

Ruling Tandem in Trouble

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Over the past few weeks, Russia's leading think tanks have been outdoing one another with apocalyptic forecasts, predicting that the ruling regime will lose its legitimacy before the 2012 presidential election.

For now, most of the discussion is focused on possible scenarios for the future and ways to ease social tensions, primarily by reintroducing direct gubernatorial elections and satisfying public demand for a new right-leaning political party that focuses on the middle class.

The Center for Strategic Research believes that a drop in ratings for President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is due largely to growing disappointment among active voters between the ages of 35 and 54, the backbone of the Russian middle class.

The problem for the ruling tandem is that it shows an open disregard for the middle class by reducing politics to a personal competition over which one of the two leaders is best. The Russian people perceive their endless cat-and-mouse game over who will run for president as insulting.

Putin is still the head of United Russia, a party best known for its abuses of administrative resources, ineffectiveness and lack of political platforms. It is also widely seen as a farce, whose State Duma members include a strange blend of oligarchs, athletes and pop singers. The latest quirk occurred last week when a weaver from the Ivanovo region — whose only claim to fame was her widely broadcast appeal during a 2007 United Russia conference demanding that the Constitution be amended to allow Putin to serve a third term as president — was appointed as a Duma deputy.

Meanwhile, Medvedev has pinned his hopes on the long shot that foreign companies will invest billions of dollars in the Skolkovo project. His recent comment that Russia has not completely overcome serfdom only offended those people who were forced to give up their professions as scientists and scholars in the 1990s to try to make ends meet and feed their families. By ignoring these people, the ruling tandem only exacerbates the social problems. It is no surprise that an angry mob gathered on Manezh Square in December with a single message: “We won’t tolerate being treated as cattle anymore!”

Recent polls show that the people are growing increasingly tired of Putin and see Medvedev as unelectable. The electorate refuses to legitimize this form of social contract in which there is no civil society and the government decides everything without any input from individual citizens or social groups.

Any attempt by the leadership to create a new political force and impose it from above is unlikely to be successful. The middle class will probably not vote for a party that is hammered together from fragments of the democratic opposition forces of the 1990s and that includes high-ranking officials masquerading as politicians. There are many well-known personalities on the Russian political scene, but few of them have well-developed political platforms. Take, for example, Alexei Navalny, the whistle-blowing blogger who exposes corrupt officials.

The most pressing need is for a party that can represent the middle class, the public wants the truth and meaningful dialogue instead of spin doctors and empty slogans. In short, the people need to participate in the democratic process.

The ruling tandem can earn legitimacy only if it makes the transition to real democracy in Russia. The best way to accomplish this is if Putin and Medvedev ran against each other in the 2012 presidential race and if United Russia competed with real opposition parties in truly free and fair Duma elections.

The clear risk, of course, in taking this route is that it would spark an ugly war among the elites. This conflict has surfaced several times over the past few years, including the current battle between the Prosecutor General’s Office and the Investigative Committee. But these battles are child’s play compared to what an all-out war of the elites would look like if Medvedev ever decided to take on Putin in a presidential race.

For Putin and Medvedev, the options are limited: Either deal with the compromises and fierce competition inherent in a democracy or sink deeper into autocracy with all the accompanying dangers of stagnation, social unrest and degradation.

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