

Who Will Rule Russia Tomorrow?

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October 14, 2014



Ukraine recently passed a law on lustration — the purging of corrupt officials — thereby giving a formal start to the cleansing of the country's ruling elite. The process has not gone without incident: Individuals suspected of political links to ousted former President Viktor Yanukovich have been seized in their offices or on the street and tossed into garbage containers.

It seems that Ukraine is experiencing a large-scale personnel change reminiscent of those that occurred in Eastern Europe after the fall of the communist regimes and where the practice of lustration was widespread. In contrast to Ukraine, however, that process was distinctly ideological — that is, anti-communist — in nature.

According to preliminary estimates, Ukraine's purge could affect a million officials in a country of only 40 million people. It also enables new officials to settle old scores, exact personal revenge and practice the same type of corruption they are ostensibly fighting.

And it raises the question of whether the shakeup will leave enough bureaucrats and managers in place to keep the wheels of government turning. After all, the process is

expected to remove up to 90 percent of the current staff in some structures, and Maidan activists cannot simply step in to fill those posts.

The processes taking place in Ukraine are also relevant for Russia. Who will rule this country tomorrow? Some observers have already begun asking a more specific question: What will happen after the eventual departure of President Vladimir Putin?

In a larger sense, the question concerns the next generation of Russia's ruling elite. What will it look like? From where will those people come, and how will they be prepared for public office? Is any systematic process in place to ensure a steady supply of qualified individuals? The answer to the last question is no.

Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia has no effective mechanism for career advancement with definite and uniform rules for all. In its time, the Communist Party also functioned as a source of manpower not only for its own ranks, but carried out a "selection" process to supply managers in all areas of public life.

There was a clear ideological framework, and people working within its limits could successfully build their careers in such a society. But today's Russia lacks a distinct ideological framework or a clear vision of the type of society it is building and the direction in which that society is headed.

China — a more frequent point of reference now that Russia has hostile relations with Europe — rotates out its entire ruling elite, including the head of state, every 10 years. The replacement personnel gradually and methodically prepare for their new responsibilities, and the whole system works because, even without free elections, it employs its own mechanisms for selecting the most qualified individuals.

In this sense, any totalitarian society is "simpler and easier" than others. It is fully capable of cultivating future ruling elite until such time as it encounters an insurmountable external or internal threat, or else a regime change causes instability. However, Russia has not yet "matured" into a classic totalitarian society.

United Russia does not serve as a source of manpower the way the Communist Party once did. It carries no decision-making responsibilities and is now directly subordinate to the president.

United Russia does not formulate an ideological platform aimed at its electorate. Its electoral functions of mobilizing voters under its banners and recruiting and promoting new party members through the election process have also been greatly reduced — primarily because the authorities have so deformed elections in Russia that they do not resemble those in developed democracies. Everything now serves the will and desires of a single individual.

In some Warsaw Pact countries such as East Germany and Poland, the future ruling elite arose, at least in part, from the ranks of non-communist parties. Although they played only secondary roles in the ruling regimes, those parties never descended to the low estate of today's so-called "Duma opposition" parties in Russia.

And it turns out that all of the youth organizations affiliated with the ruling party, such as

the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth group, have proven ineffective and useless in producing Russia's future leaders.

During the rule of former President Dmitry Medvedev, the Kremlin assembled its "Presidential Thousand" list of promising young future leaders. However, the selection criteria were never explained, and it was even rumored that individuals bought and sold their places on the list. In any case, that list is entirely forgotten today.

The future managerial elite could emerge from the ranks of the professional bureaucracy. Moscow has even proclaimed a policy that it calls the "nationalization of the elite." On one hand, it involves restrictions on foreign travel and the holding of foreign assets, and on the other, increasing officials' salaries and benefits faster than those of the rest of the population. But that is not enough to cultivate future ruling elite.

Russia also needs principles, an ethical code of conduct, a meritocracy as well as loyalty and service to the country — and not just to an all-powerful national leader. That is what distinguishes true ruling elite from the closed circle of individuals with personal ties to Putin.

What's more, the ban on foreign assets not only smacks of isolationism, but also denies access to the political process for the very individuals who create most of the country's material wealth: private businesspeople who, under current conditions, have no choice but to operate on a global scale if their ambitions extend beyond local markets.

Current rulers not only decline to recruit intellectuals and scholars into officialdom, but even flaunt their anti-intellectual stance. Participation in government is also ruled out for members of Russia's growing volunteer movement and its NGOs because such organizations that are not already sanctioned now face restrictions and even potential bans on their activities.

But rather than repressing them, the authorities should attract and involve such people, whose behavior truly befits membership in the ruling elite, and invite them to join in the work of building a better society.

For all these reasons, Russia will face an acute shortage of qualified government officials in the near future — not to mention an overabundance of unqualified administrators in their place. At that point, Russians will finally recognize the need to modernize the economy and society as a whole.

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/14/who-will-rule-russia-tomorrow-a40394>