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Voting With Your Feet Again

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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In a recent report for the Center for Strategic Studies, economists Mikhail Dmitriyev and Sergei Belanovsky concluded that "serious political changes are brewing in Russia," and that "a political crisis in Russia is already in full swing." There are many signs that the authors are right and are not merely aggravating the situation unfairly, as some have rushed to accuse them of doing.

The growing political crisis in Russia resembles more a slow-burning peat bog fire than the volcanic eruptions of popular revolt that recently occurred in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The heat and pressure in Russia are slowly but steadily growing. At any moment, however, the fire beneath the surface could turn into a massive explosion and burn Russia to the ground.

Many surveys, both independent and pro-government, confirms that the political danger of the country's disintegration is real.

According to a nationwide survey conducted in May by the Levada Center, only 26 percent of respondents think the current government can significantly improve the situation in the near

future, while 36 percent are convinced it cannot.

Meanwhile, the electoral ratings for President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have fallen to a record low. If elections were held today, only 24 percent of respondents said they would vote for Putin and just 21 percent would support Medvedev.

Under such conditions, the only way Putin can obtain his desired 65 percent to 70 percent of the vote is through massive electoral fraud. By all indications, he created the All-Russia People's Front in preparation for just such a scenario, putting pressure on factories, businesses and unions to sign up their members. Putin's sinking popularity would also explain why the Central Elections Commission has already announced that international observers will have only limited access during the vote.

Prior to Putin's visit to Penza in April, a local survey conducted by the Institute for Regional Policy produced amazing findings. Confidence in Putin had fallen from 49.8 percent to just 17 percent. And although Medvedev, with a 39 percent rating, is more popular in Penza, 30.2 percent of those questioned said they didn't want either of them.

Russians see the country's ruling elite as being deeply corrupt, as blending their public service with their personal businesses and hiding those profits in foreign bank accounts. This hostility toward the ruling elite and the deep distrust of the state are the most important elements of Russia's growing political crisis.

Confidence in United Russia is also plummeting, with current ratings at only 39 percent. The "party of thieves and crooks" fares even more poorly in large cities. For example, the Levada Center has found that only 23 percent of Muscovites are prepared to vote for United Russia.

There is a growing feeling among Russians that the country is falling apart. Rising ethnic tensions across the country have exacerbated the instability. In a May Levada Center poll among Muscovites, "the large number of people from the Caucasus and southern republics" was ranked as the third-largest problem in the city after the high cost of food and public utilities.

The growing political crisis has provoked increased capital flight, emigration and thoughts of emigration. The Levada Center survey found that 7 percent of all Russians, or 7 million adults, definitely want to emigrate to another country and another 15 percent, or 15 million people, would consider leaving. That totals an incredible 22 million people.

Historically, the mass exodus of people has almost always been the result of repression in their home countries or because of military, political and economic crises. People ran in all directions during the repression and violence of Ivan the Terrible, the Time of Troubles, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Red Terror and Civil War from 1918 to 1922.

You could add the current political and economic stagnation, cynically presented by government propagandists as the "Putin era of stability," to this list as millions of Russians are once again seeking refuge abroad.

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