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Analysts Predict a Russian Descent Into Madness

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Despite the panelists' conclusions on the Kremlin's hurdle-laden road ahead, it does not appear that Russia's economic downturn will necessarily force Putin's hand with regard to reforms.

President Vladimir Putin cannot afford at this point to reform the political system he has built up, as doing so would undermine his grip on power, a panel of political analysts said at the Gaidar Forum on Friday.

They went on to warn that without fundamental change, Russia risks an eventual descent into "revolutionary chaos." The panel, which consisted of several analysts known for their vocal criticism of Russian government policy, spoke before a packed audience.

Such heated political rhetoric may seem out of place at a high-level economic policy conference co-organized by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) and the Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy. But the final day of this year's forum was marked by departures from mainstream economics,

with forays into everything from politics to education.

The political panel was moderated by Leonid Gozman, who has stood at the helm of some of Russia's most prominent liberal parties over the course of the past decade.

At one point Gozman asked the panel, which included seven Russian analysts and one American, to say something nice about the ruling elite. "We have to say something good about the government, or we won't be allowed to hold this session again next year," he said facetiously.

Rapid Deterioration

Jokes aside, the speakers had a tough time finding any silver linings in what they saw as the many challenges Russia is presently facing due to the decisions Putin has made during his 15 years as Russia's central political figure.

Most of the analysts agreed that Russia's political system will likely remain inert over the course of 2015, with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev expected to remain in his post. At the same time, the majority agreed that the system is fragile, and susceptible to rapid deterioration.

"We have entered a stage of fantastic instability," said Georgy Satarov, former aide to Russia's first President, Boris Yeltsin, and now an expert on political corruption in Russia.

According to Satarov, the current economic crisis may leave the government with only two options: launch dramatic political reforms or tighten the screws.

"The fact that everyday life in Russia is still stable prevents common people from understanding how fragile the political situation is," he said.

The second option — cracking down — could provoke widespread dissent, which could in turn propel Russia into "revolutionary chaos," Saratov said. "This is an absolutely realistic scenario," he urged.

Experts were divided on the question of where such revolutionary chaos could originate. Political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin, head of the Moscow-based Mercator political research group, suggested that momentum would likely start in Moscow, as the capital continues to grow increasingly gentrified and politically conscious in contrast to other Russian regions.

Nikolai Petrov, a political analyst with the Higher School of Economics, argued that such fervor could emerge in Chechnya, as its leader Ramzan Kadyrov grows increasingly independent and power-hungry.

"Kadyrov has 20,000 people that swore allegiance to him and Putin. In case there is a difficulty in Moscow, they would defend them," Petrov said. "Russia is hostage to the regime; the regime is hostage to Putin; while Putin is hostage to his decisions, which have left him without an exit strategy."

Perestroika Impossible

Tatiana Vorozheikina, a political scientist specializing in Latin American affairs, argued that fundamental political change remains an unlikely scenario for the foreseeable future in Russia, as such change would threaten the standing of the present-day political elite.

At the same time, she opined, the current structure is rooted in Putin. "I don't believe the regime can be preserved without Putin," said Vorozheikina. "The process of a negative selection among the elites did not leave anybody prominent and authoritative in the establishment, who would be able to assume power during the transition period."

Regardless of the likelihood of impending change, Vorozheikina argued that Russia's political power players are not primarily to blame for bringing about the country's current economic crisis.

Putin's Rating

Despite the panelists' conclusions on the Kremlin's hurdle-laden road ahead, it does not appear that Russia's economic downturn will necessarily force Putin's hand with regard to reforms. Recent statistics reveal that his approval ratings are no longer tied to the country's overall prosperity.

Poll results published last week by the independent Levada Center revealed that 55 percent of Russians would like to see Putin remain Russia's president after the next election in 2018. Tellingly, 54 percent of respondents said they see no alternative to Putin. The poll was conducted among 1,600 respondents with the margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

According to Alexei Levinson, senior researcher at the Levada Center, approval of Putin and approval of the Russian leadership overall are two very different issues.

"Over the past 15 months, Putin has come to be seen as a symbolic and sacred figure who is not responsible for the economic situation in the country, but is responsible for the country's greatness," Levinson told the Gaidar Forum audience.

"The more Russians feel that they are threatened by the outside world, the more they will consolidate around Putin," he said.

Predictions and Advice

As the session drew to a close, Gozman asked the participants to offer words of advice to Putin, and to hypothesize about the coming year.

Most experts recommended that Putin introduce fair competition into the political system, in particular by allowing possible "successors" to emerge.

"Russia must find a mechanism that would introduce rotation into government ... No regime can survive without rotation at the very top," said Timothy Colton, professor of government and Russian studies at Harvard and chairman of the university's department of government.

As for the coming year, most experts were grim, predicting that the crisis in Ukraine will

likely escalate over the course of 2015, and that protest activity in Russia will likely remain small-scale and localized, even if it intensifies.

Gozman said that most of the last year's predictions failed to materialize, and that the prize — a bottle of booze — would therefore not be awarded to any of the panelists. However, next year's winner will get two bottles to distract from the dismal realities he or she correctly predicted this year — that is, if the Presidential Academy allows the same experts to hold such a panel again, he added.

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