

THE MOSCOW TIMES

An Outsider's Way In

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Tuesday, May 22, 2007. Issue 3661. Page 10

In his seventh and final state of the nation address in April, President Vladimir Putin called on those present to sum up the results of his presidency. For many Russians, it probably feels like the years under Putin have flown by faster than the eventful year of 1993. Such an examination of Putin's tenure serves not just as a nostalgic look at the past: Every one of his policy achievements will play a role in contributing to the legitimacy of his successor, just as each failure will remain a vulnerable point for the next president and provide political ammunition to prospective opponents.

And failures there have been. Three clear missteps have been the decision to do away with gubernatorial elections, the suppression of press freedoms and the move to electing the State Duma entirely based on a proportional representation system. Each of these measures was introduced in order to remedy specific situations that troubled the Kremlin -- the development of political fiefdoms at the regional level, bias on the part of television stations and weak political parties. Medications often, however, have side effects more harmful than the illnesses they are designed to treat, so unpopular policies provide a window of opportunity for any outsider who might aspire to the presidency next year.

So what's wrong with appointing governors? After all, a governor appointed by Moscow is more likely to follow instructions from Moscow. The problem is he or she is less likely to be familiar with the region itself. With oil prices so high and petrodollars flooding into the federal budget, there is no discussion of the pros and cons of this policy. At the slightest sign of trouble, the opportunity arises for an outside candidate to appeal to the interests of an offended region, a strategy that served President Boris Yeltsin well in the early 1990s.

The option of returning to the direct election of Duma deputies could also turn out to be a trump card in a battle for the top spot. As Russia and Russians grow wealthier with each passing year, there is less need for an outlet for voters looking to let off steam. But should growth stall, some steps might have to be taken in this direction. I wouldn't be surprised if sometime in the fall, in the run-up to the presidential vote, Putin's chosen successor -- or even Putin himself if he decides to stay on for a third term -- might promise to reinstate direct local votes for candidates, just to make sure no other challenger latches on to the policy.

Freedom of the press is a more delicate question. The average Russian is evidently satisfied with the current state of the media, even though it differs little from that in any moderate South American dictatorship. This state of affairs opens up opportunities for presidential hopefuls because not just mediocre regimes, but even the most able can easily run aground without a healthy flow of information and feedback. As high-ranking officials continue to declare that the press enjoys the same level of freedom in Russia as in Europe, you have to wonder whether they themselves are starting to believe it. Do they realize that if any of their colleagues are on the take, Russian television would never report on it? When Kremlin ideologues claim that the United States orchestrated Ukraine's Orange Revolution, have they forgotten that they invented that theory themselves? If they do understand, things aren't as bad as they could be: Cynicism like this is not unusual in government. If they have forgotten, what are they going to start believing in next -- Martians.

So an outsider would have some simple and inexpensive pledges to offer the electorate in a run for the presidency: A return to gubernatorial elections, greater press freedoms and a return to winning some seats in the Duma by way of direct voting. Borjomi might also help.

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