

An Imitation Government

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President Dmitry Medvedev's recent whirlwind of activity illustrates how in Russia, what should be a super-powerful or at least a powerful state has been replaced by powerful - corporations. And the main goal of those corporations is to maximize their influence and profits while assuming as little responsibility as possible for their own actions or the condition of the country.

Who or what is setting Medvedev's priorities — insurgents and terrorists, football fans or the upcoming elections? In his messages and statements, why does the president make so many new proposals without reporting on the results of previous decisions and programs? The authorities are primarily reactive and lack a coherent program or strategy. Their various prescriptions for solving individual problems by adding money here or removing an official there are haphazard, uncoordinated and woefully ineffective.

Consider, for example, the latest session of the presidium of the State Council that was held in Ufa. The subject under discussion was of dire importance: interethnic relations in Russia. A dozen regional governors participated, as well as two presidential district envoys and four

federal ministers.

And what ingenious ideas did they propose for dealing with the situation? Send the Bolshoi Theater on tour to the North Caucasus, eliminate ethnic quotas when staffing state agencies (an idea that could meet with explosive resistance in the Caucasus) and create even more task forces and ad hoc committees in the regions, including a new federal body for handling ethnic policy matters.

In addition, Russia's leaders want to carry out a propaganda campaign promoting unity among Russia's ethnic groups, stiffen criminal penalties for igniting interethnic and interreligious animosities and create an interregional youth project along the lines of the Lake Seliger camp in Russia and its knockoff in the Caucasus, Mashuk.

All of this comes across more as improvisation than as a serious attempt at defining the issues or analyzing the reasons behind the worsening situation. The record of this meeting shows that the presidium of the State Council is no longer a place for serious discussion, but more of a ritual gathering designed to create the semblance of decision making and problem solving.

And what about Medvedev's crusade to improve security at Russia's major transportation hubs?

It was touching to see the way he stopped by the Vnukovo Airport to commend the staff for their security measures. Then there's the old plan to wean Domodedovo Airport away from its private owners and to combine the administration of all Moscow airports. And how about his "surprise" visit to Kievsky Station where he found conditions "absolutely unsuitable," scolded the Russian Railways head and demanded the installation of metal detectors and an increase in the number of transportation police. Does the president really believe that the crowds of people now waiting in line to pass through metal detectors before entering the airport are any less vulnerable to terrorist attack than similar crowds inside the building?

Of course, we could conjecture that somewhere, far from the public gaze, government officials are engaged in a more intelligent and determined effort to deal with these problems. But not only is that difficult to believe, the positive results of any such behind-the-scenes effort are nowhere evident. Having started with imitation democratic institutions, the government has gradually evolved into an imitation state as a whole.

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