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Putin Goes Soviet While Medvedev Offers Hope

By Vladimir Frolov

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Amid the heated rhetoric in advance of the March presidential election, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is still lacking a viable rationale for returning to the Kremlin, while President Dmitry Medvedev's second term is looking increasingly sensible.

It is still inexplicable why Putin would want to nudge Medvedev out of office to return as president. After all, the country is stable and growing relatively quickly. Russia now has the sixth-largest economy in the world based on purchasing power parity, and the second-largest in Europe.

In addition, the nation faces no serious threats. The insurgency in the North Caucasus is being gradually routed. NATO and the European Union seem to be out of the enlargement business. The missile defense threat will not become a real issue for Russia until 2020 at the earliest, and the project may fizz out entirely if Washington and Brussels run out of money before they can deploy the most advanced fourth phase.

More than a month after Putin announced his All-Russia People's Front, it is still not clear what he wants it to fight for or against. The front's rhetoric is stale, its campaign tactics woefully Soviet, its leaders are boring, and its program has not been articulated. Russians don't understand — and rightfully so — why it was created.

Medvedev, on the other hand, seems to be offering a viable blueprint for changing Russia. He rightly argues that the previous model of growth based on the government spending of oil revenues and using up spare Soviet-era capacity is exhausted. Medvedev understands that too much centralization leads to stagnation, and the time has come to reduce the role of government in the economy and politics and to expand the role of private business. The Kremlin's power needs to be decentralized to other political institutions, the regions and local governments.

Medvedev offers an attractive platform for change with a seemingly realistic roadmap. It is a curious mixture of U.S. President Barack Obama's progressive liberalism plus British Prime Minister David Cameron's conservatism — a combination that seeks to spurn private entrepreneurship and civil activism to fill the gaps that government is unable to fill. The foundation of this platform is a basic understanding that the government is unable to regulate or stimulate human initiative.

It now boils down to a contest between a program for change without power and power without a program for change.

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