

Paying the High Price For Putin's Stagnation

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During the past two months, the public's attention has been drawn to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's All-Russia People's Front.

Political analysts are wondering whether this election vehicle will help United Russia, whose ratings have dropped to nearly 50 percent, to maintain a constitutional majority in the State Duma after the December elections. Disappointing results for United Russia in the vote could also change the dynamics within the ruling tandem.

In any case, one thing is clear: Putin wants to retain power after 2012.

Putin's wish to remain in charge of the country is not a surprise. If the prime minister really wanted to leave, he would have done it in May 2008. Looking back, this option would have been optimal both for Putin himself and for the country as a whole.

If he had left the political stage in time, he would have surely been remembered fondly by most Russians for ushering in a decade of growth and prosperity that followed the government default of 1998.

But it looks more likely that Putin will remain national leader through 2018, and perhaps longer. This evokes a direct analogy to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, who ruled for 18 years. Brezhnev, most often remembered for his era of stagnation, blocked reforms needed to adapt the socialist system to changing global realities.

In the 1970s, during an era of high oil prices and stagflation in the West, the Soviet Union's economic condition did not seem critical. But by the second half of the 1980s, the Soviet Union was already in a deep state of systemic crisis.

The transition to authoritarianism in the early 2000s was largely associated with the failures and chaos of the 1990s. The first decade after the Soviet collapse was a difficult period when the country broke away from socialism and instituted painful but much-needed free-market reforms.

But by 2000, after 10 years of transition, Russians were tired of political and economic instability.

At the end of his life, Yegor Gaidar, the architect of radical economic reforms, said: "We must pay the price for everything."

The Soviet Union paid dearly for the stagnation of the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. Time will tell how much today's Russians and their children and grandchildren will have to pay for Putin's era of stagnation.

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