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Clarity on Who Rules Russia

By Victor Davidoff

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On March 21, Ekho Moskvy radio polled its audience with a rather provocative question: "How would you react if Russia got the same treatment that Libya is getting?" The results were bizarre, no matter how you looked at them. More than a third of the online respondents (36.6 percent) said they would accept it. The call-in voters — an older and less well-educated audience — were even more radical: More than 80 percent said they would consent to Western intervention.

Although these results cannot be called representative, they vividly reflect Russian citizens' fatigue and loss of hope in change for the better. The similarities between the situations in Libya and Russia make any discussion about the Middle East essentially a discussion about conditions inside Russia. A prime example of this was a dispute in statements made by the country's two leaders.

At a factory in Votkinsk, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin criticized the actions of the multinational coalition against Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. "It actually resembles medieval calls for crusades when someone called on others to go to a certain place and liberate

it," Putin said.

Three hours later, President Dmitry Medvedev publicly condemned this opinion and his prime minister's statement, saying: "Under no circumstances is it acceptable to use expressions that essentially lead to a clash of civilizations, such as 'crusades' and so on. It is unacceptable. Otherwise, everything may end up much worse than what is going on now. Everyone should remember that."

In a normal democratic state, the public might pay scant attention to politicians' differing opinions on foreign affairs. But in Russia, where political processes take place in Byzantine secrecy, this spat was like a bolt from the blue. For the first time it became clear that the three-year puzzle "Who rules Russia?" might be a multiple-choice question.

This made such a great impression that it even changed the opinion of those who still thought that the president was just a ceremonial figure. Political analyst Dmitry Shusharin wrote on his blog: "I always thought that differences of opinion within the tandem were just an invention of the agitprop machine. But today it looks like it's serious and substantial." He continued: "It would seem that losses on Libyan contracts are being borne by Putin's close associates, who went into the deals with his guarantee. The cost is billions. ... So he lost his temper. ... If this is true, then it's a very serious matter indeed. For the first time."

Interestingly enough, Medvedev's supporters tried to downplay significance of the event. Igor Yurgens, head of the presidential think tank, the Institute for Contemporary Development, dryly noted that according to the Constitution, "the president is responsible for foreign policy and the prime minister is for domestic policy. The president has the right to correct whomever he wishes, including Putin." Yurgens is absolutely right, but you can only say this about a state that lives strictly by its constitution and laws, which is certainly not Russia. Is this a signal that there are new rules of the game?

In any case, the signal was so loud that even senior bureaucrats heard it. The deputy chief of the Audit Chamber, Valery Goreglyad, understood it this way: "It's a signal to all of us for democratization. Since the time of Communist Party unity, we've not been accustomed to the top leaders expressing different opinions."

There was another curious event connected with the two leaders' statements. In their news reports, all the main television stations concentrated on Medvedev's statement and none of them showed Putin speaking. Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, did his boss a dubious favor by explaining that the statement was merely the personal point of view of citizen Vladimir Putin as a private individual. It must have been something of a shock for Russians to hear this about the man who heads the ruling party and is called the "nation's leader" by his supporters.

Mikhail Fishman, a columnist for the Russian Forbes magazine, reminded readers that this wasn't the first time that the president and prime minister have disagreed, although this disagreement, and the way it was handled publicly, is the most serious. His prediction: "The louder the row, the clearer it becomes that the diarchy will soon come to an end. Putin and Medvedev cannot longer rule Russia the way they have been until just recently."

If that's true, then the next 12 months before the presidential election should really be

interesting. We might even have a real presidential race.

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