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West Should Treat Russia Like Syria

By Alexei Bayer

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Even though Prime Minister Vladimir Putin asserted at the United Russia party convention last month that he and President Dmitry Medvedev had long ago agreed how they would share power, Putin's decision to run for president in 2012 had all the hallmarks of a spur-of-the-moment, haphazard move. It seems that until the last moment, Putin had hoped to fashion Medvedev into a sufficiently strong politician to assume real power but in the end saw that it was a real-life "Mission Impossible."

Putin does not seem especially enthusiastic to be returning to the Kremlin. Actually, he is brimming with barely concealed disgust. This disgust is in one way or another shared by most of his constituents. Rarely, if ever, has a new presidential term begun under such poor conditions. Nobody in Russia harbors any hope or expectations: It is going to be the same old, tired thing.

It is a measure of Russia's lack of civil society and the subservience of its political class that, even though no one wants Putin back, no one doubts for a second that he will win next year's presidential election.

So is Russia looking at two more six-year presidential terms for Putin until 2024? Or even two more terms after that, when Putin will be 84 and older than any other Soviet or Russian leader in history, including Leonid Brezhnev?

No doubt, members of the country's bureaucratic class, having prospered in the cesspool of corruption created and deepened during Putin's rule, are more than glad to have their license to steal renewed for another six or more years.

But Putin's closest associates are probably much less happy. Their billion-dollar fortunes are entirely due to their friendship with Putin, but they now have their business empires and dynastic interests to consider. They want to preserve their fortunes, enjoy their wealth and leave it to their children.

Putin and the putrid system he represents will likely stand in their way. They fear that stagnation will be followed by a popular explosion. They are even more concerned that Russia will become a pariah state, and that corrupt Russian officials and businessmen will be barred from visiting the West. If they start fearing for their foreign bank accounts and assets, they will become a powerful constituency in favor of getting rid of Putin and instituting meaningful reforms.

Russia and the West are already on the brink of a new Cold War. Despite the famous "reset" in relations at the start of the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama, Russia remains uncooperative. While still a member of the Group of Eight leading industrial democracies, it seems more interested in rubbing shoulders with North Korea, Iran, Venezuela and Syria — and thumbing its nose at the West at the same time — than in a genuine partnership and a constructive stance on the world stage.

The United States and Europe need to take a tougher line with Moscow. They should hit Russia where it hurts most — restrict travel privileges and freeze assets of the wealthy political elite who have proven links to economic and other crimes. The West imposed sanctions on Iran and Syria, criticized the governments of Egypt and Bahrain and even bombed Moammar Gadhafi's forces in support of the Libyan rebels. Shouldn't it do something to encourage a more democratic regime in Russia?

After all, Russia is one of the world's greatest nations, and its people deserve to live in an open, democratic system. But, equally important, the country is also the world's other nuclear superpower.

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