

The Legitimacy Deficit Is Getting Even Larger

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In a prophetic speech in February, then-Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin warned that Russia's modernization could only be carried out by a government that enjoys full political legitimacy from the Russian people and that such popular legitimacy could only be secured through genuinely competitive elections.

In September, the country's ruling tandem embarked on a path toward a regime of limited political legitimacy.

This is because many Russians are uncomfortable with the thought that the future of their country has been decided for them.

The legitimacy deficit will determine the mix of drivers and constraints that will shape the new regime's policies, pushing it to err on the populist side.

President Dmitry Medvedev's political credibility as an incoming prime minister has been diminished. He has been exposed as someone who does not make his own decisions. His ability to produce meaningful change with reduced powers of a "small prime minister" is in doubt.

Both members of the tandem are aware of the legitimacy deficit, but they pursue different strategies to close the gap. Medvedev seeks redemption through televised therapy sessions with carefully screened friendly audiences that have only pleasant things to say about him.

This makes him feel good but destroys the remnants of his leadership. He comes across as weak, indecisive, bitter and desperate for approval.

Medvedev's ill-prepared initiatives, such as his "larger government" proposal, only further reduce the legitimacy of his tenuous claim to power. What popular mandate would this "larger government" have?

As Medvedev's legitimacy disintegrates before our eyes, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's legitimacy grows. While Medvedev is showing signs of hysteria, Putin keeps his cool and projects cynical toughness.

His strategy is to further justify his decision to run for the presidency in 2012 by showing that Medvedev was not fit for the office, particularly in these turbulent times.

Dumping the ossifying and increasingly unpopular United Russia on a reluctant Medvedev as the party heads for a trouncing in the December elections allows Putin to preserve his unquestioned primacy as a national leader.

United Russia's failure to secure the constitutional majority in the State Duma would let Putin focus on new succession plans and arrange for Medvedev's quiet exit from the political scene.

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