

Kremlin Pundit Advocates Change

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Igor Yurgens, head of the Kremlin's main think tank, said the country needs a political thaw, like the one under Nikita Khrushchev in the 1960s.

But the soft-spoken Yurgens also praised authorities for controlling the political system, especially outcomes of elections, saying it was essential to prevent hard-line nationalists from taking power.

Indeed, he sounded oddly similar to liberal pundits of the Soviet era during his interview with The Moscow Times this week, praising the current leadership even as he promoted the need for change.

Still, Yurgens, 58, stuck to his main message, calling on the "ruling tandem" of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to quickly announce which of the two will run in the presidential race of 2012 — and preferably make it Medvedev.

The tandem has stubbornly kept silent on the matter, to the growing nervousness of the

ruling elite. In an apparent bid to tip the scales, Yurgens has been vocal in his promotion of Medvedev's candidacy lately.

Yurgens, head of the Institute for Contemporary Development — whose board is chaired by Medvedev — issued in mid-March a report that the group said can serve as an election platform for the incumbent president. Yurgens himself reiterated the call in an article in Nezavisimaya Gazeta on Tuesday.

"Every day of expectations about who among them would run turns both of them into lame ducks," Yurgens told The Moscow Times during an interview at his downtown office.

"Medvedev has better chances [to win], since he is favored by people in both Russia and the West who want changes," he said Monday.

The institute's report said the country needs to step up political competition, with no more media censorship and unfair electioneering by authorities. Otherwise, the whole "power vertical" could come to ruin because the populace would eventually rebel against being banned from decision making.

A vital step would be for liberals in power to unite behind the Kremlin-backed Right Cause party ahead of the State Duma elections in December, Yurgens said. The party was founded in 2008 to cater to liberal voters, but its support still hovers at a statistically insignificant 2 percent, according to the latest VTsIOM poll.

"The electoral base for this party would come from those who believe that the parliament should be a place for discussion," Yurgens said, reversing an earlier statement by United Russia party chairman and Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov who said in 2003 that the parliament is, in fact, not an appropriate place for discussions.

Yurgens named three political heavyweights p { margin-bottom: 0.21cm; – Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov and Medvedev's aide Arkady Dvorkovich, as possible candidates to lead the Right Cause.

All three are well-known liberals, and Kudrin has spoken explicitly against United Russia, which prompted party boss Andrei Isayev to say "liberals within the ruling elite are actively fighting United Russia," Kommersant reported Thursday.

But while promoting free elections, Yurgens stops short of criticizing Vladislav Surkov, the first deputy head of the Kremlin administration who is believed to have engineered the stifling political system, which he titled "sovereign democracy," during Putin's own presidency between 2000 and 2008.

"I was an opponent of his idea of so-called 'sovereign democracy,' but I understand the difficulties he is facing. He needs to preserve the stability of power," Yurgens said of Surkov.

"I know that he is disliked by liberal intellectuals, but I don't see him being an enemy of democracy, just a person who has different views," Yurgens added.

He said he had presented the institute's March report to Surkov who "has agreed with its

main message."

By fiddling with the elections, the authorities "are preserving the country" from a " Hamas scenario," Yurgens said, referring to free and democratic elections in Palestine in 2006, when the ultra-radical group Hamas legally came to power.

He also warned groups in the ruling elite against using security agencies or ultranationalists as tools to maintain their influence, saying it would destroy the current system.

"We can't really do much about some ruling officials who are trying to do that by using some unhappy siloviki or ultra-conservative groups. But we should urge them to 'be aware, since they would come after you,'" Yurgens said.

The last phrase, he explained, was a quote from Sergei Witte, a famous liberal reformer under the last Russian emperor, Nicholas II, who urged the tsar against flirting with ultranationalists at the time. Covert support that the empire provided to militant conservative groups fueled tensions in society instead of stopping unrest.

A bust of Witte sits on Yurgens' desk. A self-professed history enthusiast, Yurgens may well feel a connection with Russia's pre-revolutionary past, as own his grandfather Theodor, an ethnic German, came from Estonia to Azerbaijan in the times of Nicholas II to work for the local branch of the Nobel oil company.

Continuing the grand liberal tradition of Russian pro-government pundits, both pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era, Yurgens also advocated controlled reform from above, not uncontrollable grass-roots change.

"Most of the elite are nouveaux riches who don't think far ahead. But there are certain people who link their future with Russia" and want it to improve, Yurgens said.

"It's a delicate job to pick a time to finally switch to free elections. But if I and other people who think the same don't talk about it, it will always be too early," Yurgens said.

He said his institute's report aimed at triggering free discussion in the country, even at the cost of a backlash.

"I wanted to bring back the times when people got together and actually discussed things, like during the thaw," Yurgens said, referring to the short-lived political liberalization begun by Soviet leader Khrushchev.

The backlash, indeed, was quick to come, as a senior United Russia official accused Yurgens' think tank Thursday of inciting hatred with calls for radical reform.

Andrei Isayev, who is also a deputy head of the pro-government Federation of Independent Trade Unions, took issue with a statement in the report saying "poverty should be localized" to prevent "degradation of the social structure."

The actual text of the report explains the proposal, saying the "localization" meant that the government needed to identify the poor to help them, not discriminate against them. But Isayev still saw it as a call for a crackdown on the lower classes.

"This means Russian people should become part of the group that should be 'localized' using their social status," Isayev said, media reported. His trade federation said in a statement that it will request a criminal case be opened against the institute.

Law enforcement agencies did not comment on the matter Thursday, and analysts dismissed Isayev's accusations. Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, said the ruling party was nitpicking to get on Putin's good side.

United Russia's grasp on power is slowly slipping ahead of the Duma vote. The party still controls most legislatures nationwide, but it underperformed in the last big regional elections in March, and most analysts credit its domination to the "administrative resource" as much as to public support.

"United Russia feels guilt before Putin for its failure in regional elections, and it uses any attempt to attack any opponents" to prove its usefulness, Mukhin said by telephone.

Mukhin compared the party to a "loyal dog," while Yevgeny Gontmakher of Yurgens' own Institute for Contemporary Development called Isayev's criticism of the institute's call for change "a theater of the absurd."

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