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POLITICAL ROTATION, *RUSSIAN STYLE*

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The rumors of the last few months have been confirmed. Putin will be President again, in keeping with a “gentleman’s agreement”, first you, now me. It will no longer be necessary to while away the time with analysts and Russian friends discussing whether Medvedev represented something different, or had any room for real maneuvering, or was going to have the nerve to confront Putin by running against him for election. In appearance, everything went according to plan: the Constitution was respected, the hand-off was reached by consensus, stability was assured. But if the average citizen appears neither surprised nor moved by the news, the more liberal media, the experts who actually believed the discourse of modernization, and many higher-ups in the Kremlin who worked for Medvedev have felt it was adding insult to injury to hear Putin say that the deal was sealed from the start, which means that Medvedev’s administration has been nothing but a sham.

Constitutionally, Putin can aspire to two more terms, now six years, as established by a law signed in 2008, early in Medvedev’s presidency. Putin could therefore be president for 12 more years, by which time he would have accumulated almost 25 years in power, with four as prime minister. A number of young Russian bloggers, calculating how old they will be then, conclude that they will have spent most of their adult lives without experiencing a true alternative.

Once clarified whose hands Russia’s immediate future will remain in -and thus, in many instances, our own, that is, Europe’s, as well-, the analysts begin to differ as to which Putin we will find in 2012 and what he will do once he returns to the box he left for a short time and never ceased to control. It is not that Russia has undergone substantial changes in the four years elapsed, nor that popular support for his figure has decreased in any notable way. To the contrary, the problem is precisely that the situation of the country has not changed, that is, it has not improved, in structural terms. The twelve years of the Putin era present a discouraging balance: capitalism monopolized by a State that is not required to be accountable, institutions in name only -Justice in particular-, omnipresent corruption and a virtually feudal relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Amid so much uncertainty, what is certain is that modernity will be long in coming. Behind the luster of Russian economic growth brought about by its energy resources, and despite the 110-dollar barrels of Brent, the concept that now resonates most strongly in Moscow is stagnation.

What can be expected of this caricature of electoral turnover? Prominent experts, such as Fyodor Lukyanov, the editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, or Andrew Kuchins, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, agree that Russian foreign policy will not undergo any significant change. It is in internal policy where all bets are off, though, for the time being, nothing would lead one to think that Putin will do anything but maintain business as usual. The fact is, indices of satisfaction continue to be favorable to the powers that be and people's standard of living has progressed, which, combined with public safety, is the basis of the social pact that Putin benefits from. But among political and economic experts the feeling is growing that before too long the Putin formula will reach critical exhaustion.

Russia is proud to be among the ascending stars of the BRIC countries, but a growing number of economists, both Russian and foreign, considers that in terms of rate of growth, productivity, and investment security, comparison with Brazil, India and China leaves Russia far behind. Sergei Guriev, one of the most brilliant young Russian economists, Rector of the New Economic School, considers that Russia needs a new growth model, and that the current development of the country is more or less at the level of South Korea in the late nineties, but without the institutional strength Korea already enjoyed. Another well-respected economist, Vladislav Inozemtsev, director of the Center for Post-Industrial Studies in Moscow, reminds us that in Russia, on average, one kilometer of paved highway costs three times what it does in Western Europe, or that the 49,000 people employed in the cement industry in 2008 produced 40 million tons of cement in contrast with the 279 million tons produced by their 52,000 counterparts in the EU.

Discontentment is weak as yet in Russia, or at least when surveyed few people say they would be willing to take to the streets to express it. But all Russian sociological studies point out that social stability is far from firm. One of Putin's greater problems may arise from the very middle class that has emerged in the warmth of the recent years of growth when they tire of not having true avenues to express their political preferences. In late February this year, a sizeable group of intellectuals, political analysts, entrepreneurs and journalists, from a broad political spectrum, including people close to the political inner circles, sent President Medvedev an open letter in which they appealed -if indeed it was not already too late- for a profound change in course for Russia: "injustice, corruption, and untruth have led the country to moral isolation." Twenty years ago it was a combination of a deep loss of legitimacy and a long economic stagnation that brought down the Soviet Union. The current political system in Russia, known as a "sovereign democracy", maintains formerly inexistent margins of liberty, but it is sustained by a political engineering -cosmetic political turnover, prefabricated pluralism, controlled media, sham elections- whose obsolescence can only serve strategies alien to the general interests of society. At present the country is probably still far from a scenario like that of the uprisings in the Arab world, but in Russia -as happened there twenty years ago- the determining factor will be the question of legitimacy.