each leader are threatening to upend the political calm in the nation and plunge Russia into a clannish warfare rivaling the late 1990s.

The political courts are already waging media wars positioning themselves for a showdown in a few months. Medvedev's court is on the offensive and is trying to box the president into a decision even before he sorts this out with Putin.

In September, Medvedev's press secretary Natalya Timakova went out on a limb to state in an interview that Medvedev's modernization agenda extends well beyond a single presidential

term, inferring that he should run again, a proposition that Medvedev has not yet endorsed.

Then on Oct. 21, Igor Yurgens, who is head of the Institute for Contemporary Development and claims to be an adviser to Medvedev, crossed the line by stating that Putin should not run for president again in 2012 because "modernization is associated, both domestically and abroad, with Medvedev."

Yurgens condescendingly sought to disparage Putin as being "popular with conservative voters — the ones who make an emphasis on stability, discipline and order."

Then Yurgens placed a political kiss of death on Medvedev, saying that he is "popular with liberals bent on progress and changes" and painting Medvedev as an elitist "liberal" — a public image that all but dooms his electoral prospects. Yurgens earlier endorsed NATO membership for Russia. With friends like these, does Medvedev need enemies?

Putin's court retaliated by planting stories that portrayed Medvedev's closest advisers as an "American lobby" and casting the president's attempts at economic and political modernization as "another perestroika," implying that their consequences could be as disastrous for Russia as perestroika was for the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991.

Amid all of this comes the manifesto on "enlightened conservatism" by film director Nikita Mikhalkov, who has a very close relationship with Putin. For all its flowery language, the manifesto is no less than an ideological alternative to "liberal modernization" pushed by Medvedev's court of "Westernizers."

This battle will only get uglier. Stay tuned.

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