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Only the Kremlin Can Help Kasyanov

By Konstantin Sonin

In my column a month ago, I argued that the best way to restore command and control within the government would be to return former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov from the political wilderness -- by reappointing him prime minister, for example. President Vladimir Putin either turned a deaf ear to my advice or he had other ideas. Kasyanov was therefore left to return to politics on his own. His reappearance last Thursday demonstrated that the political process is alive and kicking in Russia.

Breaking the back of the opposition and standardizing television news coverage only appears to eradicate politics. Politics don't disappear; they change. The president of a democratic country doesn't fear the head of his security detail or the minister of defense. His political enemies are well known. They sit in parliament, win regional elections and attack the president on television every day. The president of a country with managed democracy has a much harder time. No matter where he looks, everyone appears to be loyal, but there's no way to know what they're really thinking. Blood-thirsty dictators have the most difficult time of all, of course. During the early days of World War II, Kliment Voroshilov and Vyacheslav Molotov came to Stalin for instructions but found the "father of nations" huddled under his desk. Stalin seriously feared that he would be arrested.

Kasyanov's return to the political stage made clear that he is pinning his political hopes on the mid- and low-level bureaucrats who account for most of the Russian political class. These are people who would never admit that they're not on board with the president, of course. One day they'll just happen to be on board with a different president.

The events of recent months have alarmed not only the liberal right. Caught up in its own wars over principle and property, the Kremlin leadership has largely lost the trust of the bureaucrats in the trenches who implement its decisions. Well-known Izvestia columnist Maxim Sokolov has aptly called this group the "nomenklatura opposition." This loss of faith has resulted not from the scheming of agents of influence or pressure from the outside, but from the Kremlin's total inability to understand that its own mistaken policy choices have led to the rapid collapse of state power during Putin's second term in office.

This would all be well and good if the response to Kasyanov's return to the political stage were even a partial shift of direction in the country's development. But no such change is going to occur. Instead, we can expect an all-out offensive against Kasyanov in the media. Paradoxically, the former prime minister's chances of victory are closely linked to just such an assault.

The pollsters rightly point out that Kasyanov is hardly a popular figure. He's certainly no Viktor Yushchenko. And no amount of money from the United States, George Soros or a certain famous emigre in London can change that. (To be clear, even if Boris Berezovsky did contribute to the Yushchenko campaign, I don't believe his money had much impact on the outcome of the election.) But if the Kremlin really tries, it might just be able to make Kasyanov into a viable opposition candidate by arresting his backers, driving him into the arms of all sorts of "political allies" and filling the airwaves with personal attacks. But then the Kremlin's political operatives don't need me to tell them how it's done.

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