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My Muted Optimism For Change in Russia

By Konstantin Sonin

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Although there was more bad news than good for Russia in 2013, the year unexpectedly ended on a positive note. For the first time in many years, the number of political prisoners dropped rather than rose. Optimists, including me, believe that this marks the end not only of a year, but of an entire decade.

But my current optimism is not the same as it was in 1985, 1991 or other years. Back then, I based my optimism on the belief that a single word, gesture, political appointment or law had the potential to significantly alter Russia for the better. Of course, that is never the case in politics, economics or anything else for that matter.

Imagine that the least turbulent of velvet revolutions takes place in Russia, and that the leader of your dreams comes to power — whether it is anti-corruption whistle-blower Alexei Navalny, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin or even former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky. For the purposes of this experiment, it doesn't

matter who you choose. All that matters is that this new leader will carry out your vision for the reconstruction of the country's political system, economic development strategy and education and scientific research policies.

What would that leader do on his first day in office? Aside from having to spend the first month appointing trusted friends and associates to head Russia's oil and gas companies, his first step would probably be to hunt for that scant handful of individuals who are honest and competent. He might appoint them to head the Prosecutor General's Office, Federal Security Service, the judicial system and key technical posts, but would probably have to leave most other officials in place for lack of better candidates.

Would he dissolve the State Duma next? As most people reading this column believe, the current parliament is practically worthless as a democratic legislative body. But it does an exemplary job of rubber-stamping decisions from higher up. Therefore, the new leader might be tempted to preserve the Duma just long enough to pass his reforms, knowing that he would only get bogged down in prolonged debate with a real parliament.

The conclusion is that qualified and trustworthy professionals are in short supply in Russia, and it would be easier to carry out reforms with the Duma's current, purely nominal lawmakers.

Is this cause for optimism?

Sure — at least when you realize that no matter who becomes president or walks free from prison, Russia is not likely to change anytime soon.

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