

It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Brezhnev

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Russia's ruling tandem seems to be blissfully unaware of the proverbial first rule of holes: When you are in a hole, stop digging!

This is true of the clumsy campaign to both embellish the rotten rule of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, best known for his extended period of stagnation, and to accentuate the "positives" that the tandem's extended reign would have in comparison with Brezhnev's rule.

It is true that both Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev are in much better physical and mental shape and are much more active and dynamic rulers than Brezhnev ever was. It is also true that modern Russia is a completely different country than the Soviet monstrosity of the 1970s.

But there are two features common to both regimes that make them disturbingly close — political imitation and inbred cynicism.

The Soviet Union under Brezhnev was an “imitation empire.” Every feature of its political and economic landscape was profaned by massive manipulation and imitation — from single-candidate elections to wasteful, nonsensical economic behavior. The state was a corrupt fraud bolstered by repression.

Brezhnev’s “imitation empire” was heavily permeated by the destructive cynicism that fed on the widening gap between what the rulers said and promised and what the people actually saw in their lives. That cynicism destroyed the faith in the system and prompted the country’s unraveling as much as the economic collapse did.

The tandem’s Russia is also turning quickly into an “imitation state.” It’s political parties and parliament are make-believe simulators, and many of its civil society groups are government-sponsored fakes. Economic and business decisions are heavily skewed by systemic corruption that makes a mockery of normal market competition. This imitation, branded as “stability,” is guarded by selective repression against potential challengers.

Ever since their cynical decision to trade places, the tandem has engaged in imitation politics. Take, for example, Medvedev’s feel-good sessions with “his supporters,” which looked painfully Brezhnev-esque — except, perhaps, for the iPads. Both have unleashed waves of cynical arguments justifying their decisions that violate the sense of dignity and self-respect of the Russian people. Their public statements rehash banalities that make the cynicism stand out even more.

Much like in the Brezhnev era, this cynicism does more to undermine the Russians’ faith in their country than anything else.

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