The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Bulldog Fight Under the Rug

By Victor Davidoff

April 24, 2011



Presidential races are like wrestling matches. They begin when each wrestler enters the ring and shows off his muscles. Then the fight starts as everyone watches.

In Russia, the wrestling ring is covered with a thick rug. One by one the wrestlers slip under the rug, and the public can only speculate about the fight when they catch a glimpse of a toe or finger. Actually, the public is only assuming that a fight is going on under the rug. For all they know, the two are having a friendly chat about their pets.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's annual address to the State Duma flummoxed observers, who scrambled to figure out whether Putin was kicking off his presidential campaign or not. By the standards of normal politics, the speech wasn't an election bid. Intentionally reserved in the style of the speeches of Communist Party general secretaries, the report was almost 2 1/2 hours long and was weighed down by so many figures that it put both deputies and ministers in Putin's Cabinet to sleep. (For the record, last year Putin spoke for one hour and 20 minutes.)

Most important, the speech didn't have a message that could become the platform for a presidential candidate. Putin gave a brief rundown of successes and then gave prescriptions for further improvement in the form of additional financing for specific industries and social programs.

Commentators immediately noted the stylistic similarities between Putin's speech and speeches by Soviet leaders. The journalist Andrei Kolesnikov wrote: "Structurally, stylistically and in terms of content, the report by the head of the government was astonishingly reminiscent of Comrade Stalin's report ... at the 17th party congress" in 1934.

In the same way, Soviet leaders interspersed key words in a flow of meaningless cliches, Putin used the key word "stability," which was enough for a potential electoral platform. A commentator on the web site Politcom.ru noted, "The main point of Vladimir Putin's speech was that the country needs decades of stable and calm development without ... ill-conceived liberal experiments and without structural changes in the economy — and certainly not in the system of governance."

This was in fact the message that a large and very influential group of voters wanted to hear from a presidential candidate. This group is made up of the bureaucrats and siloviki who have been the main beneficiaries of Putin's "stability," and they would be against any other political program.

We know this because of the political establishment's reaction last month to the report "Attaining the Future: Strategy 2012," produced by the liberal think tank Institute for Contemporary Development. (Observers of the under-the-rug battle surmise that the report might be President Dmitry Medvedev's political platform for his second term.) A functionary in United Russia called the report a "provocation," and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, which always supports United Russia, accused the Institute for Contemporary Development of "inciting social enmity" and threatened to ask the prosecutor's office to punish it.

When left-wing economist Mikhail Delyagin read the report, he wrote: "Before my eyes I saw cities in ruins, dead trees, and the corpses that those phrases [in the report] are bringing to my country and my people. ... Strategy 2012 is the strategy for Russia's destruction."

What was so upsetting about the report from the presidential institute? Most likely the measures to overcome that "stability," which is fraught, in the authors' view, with another period of stagnation and crisis. The measures include radical reform to strengthen property rights and a return of an independent judiciary. The Institute for Contemporary Development recommends the "de-bureaucratization of the economy" and government, the reinstatement of elections on all levels, a free mass media and even the revolutionary measure of dissolving the Federal Security Service.

Today, we clearly see that there are two opposing political programs that could become platforms for the main presidential candidates. But the question still remains: Which one will announce his candidacy?

The problem is that we still don't know what's going on under Russia's rug.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist whose blog is Chaadaev56.livejournal.com

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/04/24/bulldog-fight-under-the-rug-a6546