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The Voters Will Not Forget or Forgive

By Konstantin Sonin

It took the State Duma all of half an hour last Thursday to give final approval to a bill replacing benefits for vulnerable social groups with cash payments. Most deputies didn't even read the bill or a huge slate of corrections, nor did they take part in discussion of the bill on the Duma floor. It's been a long time since anyone really expected the Duma to represent the will of the voters. But this time around they didn't even try. They might at least have acted as though the decision to vote for this unpopular legislation had cost them a sleepless night or two.

Reform doesn't happen on paper, even when it comes to the Constitution. Reform involves changing the way people think. The bill replacing benefits with cash payments -- a necessary measure, though the government has done little to explain why -- will soon be signed into law. After a while those canceled benefits will be quietly restored, because if most Russians think they're better off with benefits, every politician from the president on down will have an incentive to cash in on their discontent.

In fact, benefits are already making a comeback. Benefits for the country's most powerful pressure group, the state bureaucracy, are being significantly expanded. Another group with serious political heft, Muscovites, look certain to retain many of their benefits. There's no question that implementing necessary but unpopular reforms is more difficult when you play by the rules of democracy; that is, making the case for reforms and winning popular support before implementing them. But the results are far better and they last longer.

Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref would have a hard time pushing for benefits reform. It's unlikely that he would have traded access to the Grand Palace at the Peterhof museum, where his wedding was held in April, for a cash payment.

Health and Social Development Minister Mikhail Zurabov blamed negative reaction to the bill on the government's "totally ineffective system of disseminating information to the public." In the Soviet era, Zurabov explained, the plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee would meet, and a decree would be issued the next day. "This decree was carried by all media outlets. Within 24 hours, Central Committee members had to confirm that plenary sessions had been held by party committees at the regional and district levels and by central party committees in the various republics. Within two days, similar meetings took place at the lower levels. The media informed the public of this process. As a result, even the laziest machine operator would learn during his political education hour that something had been decided."

United Russia deputies were given instructions on how to explain the bill to the voters, though you'd think the party's deputies, who represent the interests of the so-called Putin majority, would know how to do this on their own. But assuming that voters don't know why deputies vote the way they do would be the height of arrogance and naivete. The voters know.

I still have a few unanswered questions. Boris Gryzlov, head of United Russia and speaker of the Duma, is a likely candidate for the presidency in 2008. Does he think the voters will forget which legislators cast their votes without even reading the bills they were voting on? They might have forgotten if the benefits bill were a one-off, but how many unpopular bills remain to be passed? Then again, if another probable candidate, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, intends to make the cancellation of draft deferments a major campaign issue, Gryzlov might just stand a chance after all.

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