

'Long Shot' Bid to Bring Political Zombies to Life

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The best that could be said about President Dmitry Medvedev's latest call for more competition in Russian politics to combat "stagnation" is that he and his tandem partner, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, are trying to magically modernize the ship of the state without actually sinking the boat.

We pray that they know what they're doing. For the alternative could be that this venture masks with flowery rhetoric an intellectual void where there should be a strategy to deal with the nation's problems.

What this is not, however, is a split in the tandem. Putin and Medvedev are jointly experimenting with gradually opening up the political system to create a new momentum for modernizing the country when the existing political arrangements start sapping modernizing impulses.

It is a very long shot. Not one of their predecessors has succeeded in mixing technological and institutional modernization with experiments in popular democracy. All successful Russian modernizers were brutal despots. All modernizers who shunned despotism were failures.

The key operating words here are “gradually and slowly,” as Vladislav Surkov, Medvedev’s first deputy chief of staff, put it to a bizarre audience of American student leaders. The intention is to avoid repeating the mistakes of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who quickly lost control of the country after the introduction of genuinely competitive politics.

Putin’s plan seems to be to let Medvedev reach out to the liberal modernizing class with promises of gradual political opening that would awaken the generation of thirty-somethings from lethargy and reinvigorate the remodeled regime with their crowd-sourced mojo.

This would broaden the political base of the tandemocracy while incorporating many of its critics who now feel ignored or rejected. The internal social mobility within the Russian ruling class would increase, thereby reducing the risks of an elite mutiny. This is not unlike what the Communist Party of China is doing by stimulating controlled internal competition for top leadership.

The problem with the “go slow” approach is that competitive politics is as much about creative destruction as consumer markets. The political scene is littered with zombies: parties and leaders who lost election after election but still linger in the parliament as decorations.

Medvedev’s plan is to bring the zombies to life, while tightly controlling new entries to the market. It’s hard to see this working as intended.

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