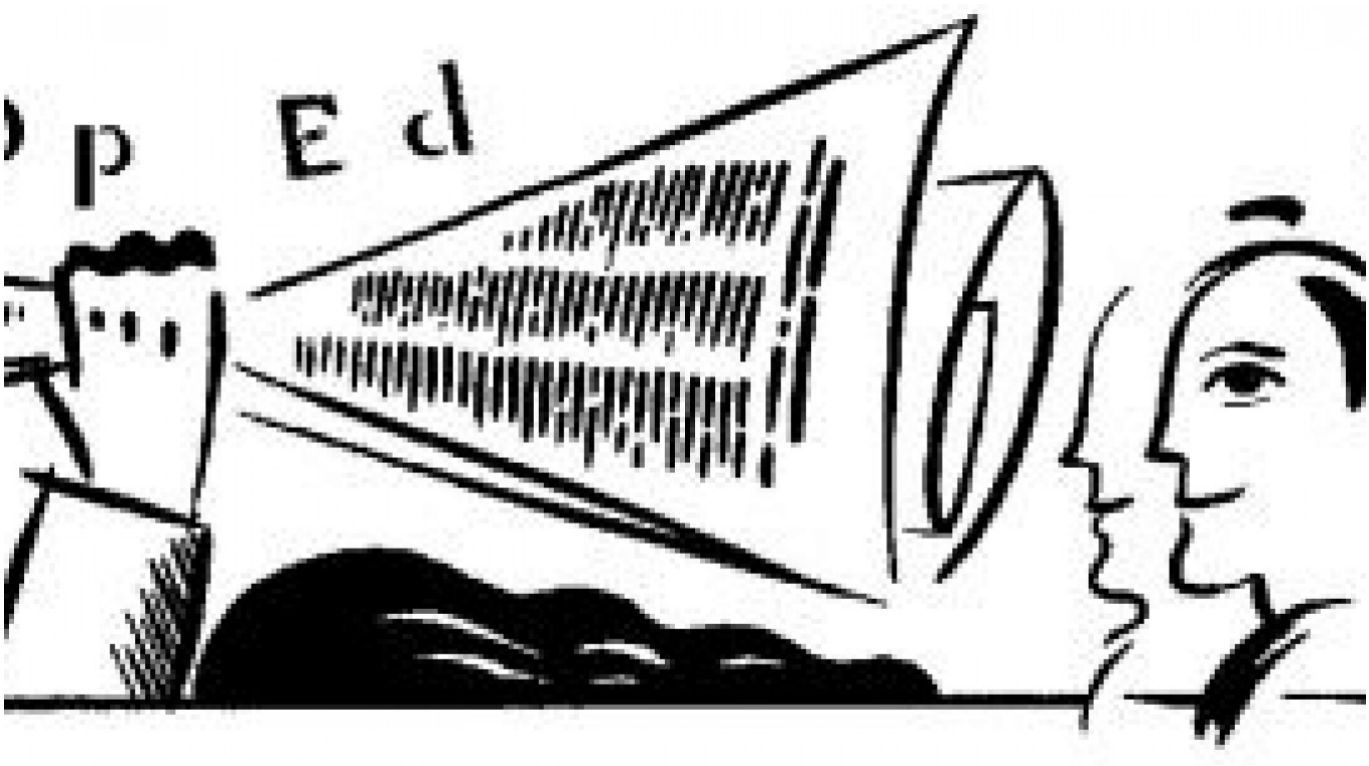
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Presidents Putin and Obama Are Political Twins

By Sergey Aleksashenko

March 20, 2013



It has been fascinating to follow the debate in the U.S. over budget policy. The Republican and Democratic parties advocate fundamentally different approaches. The Republicans argue that fiscal discipline is the basis for sustainable economic growth and that it must be achieved by dramatically scaling back planned budgetary spending and completely eliminating the deficit within 10 years. Speaking for the Democrats, President Barack Obama said the budget deficit will not be the main problem for the next 10 years. He proposes maintaining the current deficit over the next decade and, what's more, to conduct another fiscal stimulus program that will require a hike in taxes.

Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Bob Woodward does an excellent job of examining the roots of this debate in his new book "The Price of Politics." The author provides a detailed account of the events of 2009-11 when the U.S. had reached its debt limit and was on the verge of default.

I read the book immediately after Obama's re-election and ended up reaching a very

surprising conclusion: Putin and Obama are political twins. They are clearly not identical twins, but their behavior and positions on a number of very important issues and principles are remarkably similar for several reasons.

First, both are political pragmatists who are willing to be flexible on their values and principles to maintain support of the majority. The difference is that Obama needed that support to win in fair and honest elections, while Putin needed support to add tinges of legitimacy to an electoral and political system that is far from being legitimate. Elections are a mere formality in a system in which Putin has basically installed himself as a leader for life.

Both Obama and Putin have thoroughly analyzed their electoral base, and both tailor their actions and public addresses to appeal to the greatest possible number of supporters. Both build their majorities by aggressively working with monolithic segments of the electorate whose members all tend to vote the same way. For Putin, these are pensioners, state employees, military personnel and those connected with the country's defense sector. Obama's political base are African Americans, Hispanics, pensioners and low-income individuals dependent on Medicaid and Medicare — people who are more interested in social welfare programs than the intangible, conservative principles and values advocated by Republican candidates.

Second, both Obama and Putin show an amazing flexibility when communicating with their electorates and a remarkable inflexibility when negotiating or trying to reach agreements with their political opponents. Of course, the two are miles apart in the way they treat the opposition. Putin cannot stomach anyone questioning him or his rule. By contrast, Obama accepts political opposition from the Republicans as a natural phenomenon, like the rising and setting of the sun.

But two years after Obama was first elected in 2008, he lost the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives and was forced not only to engage in a political dialogue with both houses of Congress, but also to give Vice President Joe Biden the leading role in the process. Biden not only has great experience with political compromise but is recognized by U.S. policymakers as one of the most skilled masters of political dialogue. By contrast, nothing threatens Putin's political position because that stability is ensured by the chairman of the Central Elections Commission, the members of the Supreme Court and Constitutional Court, the prosecutor general and the head of the Investigative Committee, all of whom Putin can dismiss with a wave of his hand and who are always ready to bend their principles to comply with the president's wishes. Unconditional loyalty to Putin is an absolute prerequisite for these high-level positions.

Third, it seems that both Putin and Obama do not understand — or ignore — the interests of the business community. According to Woodward, the Democrats' congressional defeat in 2010 stemmed from the Obama administration's flat refusal to heed the requests and recommendations of leading businesses and investors regarding his key economic policies. In place of a meaningful dialogue with business interests, administration officials held numerous short but meaningless meetings and phone calls, prompting a significant outflow of cash toward Republican election campaigns. Having lost his majority in the House of Representatives, Obama is actively consulting with business interests on immigration

reform. Perhaps Obama has learned from his mistakes and changed course, but the U.S. business community remains cool to him for now.

Of course, it would be impossible to imagine Russia's largest businesses openly supporting the opposition and denying financial support of the ruling party because they have cool relations with Putin. But it is also true that Putin turns a deaf ear to the constant complaints of Russian business about the high cost of insurance, racketeering by the siloviki, endemic corruption and pointless bureaucratic pressures on business through excessive and needless regulation and inspections. Like Obama, Putin is willing to travel to various cities and look impressive by opening factories and assembly lines as if he himself had built them, but the only business interests he is ready to defend are those of his close friends and associates, however corrupt they might be.

If the two are so similar in their political behaviors, why are they so dissimilar in their politics? The answer is simple: The checks and balances built firmly into the U.S. political system guarantee freedom of speech and rule of law. Putin all but destroyed a similar system of checks and balances that are enshrined in the Russian Constitution but have been rendered meaningless amid his vertical-power structure. The country's judicial system has been unwilling and unable to resist Putin's dismantling of the Constitution and other state institutions that were intended to provide stability and a unbiased legal framework to protect people's interests and property.

Strong political and economic institutions such as independent courts and parliament are the foundation to providing stability in government and society as a whole. Sooner or later, Russia will have to build these institutions. Perhaps Putin will use his remaining years in power to create these institutions. If so, he will leave a positive historical legacy. If not, let's hope his successor will find the courage to do it.

Sergei Aleksashenko, former deputy finance minister and first deputy chairman of the Central Bank, is the director of macroeconomic research at the Higher School of Economics. This comment appeared in Vedomosti.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/03/20/presidents-putin-and-obama-are-political-twins-a22533