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Tandem Rivalry Could Build a 2-Party System

By Vladimir Frolov

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Less than a year ago, it seemed almost natural that President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would meet in mid-2011 and decide quietly between themselves who would run for president in 2012.

But as Selection Day draws nearer, it is getting harder to envision such a meeting.

It is not because Medvedev, as The Economist put it, "is displaying an urge to stay on as president." Nor is it because his circle is propelling him on a risky course of demeaning Putin to make this meeting impossible or preclude it from ending amicably.

The reason the Selection Day is unlikely to happen at all is that it no longer suits the interests of the ruling tandem. It would destroy the legitimacy of both leaders.

An alarming report from the Center for Strategic Research, citing extensive polling data,

shows that the public is disgusted with the behind-the-scenes mode for transferring presidential power where Putin and Medvedev decide everything between themselves. The public, it turns out, resented the way it was excluded from making the choice for the country's future in 2008.

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 or Medvedev's ascent to a second term through the same behind-the-scenes decision-making would be perceived as illegitimate and encounter resistance. The most likely result would be an increase in protest votes for a third candidate. Polls show that Medvedev is largely unelectable on his own, while Putin's victory could be very close, denying him a broad popular mandate for the presidency.

People want to feel that they are choosing the country's future at the polls. The country deserves this debate.

Both members of the tandem need to run in a competitive election. It is the only way to bolster the legitimacy and regain public trust in the system.

Medvedev would most likely lose against Putin, but Medvedev would win enough popular support to become the natural leader for liberal voters favoring more political freedom and better relations with the West. This could hasten the transition to a two-party system in Russia, with Medvedev having a good shot at the presidency in 2018.

There is only one problem with this scenario: Its closest precedents in the former Soviet space are former Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

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