

REPORTS ARE A DESPERATE MEASURE

Sergey Belanovsky



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There are two reasons for the recent appearance of so many reports, analytic notes, and manifests on the fate of Russia. The first one is the ambiguity of any candidate or candidates for the Presidential office. Moreover, there is a fundamental unclarity here, not just regarding Putin or Medvedev, but, conditionally speaking, with regards to anyone. The intrigue remains. The second reason is linked to the fact that the resource of trust for Putin's regime has been almost entirely exhausted. **The public is becoming more and more convinced that Putin has not solved the tasks that he should have solved, or at least those which the mass voters, the citizens, hoped to have been solved.**

Inasmuch as these approaches are deliberately broadcast by the mass media, they are focused on the public; but a scholar writing a scientific article does not aim at

anyone deliberately. In other words, he targets those who understand what he writes about, i.e. the part of the expert community specializing in the same issues, and thinking about the same problems. In this regard, and if the issue is to be continued, I think it would be a good idea if Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, as well as the key members of their respective teams, read all of these reports.

From my point of view, due to the private effect of power they, these officials, do not fully understand the situation in the country nor do they understand the people's true feelings. So it would not do any harm to add some sense of realism to their understanding.

Based on the printed reports, it would appear that the main issue in politics for 2011-2012 is going to be a question of who will take the helm of state. It is a question of the extent to which the existing system will remain intact, be transformed, or broken altogether. It might not be broken completely, but some mechanisms could change, and the vacuum will certainly be filled by something else, including new people and new institutions. It is clear that **not everything depends on the chief executive; much depends on the environment in which he is able to operate.** It will be interesting to see how the characteristics of this environment change. They could change dramatically or not at all.

Roughly speaking, the reports by the Institute of Contemporary Development and the Centre for Strategic Research Foundation

(other reports may have other focuses) agree on the need for introducing a concrete political model. It is of prime importance in our economy, based as it is on rent, namely, oil rent. Altogether, if past experience is anything to go by, when an economy is built on rent, palaces, country cottages, and the like will follow. As for the economy, one can see similarities both in the attitudes of the Institute of Contemporary Development and in the position of the CSR. The most recent initiatives of President Medvedev also reflect the same mentality, that of bringing transformation to the climate of investment, and clearing the way for economic growth beyond the extractive industry. But the question remains as to how much of this will be understood by the public and if the points of the reports by the Institute of Contemporary Development and the CSR will provide the basis for any new policy.

Nevertheless, a new policy is badly needed. Unfortunately our report, the one by the CSR, was written before the recent initiatives of Medvedev. **But if the government can implement the policy suggested by us, the consensus between them and the expert community will be restored.** At the same time, it is quite possible that the right steps made by the government could be rejected by the public. Nevertheless, the initiatives of Medvedev could fall in line with the suggestions made in expert reports, or those made by organizations such as the Higher School of Economics, and the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade.

But it all will be in vain if the main threat is not eliminated, that is the threat to the government of losing its legitimacy. The people's trust in the government in general, including Medvedev and Putin, and, apropos, the 'United Russia' party, is tragically dying. This means that a distrust for the very structure of power is on the rise. In this context, in our opinion, no functional reforms can be introduced. Some steps can be made, but they are not going to gain broad support. If the authorities have to sacrifice something it will only cause mass protests and do a great deal of harm. **A kind of 'restart' is necessary for the government, so it can once again begin to enjoy the public's trust.** Only after such a restart can a program of reform be implemented.

Unfortunately, the actions by Medvedev or Putin, whether right or wrong, appear to be secondary in regards to this fundamental fact. Consequently, if we continue to amplify the idea that there is such a fundamental lack of trust, then the political system has to be changed somehow, so it can advance new people and create conditions for the authorities to be elected on a competitive basis, and thus garner some degree of trust and legitimacy. Only then can reforms be held with greater certainty and less fear of provoking public protest.

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Unfortunately, it is difficult to say how accurate such reports are in characterizing the exchange of ideas between the expert community and the government. But I think that this is to be expected since there are no other channels of communication in Russia between experts and the government. There are no reputable small publishing houses in Russia. At the same time, academic peer-review editions have degraded to such an extent that it has become impossible to read their publications (they are read only by those who are writing theses in order to have someone to quote). The mainstream mass media are in a more advantageous position. They are in touch with the experts' opinions. But even in the 'Kommersant' or 'Vedomosti', one can publish only a very short text of expert analysis. There is the 'Expert' journal with a high level of analysis. But that is all.

It is a strange paradox. These are not scientific journals, but mainstream ones, yet they seek to target a wide expert community. We have nothing else. In other words, in Russia there is a deficit of respected brands to help broadcast new ideas to help gain the trust of the public. ■

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MEDVEDEV IS NOT A PROGRESSIVIST BUT A REFORMER



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In one of the recent newsletters by the *Russian Journal*, dedicated to the topic of progressivism — *Medvedev: a turn to progressivism* — the President of Russia was all but called a progressive in the sense it is used in the U.S. Or at least there was the question of whether he is a progressive. But the meaning that word has in the U.S. is quite different. More appropriate is the term reformer. The word progressivism has a very concrete meaning for Americans. It is a trend in American political thought, which has a long history rooted in the nineteenth century. When people use it **in reference to Medvedev, they mean that he is a reformist president. He is associated with ambitions to implement changes in the socio-economic life of Russia**, unlike conservatism, which stands for keeping the things the way they are.

The policy agendas in Russia and the U.S.A. are different, so what can be called progressive appears to be different as well. If Medvedev were in Obama's shoes, perhaps he would support some of his decisions, for instance, the one concerning healthcare reform. But he lives in

quite a different environment, has different tasks and — what is the most important thing — quite different state institutions. While, in America, a progressive sees the state as the collective embodiment of the polity, and as a tool that is required to resolve collective problems, in Russia, reformers see the state machinery, which suffers from the Soviet legacy, as the source of many collective problems.

Think tanks play a special role in advancing progressive and reformist ideas. A sea change in the number of think tanks in the twentieth century is related to the fact that the tasks to be resolved at the political level have become more complex. For instance, if we compare the number of the tasks the President of the United States and the legislative branch faced one hundred years ago to what they are facing now, we will see that today, they have exponentially more now. Also, what has helped think tanks to establish themselves was the growing practice of private philanthropy and the creation of various independent foundations. ■