

Medvedev's Magnitogorsk Manifesto

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President Dmitry Medvedev's speech last week in Magnitogorsk would have made a good start for his 2012 presidential election campaign except for one thing: There are no real elections in Russia.

In his speech, Medvedev clearly defined a theme that could easily serve as the basis for countless election-year speeches. In other words, he pointed out pressing problems and outlined the general measures and concrete steps that could be taken to resolve them. For example, Medvedev called for replacing government ministers on the boards of directors of state-owned corporations with independent directors.

In addition, Medvedev introduced measures aimed at reducing corruption, limiting state interference in business and improving customs and visa procedures to make the country more attractive for foreign investors.

The obvious drawback to Medvedev's address as a campaign speech is that it was directed to a very narrow audience. Reducing the tax burden on businesses, protecting companies from undue interference by state authorities and increasing the competitiveness of markets are all very important for the so-called elite — that is, for those actively involved in politics and for

the millions of people with small and medium-sized businesses. But even those millions are an insignificant percentage of the total population, and political popularity and power go only to those who know how to appeal to tens of millions of citizens. For that, Medvedev would have to explain how noncompetitive markets and state corporations protected from regulatory scrutiny by laws and political “patrons,” as well as individual companies that benefit from protective tariffs and other barriers to competition are actually one of the root causes of the high consumer prices and lower standard of living that those tens of millions experience.

But as far as I know, Russia is not anticipating any real elections in the next couple of years. The very idea of competitive elections as a mechanism that motivates incumbents to promote voters’ interests and that provides for the regular change of political leadership is in complete opposition to the current archaic structure of the Russian government. The one fact alone that Vladimir Putin has been the sole leader for 11 years in a row is proof of this archaic condition. In countries with modern political systems, that type of tenure in office is not standard but a rare exception.

At the same time, holding pseudo-elections is still much better than having no elections at all — especially if the candidates are competing over who will promise the most radical improvements to the economy. It could be worse, after all. They could be competing with one another to show who would best protect the country from “foreign threats” — a standard line for authoritarian leaders all over the world — or other imaginary enemies. Strange as it might seem, Putin doesn’t really believe that he can earn points by playing the national security card because the spate of terrorist attacks in recent years has made this issue his weak point.

So, whether or not Russia has real elections, at least Medvedev’s speech in Magnitogorsk offered an alternative course for the country’s future.

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