

MOSCOW SPRING?

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The Prague Spring was a promising political experiment that was ultimately a failure. Would a new Moscow Spring become a more successful project? Isn't this topic currently being explored and discussed in various reports issued by Russian think tanks, divergent reports that disagree on the details but are nevertheless very similar in essence?

Over the past few weeks, the expert community has seen the issuance of three weighty reports. The latest of them is titled 'Political crisis in Russia and the possible mechanisms of its development', produced by the Centre for Strategic Research Foundation (CSR). It was closely preceded by another report from the Centre for Social and Conservative Policy (CSCP), entitled 'Real Federalism, Local Governance and Inter-budgetary Policy'. The earliest of the three, which received the most public attention and critique, was a report issued by the Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR), entitled 'Strategiya-2012'. Each of these reports was more or less widely discussed in the media and the blogosphere. INSOR's

report was stigmatised as a 'report from a criminal gang'. The CSCP's report was branded as 'the penitence of United Russia', while the report from the CSR was interpreted as a warning.

The interesting thing to note here, above all else, is the fact that, **for the first time in recent years, the notion of political crisis (or its impending threat) is being brought up by experts from institutions that are connected to the ruling power.** The CSR is regarded as 'one of the key expert institutions preparing analytical recommendations for the presidential administration and the government'. The CSCP, as revealed on its official website, is 'a centre that formulates the position of the parliamentary majority party' ('United Russia'). It is thus possible to assume that a discussion of crisis initiated by these parties is indicative of the following: that leading think tanks are admitting the existence of a crisis, which the majority of the public is ignorant of, being brainwashed as they are by TV channels, which are equally unaware of it. What it looks like is that the ruling power is crying wolf from above before a real crisis hits it from below. INSOR is also complicit in this, for its experts can hardly be ranked as being ordinary people.

Curiously, the language of these reports doesn't quite suit the given genre. They look more like articles, for example, or 'service proposals', as they tend to be called in the West. They sound something like: 'Well, you've got problems here, as we can see from this data, and they can be resolved; for that you need to... we know what should be done'. Such is the essence of the chosen genre. It sometimes takes the form of a 'tender-oriented proposal'.

Judge for yourself. The CSCP is calling for real federalism and local self-governance to be restored. This can only mean that these institutions are non-existent, or why else should they imply that they need to be restored? But there is no need to worry. The experts from the CSCP apparently know what to do and they are proposing a whole

spectrum of possibilities ranging from 'maintaining the *status quo*' to 'an immediate restoration of the practice of electing governors and other democratic mechanisms at all levels of power'.

The section of INSOR's report entitled 'Political Institutions' contains twenty-two recommendations, which include lowering the parliamentary barrier to five percent, the right to create pre-election blocks, 'restoring the practice of directly electing governors', abolition of 'practical censorship on federal TV channels', revoking 'the ban on financial support for parties, bypassing the Kremlin', etc. These recommendations amount to a revision of the system of management of political life in Russia, which was established under the tenure of Vladimir Putin.

Experts from the CSR insist on 'renewing the political contents and advancing a new cohort of political leaders', since sociological studies indicate that voters are interested in seeing new individuals emerge in this sphere. Here is some things they are saying: 'It seems to me that Putin is petering out, and he's been in power for too long...' or 'I'm neither for Medvedev nor for Putin... I would like to see something altogether different in our country...' or 'If we only have the choice between Putin and Medvedev, I wouldn't vote at all, but I would vote for a third person if such a person existed'.

People are not eager to see Putin and Medvedev contending for power. What they want is someone else who can fulfil their aspirations. Otherwise it would be simply boring. This is how the will of the people is formulated. However, there are no direct indications as to who shall be called forth to create new contents and to advance new leaders. Surely there must be someone to do that... Here we have two problems in the genre of a 'tender-oriented proposal'. First, such challenges should normally be addressed to specific persons, and second, they should be kept confidential. But here, in this case, we do not see a proper addressee and the proposal is open to the public. Why is this so?

Meanwhile, ‘serious political changes are imminent for Russia!’ This is what the CSR says, together with Sergei Belanovsky and Mikhail Dmitriev, the authors of this report. This is essentially a call for changes. Up until now, the public was used to the idea that no changes are forthcoming, let alone serious ones, so just let it be. The idea was that we already have enough troubles to worry about, so any changes would be too much for us to bear. But here’s we have a distinct call. Who might be happy to hear about it?

The farther in, the deeper you are! There is even currently talk about stripping the ruling power of its legitimacy, as more and more people regard it as unlawful. This is something that fore-shadows woeful consequences. The amazing thing is that, not that long ago, there was a virtual taboo on speaking about political crisis in the hearing range of the ruling authorities. However, we have suddenly discovered that Russia is right in the midst of a political crisis (it apparently began eight months ago). People are now allowed to speak about it and have indeed been doing so. What a nightmare!

Did the authors of this report really just become aware of this problem now? Regardless, the data, which were obtained by competent experts, produces immediate conclusions and the tendencies for the acceleration of this dangerous tendency can be detected equally fast. Why did the CSP announce its discovery namely on April Fools Day? Moreover, the authors state in this report that ‘the dynamics of change is tending to accelerate’?

In its poll, FOM asked respondents to name the politicians who they trust. The results were as follows: Putin 37%, Medvedev 30%, and Zhirinovskiy, Zyuganov and Shoigu each at 10%. Other politicians received 1% and even less of the vote. However, it should be noted that Putin is not actually the win-

ner, as such answers as ‘none’ or ‘difficult to say’ amount to 40%!

This means that cancelling the ‘against all’ box does not at all abolish such a political stance, and since it is dominant, what it means is that there is indeed public demand for new political figures. Would they end up being any better? Nobody actually knows. But this is not the crux of the matter.

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Scandals, tensions, and wavering ratings for political leaders are normal for democracy. This is especially true for such a young democracy as Russia’s capitalist model. It wasn’t without reason that the President called Russia a young country. Having cast away its imperial legacy, it inherited all the vices of the ‘Red Project’: corruption, irresponsibility, underdeveloped management technologies, weak social solidarity, and the consumerist attitude of the public vis-a-vis the ruling power and vice-versa.

But we shouldn’t get desperate here! This is something that urges us to re-evaluate the approaches taken in forming the political medium. The press is anxiously citing as saying, ‘*Let’s suppose that Putin wins the elections. What can he possibly do?... I doubt that he will complete his six years tenure as a president. That is my personal opinion*’. Everyone has the right to a personal opinion, but is there any cause for anyone to worry, including the dedicated supporters of Vladimir Putin?

The history of democracy has many pitfalls. Surely **it would be nice to live happily in a society that enjoys exemplary freedom and peace. However, such societies do not exist. Political struggle is a norm for democracy.** It is strange to observe people’s hearts accelerate when they hear about political struggle, all the more so if these people are political experts. Political demands may upset the balance of any society and especial-

ly the ruling groups with vested interests, but such things do not bring the skies crashing down on people’s heads.

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It’s a curious fact that the reports do not discuss the subjects of such changes. It seems like the authors know beforehand that there are no other subjects apart from the ‘ruling power’ to speak of. This situation is reminiscent of the story with the Prague Spring. That project was headed by the leader of their Communist Party, Alexander Dubček. He was successful at implementing a programme of significant reforms that scared the Soviet establishment. The Prague Spring ended with the intervention of the Warsaw Pact into Czechoslovakia and the inevitable removal of its leadership. However, it seems that there was a chance, and the experts of that time, who favoured a ‘democratic revolution from above’ had advised not to miss such a chance. The basic premise that brought them together was the idea that there can be no other subject of political change but the ‘ruling power’.

This same idea unites the authors of the reports in question. **The reports are apprehensive of a political crisis of the system. However, apart from the ruling power, they do not name any other force that could change the situation.** All of it does look like a new Moscow Spring, a political operation designed to call upon the ruling power to implement changes with limited public participation. It would be better still to simulate an illusion of such participation. With a skilful use of electoral and media tools, such a manoeuvre could possibly allow the ruling elites to retain their role as subjects of the country’s economic, social and political life. ■

Exclusively for RJ

The Centre for Strategic Research Foundation is a foundation that posits its mission as ‘promoting the successful development of the country by providing expert regulatory and legal support for reforms in the economic and social spheres’. The Foundation is headed by **Mikhail Dmitriev**, an economist and statesman. The Chairman of the Foundation Council is **German Gref**, the First Minister of Economic Development and Trade of the Russian Federation. In

March 2011, the foundation issued a report authored by Mikhail Dmitriev and Sergei Belanovsky, entitled ‘**Political Crisis in Russia and the Possible Mechanisms of Its Development**’, in which the authors propose various scenarios of political transformation aimed at minimising the political risks from a potential crisis.

