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2 Candidates, One Message

By Konstantin Sonin

The speech given by First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June has become something of a sensation. Although Ivanov -- one of the two leading candidates to succeed President Vladimir Putin in 2008 -- said nothing fundamentally new in his address, many are taking a close look at his words regarding the government's future liberal economic policies. Journalists at Moscow's New Times magazine even went to the trouble of trying to identify the liberal economists who helped Ivanov prepare his talk.

As often happens, it has proven impossible to pinpoint the exact source of Ivanov's comment that the state will play a smaller role in the country's future economic course. It can be safely stated, however, that the speech was prepared by the Economic Development and Trade Ministry, which is headed by German Gref, and by the various think tanks attached to the ministry. Further inquiries revealed that the same economists prepared the talk given at the economic forum by First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedov, Ivanov's primary presidential rival.

This might not seem so bad at first glance. Both are first deputy prime ministers in the same administration, and it is entirely natural that their speeches would be prepared by the same people. But while this might be common practice among fellow Cabinet ministers, it is very strange when you consider the fact that they are rivals for the presidency. A presidential candidate in the United States or France would have terrible nightmares if he learned that his campaign team was simultaneously preparing the economic platform for his opponent. Even during the primaries, in which candidates battle it out for their party's nomination, competing teams of economists rarely have any formal contact.

What do we stand to lose if the leading presidential candidates draw their core ideas from the same source? We lose a great deal because outstanding ideas capable of uniting and attracting voters emerge only when politicians are engaged in a battle to the death -- political death, that is -- and not when they function as interchangeable players in a closed system. Only then does the political debate become a true intellectual battle. Only then can voters force the economists who prepared the speech and the politicians who gave the speech to perform their jobs with maximum effort. Without that competitive element, it is not surprising that speechwriters make only a half-hearted effort by composing similar texts for opposing candidates.

The speeches by Ivanov and Medvedov in St. Petersburg pursued essentially the same goal -- how to give a liberal spin on the administration's dirigiste economic course. It would have been much better for all of us had one candidate made the argument that governments are playing an increasing role in their countries' economies worldwide, and if the other candidate had argued the opposite -- that there should be a smaller role for government in a nation's economy. This type of debate would have gone a long way to expose the real strengths and weaknesses of both candidates' proposed programs.

In the end, politicians avoid presenting their political programs for public examination, and this goes against voters' wishes. A normal democratic election process gives the public a chance to receive as much information as possible from the presidential candidates. It is difficult to force politicians to be competitive, but it is nonetheless useful to know our rights and how much we lose by not exercising those rights.

Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School/CEFIR.