The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

United Russia Think Tank Urges Democratization, Pluralism

By Alexandra Odynova

March 27, 2011



Call it the pre-election war of the think tanks.

Just days after President Dmitry Medvedev's think tank released a report criticizing Putin-era reforms and suggesting that Medvedev seek re-election on a platform of democracy, a think tank close to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has issued a copycat report that sets the stage for Putin to run on a similar platform.

The Center of Conservative and Social Policy, a United Russia think tank, criticized "suppression of political pluralism" in its report on the country's development and called for democratization, including the possible return of direct gubernatorial elections.

Its authors said the report is the first "serious piece of analysis" aimed at implementing "Strategy 2020," a development program supported by Putin.

The report, which covers topics of "real federalism, local government and inter-budget policy," notes that political climate in the regions is "in deep crisis."

"The suppression of political pluralism ... leads to a growth of nationalist and populist protest sentiments," said the document, drafted by Public Chamber member Vyacheslav Glazychev and economist Irina Starodubrovskaya.

The report lists five scenarios on how to tackle the situation, noting that the option to keep the status quo will lead to further deterioration of the political system.

The four other scenarios propose various degrees of democratization, including the return of gubernatorial elections — abolished by Putin in 2004 — and the liberalization of the largely state-controlled media.

The paper was presented Thursday by the Center of Conservative and Social Policy, one of three major "political clubs" within United Russia, which is led by Putin.

The document is now "being studied by Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov and will be soon discussed by the Cabinet," the center said on its web site.

The Institute for Contemporary Development, whose board is presided by Medvedev, rolled out a proposal for a "reset of democracy" and other reforms on March 15. The report's authors said they intended it as a political platform for Medvedev's 2012 re-election bid but conceded that he had not requested it.

Glazychev said the two reports were not related, with work on United Russia's initiated "months before" Medvedev's institute presented its own paper, Gazeta.ru reported Friday.

Glazychev said Thursday's document would serve as part of an extensive report on "Strategy 2020," which will be presented in September, right as campaigning kicks off for State Duma elections in December.

Some United Russia members, however, were quick to dampen hopes that a more democratic movement might be growing within the party, saying the report does not necessarily express the official party line.

"United Russia's clubs are discussing many different documents. ... The fact that we examine these documents doesn't mean that we support them," senior party official Andrei Isayev said Sunday in a statement released by the party.

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