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Kudrin for President

By Konstantin Sonin

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When political activists Masha Gaidar and Ilya Yashin draped a banner that read, "Return the elections to the people, you scum!" over the side of the Great Stone Bridge facing the Kremlin, they were expressing in a very clear manner a thought that fills volumes of texts written by political scientists today: Russia is no longer a democracy. Although, formally, elections continue to be conducted, neither the rules --- thanks to United Russia -- nor the process -- thanks to President Vladimir Putin's administration -- meet the broadly accepted criteria for democratic elections. The system may be democratic in form but is hardly so in content.

The idea that elections are something that the political leadership grants the people is a fairy tale: In fact, those in power only agree to hold elections when they have exhausted all other options. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev continuously held freer and freer elections with the sole goal of guaranteeing his own political survival through his struggles with the more conservative wing of the Politburo. And President Boris Yeltsin used the mandates that he had won in elections as weapons -- first against Gorbachev, and later against the Communists and other opponents.

So, if the people want genuine elections, the only way is to compel those in power to hold them. Given this, I have a suggestion to would help improve the democratic bona fides of the 2008 presidential vote. Now, before anyone gets too excited, let's remember that rendering the election fully democratic in one fell swoop is probably too tall an order. But it still might be possible to develop some of the requisite elements, such as a public discussion of the way the different candidates propose to develop the country they hope to lead. In developed democracies, political campaigns and party platforms play a major role in determining the course the country will ultimately take.

The idea here is that the candidates looking for Putin's blessing ahead of the 2008 vote would discuss their programs as if they were actually running a campaign.

We have already been seeing this to some extent in the cases of the current favorites: First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov. Before the plan put forward last week by Medvedev, the discussion had been free of verbose party manifestos, focusing instead on analysts' projections for the policies each of the figures might follow as president. The suggestion was that Sergei Ivanov, for example, would follow a policy of even greater state intervention in the economy and open confrontations with governments in other countries. There was a fair consensus on this among analysts, despite the fact that Ivanov had yet to make any public comments on these subjects.

And there's no reason to confine our discussion to these two candidates. There could be other interesting options. If any of these people can get their message out and convince a big enough portion of the elite that Putin should endorse someone other than Medvedev or Ivanov, the president would be obliged to do so. In other words, it isn't true that any person's only hope for success rests on a word from Putin: A candidate who can suggest a popular program also stands a chance.

One such candidate could be Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin. No other government member has such obvious and solid strengths. His ability to keep spending under control, and the development and defense of the stabilization fund at a time when Russia is reaping unparalleled revenues from oil and gas sales, is a feat few finance ministers in the world could have pulled

off. Last year's substantial capital inflow, though driven by excess global liquidity, is a good indicator of Russia's macroeconomic stability.

So, let the discussion begin.

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