

Kudrin's Bold Appeal For Honest Elections

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By Konstantin Sonin

Speaking at the Krasnoyarsk economic forum, Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin made an instant hit with political commentators when he said Russia “needs fair and honest elections.” Some cast Kudrin as a traitor to the current leadership for having suggested that fair elections do not exist in Russia. Others saw in his comments echoes of Latin American finance ministers of the last half of the 20th century who sometimes criticized prevailing conditions in a bid to become president themselves.

But if there are any obvious differences between those bygone Latin American regimes and Russia, it is that in Russia, the finance minister gets relatively little respect. And yet, for many years Kudrin has been the main defender of everything good in Russia’s macroeconomic policy, including the stabilization fund, opposing costly pork-barrel projects and advocating for more transparency in the country’s financial system.

Unfortunately, these accomplishments — however important they have been to stabilizing the economy — have not made him especially popular.

Thus, it is unlikely that Kudrin is about to campaign for a top political post anytime soon. He used the word “honest” because it would be difficult to express the same idea without it. For the last six months, I have stopped reading comments from political scientists and commentators who use the word “elections” without putting it in quotation marks or without qualifying statements as to how elections are manipulated in Russia.

In real, honest elections, incumbents are voted out of office 30 percent to 40 percent of the time. What happens in Russia has long ago ceased to have any semblance to true elections.

The fact that Russia lacks a viable mechanism for voting in new municipal, regional and national leaders does not make the political system more stable. On the contrary. Although competitive elections do not guarantee stability, their absence almost definitely guarantees prolonged periods of stagnation that result from the same people holding office for a decade or longer. This, in turn, makes revolutions one of the only viable options left to remove an entrenched and ineffective leader.

I don’t think Kudrin spoke about “honest elections” as a challenge to those in power. More likely he, like most Russians, simply believes that this country needs honest elections — without quotation marks.

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