

RUSSIA NEEDS A LEADER

Gerhard Mangott



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■ *With all the talks about the crisis of representation in institutions, what are the pillars of present-day loyalty to the political institutions in Russia, without which the entire political system would collapse? Is it economic prosperity, ordinary conservatism, or something else?*

Russia in fact lacks public endorsement of its institutions, but suffers from deep-rooted personalized electoral support. In disregarding the important long-term stabilizing effect of institutions, **Russia has so far based its public order and political realm on charismatic individuals.** This track is inherently risky, because it is highly vulnerable to external shocks like economic and social crises.

Furthermore, **what if the charisma of its leader falters and evaporates**

and no charismatic substitute is on hand? Political order might falter in this case as well.

■ *What can form the basis of a 'new consensus' between power and society, of the new 'social contract'? To what extent is this problem of consensus between power and society topical for Russia?*

The most essential domestic feature of the Putin era was the population's desire to trade demands of political participation for order, stability, and economic recovery. This has worked perfectly fine so far. However, there are two variables that might eventually undermine this tacit agreement: firstly, the Russian government so far has missed opportunities to diversify its economy. An increase in real income and micro-economic optimism is still vulnerable to external economic shocks – as the global economic and financial crisis has so painfully demonstrated. GDP growth, fiscal and monetary stability, stable labour markets, and guaranteed social transfer payments by the state all depend on strong demand for Russian commodities at high prices. In essence, this means that **the Russian government cannot sustain its economic and social growth strategy if foreign markets contract.** This makes the 'social contract' strategy inherently risky.

Secondly, if prosperity proliferation is successful in Russia, the emerging middle class might well ask for more political freedoms, transparency, and accountability of its rulers. The Russian government needs to be aware of this inherent 'destabilizing' threat of economic success.

■ *Who is the new majority (class, stratum, layer), the new political subject, that the Russian government can rely on if it decides to 'rebuild' society? Can the middle class become such a subject?*

The Russian government needs to re-conceptualize its social contract approach to the extent that the emerging middle class might ask for a more responsive, transparent, and accountable Russian political class. Without a fair share of political participation, the middle class will abandon the tacit pact endorsed in the Putin era.

It is of strategic importance to take into account the demographic trends in Russia. With its aging population and a spectacularly low proportion of 15-29 year-olds, Russia will likely escape any 'youth-based' rebellions as seen in the Arabian crescent in the short-term. In the long term, however, this fact seriously weakens the age-stratum, which is highly important for stability and moderation.

■ *What program should Dmitry Medvedev develop for the next Presidential election if he decides to take part?*

President Medvedev needs to translate his rather abstract and much too general 'modernization approach' into more tangible short and mid-term reform objectives. Russian citizens need to be convinced that its leader does not only have a long-term vision, but is capable of implementing his modernization effort step by step.

Political leadership is based on vision, detailed work plans, credibility, and public trust in a leader's ability to perform efficiently and effectively. A sustainable presidency needs to convince the Russian public of its leaders' intellectual and political capacities as much as his freedom of action on the political stage. An office holder can become a transformational leader only if the society does not perceive him as essentially constrained by other actors and nontransparent social networks. ■

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