

Tuesday, February 1, 2005. Issue 3096. Page 10.

Come Back, Kasyanov

By Konstantin Sonin

Not quite a year has passed since the appointment of Mikhail Fradkov as prime minister on March 1, 2004, but two conclusions can already be drawn. First, Fradkov has failed in his chief task, running the government on a daily basis, and in his secondary task of taking the heat for President Vladimir Putin as the Kremlin implements unpopular new policies. Second, the idea -- which seemed to be appealing at first glance -- of putting the presidential administration in charge not just of politics but of economic policy proved to be deeply flawed. As a result, both strategic and day-to-day economic decisions have been caught up in the administration's various internal and external political battles.

The government's signal failures, such as its welfare and administrative reforms, did not happen by some evil design, however. The very structure of the presidential administration, particularly its lack of transparency and press access, is unsuitable for strategic planning, just like the sectional system of the Communist Party Central Committee, the least effective part of the Soviet system of governance. The ease with which carelessly drafted bills sailed through the State Duma only served to compound the Kremlin's isolation.

Rather than getting to work on the government's plans for economic reform, Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin and Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref have become their own PR managers. You'd think they were running an endless election campaign against unknown but very powerful opponents. Meanwhile, Voter Number One didn't seem terribly interested in what was happening. Fradkov's latest idea -- that the security services should help business do business -- wasn't even a last cry for help; it was more like his first words on the threshold of purgatory.

Who could take over as prime minister and restore command and control within the government itself, as well as increasing the government's political heft in relation to the presidential administration?

A year ago, the pundits were simply trying to guess who the new prime minister would be. This time around, it makes sense to discuss the possible candidates in advance. Who knows? After the grim experience of the past year, Putin might be open to recommendations.

The new premier's second urgent task, restoring the government's control of economic policy, rules out a number of candidates who could handle the political heavy lifting involved in the first. On the other hand, excellent managers such as Igor Shuvalov, Putin's senior economic aide, Arkady Dvorkovich, the head of the presidential administration's expert department, and Sergei Kiriyenko, presidential envoy in the Volga Federal District and a former prime minister, don't yet possess the necessary political weight to handle the political aspects of the job.

Appointing Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov or State Duma Speaker Boris Gрызлов wouldn't solve the "separation of powers" issue, though for different reasons. Gref and Kudrin have proven their ability to survive in difficult conditions, but no more than that. Former Audit Chamber chief and Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin would be a good choice. He has a wealth of experience and possesses caution and moderate ambitions, very important qualities in the current political climate.

All the same, I propose bringing back Fradkov's predecessor, Mikhail Kasyanov. Like Stepashin, he's not likely to devour anyone. It was on his watch that Russia's economy grew by leaps and bounds. And appointing Kasyanov would constitute both an attempt to return to the good old days of 2002 and a tacit apology for an unsuccessful 2004.

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