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## Officials Play With, Not By, the Rules

By Konstantin Sonin

Most parents probably hope that their children will be winners -- in spelling bees and beauty contests, chess tournaments and boxing contests, mayoral and presidential elections. But it's very unlikely that there are parents who hope that their children will secure victory by hitting below the belt.

Victory, in sport as in life, is valued not just for the final result, but particularly when it is achieved by following the rules of the game.

One year ago, supporters of democracy criticized President Vladimir Putin for running a re-election campaign that destroyed the very institution of presidential elections. It is now clear, however, that what seemed the abstract protests of high-brow liberal intellectuals have produced very real consequences. Had candidate Putin announced in advance his plans for a second term, such as replacing social benefits with cash payments, and had he hit the campaign trail for two or three months to stump for his policy initiatives from dawn to dusk, he would have had a much harder time winning over senior citizens, and he might have lost their support altogether. But at least he would have been forced to contend with the public's reaction. Who knows, that reaction might have even compelled him to alter his plans somewhat.

Had Putin taken part in a televised debate -- even against an opponent as unpopular as Communist Nikolai Kharitonov -- pensioners might have taken to the streets long before they went to the polls. The use of political campaigns to advance the cause of reform is common practice in developing countries such as Colombia, Peru and Brazil. Putin's victory in March 2004 was as meaningless as it was convincing. This is the price to be paid for playing around with the rules of the game.

You could object that Putin's oligarchic rivals -- the terrible great oligarchs of the 1990s -- have only themselves to blame for playing around with the rules rather than playing by the rules. But there's an important difference between an oligarch and the president: An oligarch can use whatever means necessary to achieve his aims, but the president should play by the rules. An oligarch can lose a rabid television anchor to achieve his personal goals, but the president of Russia should not resort to such tactics -- not from some abstract notion of purity and honor, but because after the election he must govern his detractors as well as his supporters. No matter what target the Kremlin goes after -- the ambitious Khodorkovsky, the frank Illarionov, the clever Yushchenko, a corrupt governor or pensioners who don't know what's best for them -- its salvos inevitably land on the country as a whole. And if the regime is now being advised to strike a blow against revolution, you can be sure that it will miss the revolution and hit Russia.

If only the authorities had emerged victorious in a political battle -- winning over legislators and convincing analysts and journalists -- to force Yukos to pay its back taxes. If only some other presidential adviser -- to whom Putin actually listens -- would publicly engage his economic adviser. If only the regime would address pensioners as human beings.

The Kremlin has chosen to do just the opposite. Imagine that you are sitting on a park bench playing chess with someone you don't know. At a turning point in the match you bash your opponent over the head with the chessboard. Does this constitute victory? Technically, yes. Is such a victory something to be proud of? Not really.

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