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Fear Keeps the Kremlin in Check

By Konstantin Sonin

When trying to predict a politician's behavior, you can either take him at his word, or you can disregard his public statements entirely and look at his actions. President Vladimir Putin's actions over the past four years follow a definite logic: With each passing day, fewer and fewer governmental institutions have been able to obstruct his plans of staying in power after his authority granted by the Constitution expires. Had Putin not planned from the very beginning to remain in power after his two terms expired, he would not have cancelled the elections of governors or turned the State Duma into a meaningless, puppet institution or made the mass media dependent upon the presidential administration. By agreeing to head United Russia's federal ticket, the president made his intentions clear: He wants to remain in authority as long as his health and circumstances allow.

This is not surprising. All politicians would like to do accomplish what Putin is trying to do, but they don't always get the chance. Developed democracies have checks and balances against attempts to usurp power; the parliament, opposition parties, voters, mass media and judicial system play a crucial role in controlling the runaway ambitions of leaders. In some autocracies, such as those of Mexico, Brazil and post-Maoist China, the political elite has been strong enough to ensure that there is a regular change in leadership, while in others, such as the Philippines and the former Soviet Union, this system was not in place. A recent study by Timothy Besley and Masayuki Kudamatsu of the London School of Economics shows that autocracies that have institutionalized leadership change as part of their political system achieve higher rates of economic development than those that do not.

Is there any hope that Russia's political elite is willing to tell Putin: "Thanks for a great eight years. Now you can enjoy a great pension, honor and respect"? There are cases in which the collective mindset of the political elite was able to stop negative events from getting out of hand. The anti-Georgian hysteria last fall was a good example of this. Following a sharp worsening of relations with neighboring Tbilisi, Moscow decided to strike at the Georgian diaspora in Moscow. At some point, the anti-Georgian campaign even touched the controversial Tbilisi-born sculptor Zurab Tsereteli. You can imagine how popular this was among many Muscovites. The first couple of days demonstrated how easily a racial spark can become ignited, and it also showed how difficult it is to put out the fire once it spreads. In the end, however, the political elite's own rational fear that the anti-Georgian campaign could get out of hand brought it to a halt.

There is a possibility that the political elite -- in the broader sense and not merely the president's inner circle that he shuffles around -- might become frightened of the way things are going prior to the next president taking office in 2008. Putin must work to ensure that in the December Duma elections United Russia receives at least 75 percent of the vote nationally and not less than 50 percent in Moscow. Anything less than this would mean a vote of no confidence for Putin's political course. And it would appear that there is no realistic way to achieve such numbers without the president interfering even more substantially in the elections than he has done already. For example, United Russia is now trying to force doctors and teachers to join the party, and this interference might reach that point where the political elite becomes scared of the consequences.

Of course, it will be difficult to explain to someone who has just won an election that he must leave office. Russia's elite tends to behave irresponsibly when they can get away with it. But there is one exception to this rule: When Russia's elite is motivated by fear rather than political belief, it tends to behave more responsibly, which ultimately means that the people's interests are better served.

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