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Putin's Mission To Become the Next Stolypin

By Andrei Tsygankov

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Since Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's decision to return to the presidency, he has been frequently compared to former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Putin rejects the Brezhnev analogy. Instead, he likes to cast himself as a follower of Pyotr Stolypin, the powerful prime minister and economic reformer under Nicholas II.

Stolypin launched an ambitious program of economic modernization and hoped to complete his reforms within 20 years, given that the country was politically stable. But Stolypin did not have this stability. Tough on terrorists, he was eventually gunned down by one of them.

The comparison with Stolypin helps Putin to present his return to power as necessary to complete the recovery started in 2000. Putin' message is that his job is not yet finished and should not be judged prematurely.

Indeed, Putin's job is not finished. The quintessential conservative, he sees his main task as

preserving Russia's statehood and preparing the nation to survive in a new, rapidly changing international environment. Relative to former President Boris Yeltsin, Putin is a counter-revolutionary and state-builder who seeks to safeguard the country against future political disturbances. He is not opposed to modernization, but views it as another pillar for strengthening the state. ⊠

Putin needs to reform the system by drawing lessons from Russia's past. Rather than engaging in misleading comparisons with Western nations, Russia must build on examples of its own successful historical modernizations. In the early 20th century, Russia was largely on the right track not only economically, but also politically.

While both Brezhnev and⊠Stolypin were autocratic in their instincts, they used their power very differently. The former squandered the wealth and opportunities for Russia⊠s development, whereas the latter sought to increase them by promoting land reform, local initiatives and a moderate foreign policy.

Is Putin returning to finish his job as a state-builder or guard the interests of narrow elite groups? Within the next six years, he may not have the time to fully meet the country's formidable economic, demographic and social challenges. Yet he may have the time to put the country on a reliable political footing. And this will ultimately determine whether he will be remembered as another Brezhnev or another Stolypin.

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