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My Predictions for 2011

By Richard Lourie

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January is the month for resolutions and predictions. As a rule, little comes of either. Still, I thought I'd try my hand at making some predictions about Russia with an eye to revisiting them in December.

Putin will announce himself to be the presidential candidate in the 2012 election, although the word "candidate" is misleading because it is clear that he is guaranteed a victory from the start. Even so, he will have to announce well in advance both for form's sake and to do some real campaigning. Since the election is in March, that announcement should come no later than mid-November.

It's true that Putin wields immense power as prime minister and that there are advantages to having President Dmitry Medvedev out in front as the good cop. But Putin did not have the presidential term lengthened from four to six years so that someone else could take advantage of it.

According to the Constitution, Putin will be eligible for two consecutive six-year terms, but

the first term will be the more important to him since he will go from age 60 to age 66 during it. This first six-year term will be Putin's chance to leave a lasting and major mark on Russia. He will have to choose between a stability bordering on stagnation or real attempts to bring the Russian firebird alive again. But that's a prediction for another day.

The economy will have a strong year, growing by at least 5 percent. High commodity prices will allow for a balanced budget — or very close to it. Foreign investors will not shy away from Russia in great numbers, despite the "Khodorkovsky effect." BP has no qualms about exploring the Arctic for gas and oil with Rosneft, the company that cannibalized the lion's share of Yukos. And Russia has no qualms about doing business with BP, whose colossal oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico suddenly proved an asset since they were now apparently "experienced" in disaster management.

The economy will also be helped by agriculture, one of the unsung success stories of post-Soviet Russia. One-third of all food grown in Soviet times was lost in transport and storage. Russia has once again become a major grain exporter, as it was before the 1917 revolution. While the Soviet Union had to import wheat, Russia is third in terms of wheat exports, behind United States and Canada. How did this exactly happen? High food prices will boost the Russian economy once Putin's export ban is lifted.

The real danger to the Putin-Medvedev status quo in 2011 will not be the liberals, who are few and ineffectual, or Islamic terrorists, who are also few but who can be lethally effective. A new type — nerdy skinhead hackers — will also begin to bedevil the regime. Any attempts to censure the Internet will only increase their fury.

Then there's always the wild card, a force coming from outside to affect the political game. It could be something like former Soviet leader Yury Andropov's bad kidneys suddenly failing after a year in office, opening the way for his protege Mikhail Gorbachev. Or like the forest fires outside Moscow last year that helped hasten Mayor Yury Luzhkov's exit from the scene.

A wild card doesn't have to be negative, however. It could be a sudden breakthrough in a science, like nanotechnology, or the discovery of vast deposits of rare-earth minerals. But I won't even try to predict what that wild card might be. Russia alone is its own wild card.

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