

Ruling Tandem Makes Russia More Democratic

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I have argued on these pages that the tandem's creative ambiguity as to which one of them will run for president in 2012 is now turning into a source of political instability in Russia.

Yet looking back on 2010, the tandem's purposeful uncertainty could actually be good for the country's democracy, despite the destructive potential of the clannish rivalry.

Vladimir Putin's decision in 2007 not to change the Constitution to allow himself a third presidential term and his subsequent repositioning as the most powerful prime minister in modern Russian history with all the constitutional powers of a popularly elected president is perhaps the most under-recognized and undervalued contribution to the development of the country's democracy.

This had a huge impact on Russia's division of power, ultimately reducing the potential for autocracy and arbitrariness. For the first time, we have a political system with two, not one,

equally powerful centers of decision making.

It made the system more pluralistic and much more open to the inflow of new ideas and new people, eliminating the risks of stagnation. President Dmitry Medvedev and Putin may be working in concert and are in agreement on the ultimate destination for Russia as a developed market democracy, but they clearly have different, but fortunately not antagonistic, views on how best to get there.

This has broadened the scope of the political debate, allowed for the introduction of policy ideas that have long languished as too liberal, and created a less confrontational style of foreign policy. Although Putin's word may still be final, Medvedev's impact on policymaking is already enormous. Just ask former Mayor Yury Luzhkov.

The gradual devolution of power under the tandem is good for Russian democracy. The emergence of the two centers for strategic decision making has already increased political competition, albeit still within the closed circuits of the political courts around each leader. Nonetheless, it is still an example of healthy competition.

Whether this rivalry of ideas and teams translates over time into open and competitive politics with independent parties and free elections remains to be seen. But under the tandem, the system is getting increasingly pluralistic and competitive, with reduced risks of tearing the country apart.

Keeping the tandem for another six years could be the fastest and safest way to develop democracy in Russia, as well as preserving Putin's and Medvedev's legacies.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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