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Ministers Must Pass Through Duma Control

By Vladimir Frolov

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The tortuous process of forming the new Cabinet and the public stupefaction over some surprise appointments reveal a constitutional flaw that works to deepen the schism between Russian society and the nation's ruling elite.

At a time when voters are demanding greater transparency, accountability and democratic mechanisms to influence the decision-making process, the new government was formed in an opaque, secretive way by just two gentlemen who kept the debate and the reasons for specific appointments all to themselves.

While this practice is constitutional, it is inadequate for Russia's changing political environment. It shows contempt for public opinion while indulging the rulers' penchant to reward loyalty instead of competence. Neither is it very efficient, as appointments made without public scrutiny could be short-lived, creating political hazards for the regime. It reduces the regime's political legitimacy even further.

A government that has been secretly put together and presented to the public as if it were taken out of a gift box cannot realistically be viewed as having a broad popular mandate for change.

Creating a parallel governing structure does not help build trust in the new Cabinet. This is eerily similar to the Soviet system, where the Communist Party apparatus supervised the executive bodies of power.

A way to ward off such risks is a parliamentary confirmation process with real opposition. We had it once before. In the waning days of the Soviet Union, Cabinet appointees were subject to confirmation by the Soviet parliament and its committees. The confirmation process was arduous, and some nomination fights were fierce. But it gave the separation of powers a degree of credibility and the public a voice in putting together the executive team.

In the 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin, feuding with the country's first parliament, truncated the confirmation powers of the legislature. By doing so, he did a disservice to Russian democracy, leaving the public with no means of influencing the Cabinet nomination process.

The time is now to remedy this constitutional flaw and give the State Duma sweeping confirmation powers over all Cabinet appointments, including the security agencies. It's a better way to form a competent and legitimate executive power than fake arrangements like Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Open Government.

It should be on the agenda of Russia's protest movement.

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