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What Keeps the Kremlin Up All Night

By Daniel Treisman

To observers of Russia's election campaign, one thing is clear: The Kremlin's political operatives do not want to leave anything to chance.

Of eight would-be opposition candidates, all but three have been driven out, either disqualified or discouraged from running. National television reports with breathless excitement on every movement of the Kremlin favorite, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Lest anyone miss the point, polling stations have been told to hang posters accusing Medvedev's rivals of filing fraudulent income declarations. Before the State Duma elections in December, governors were reportedly ordered to deliver at least 65 percent of the vote for United Russia, and there is no reason to think such pressures have stopped.

All this raises the perplexing question -- Why? As numerous opinion polls show, President Vladimir Putin and his team are genuinely popular. It seems certain Medvedev would win decisively even in a completely fair vote without Kremlin insiders leaning their thumbs, toes and other body parts on the scale.

The government's popularity is no surprise. Under Putin, real wages have tripled and unemployment has fallen sharply. Given the booming economy, it would take some hard work for a Kremlin candidate to lose. Even if Russia had plunged this January into a financial crisis as severe as August 1998, simulations suggest this would not have threatened Medvedev's lead.

So why is the Kremlin doing everything possible to undermine the legitimacy of an election in which its own candidate is set to triumph?

First, it might be simple paranoia. It is hard to believe Kremlin insiders genuinely think opposition candidates Garry Kasparov or Mikhail Kasyanov could have won if they been allowed to run in an open contest. But with an administration as secretive as this one, nothing can be ruled out.

Another possible reason the Kremlin is messing with elections is because that is what the siloviki and political operatives like to do. They see no downside in doing so, and they enjoy it. Scolding and demonizing the West is a badge of honor for them. Cutting off its nose to spite its face, the administration chooses to tarnish its international reputation because it views the election monitors and the democracy-rating industries of

Washington and Strasbourg as the preserve of anti-Russian hypocrites with self-serving agendas.

A third possibility is that the Kremlin's election management is not about the voters at all; rather, it aims to keep the pro-Kremlin elite in line. Much has been made of the conflicts between silovik clans that have been arresting or investigating each other's agents and leaking to the press. To impose discipline on this fractious band, especially as he attempts to hop from one seat to another, Putin needs to demonstrate total control of the political machinery. Permitting even minor challenges might be viewed by some as a weakness, which would mean increased vulnerability.

Thus, the Kremlin may instruct governors to manage the votes not because the victory is in doubt, but to verify which governors are loyal and effective servants. Once they have dirtied their hands manipulating local elections, the governors are also less likely to metamorphose into anti-Kremlin campaigners for openness and liberal democracy.

A similar logic may hold for Medvedev himself. Were he to win an honest election, he might construe this as conferring a personal mandate. It is in the interest of Medvedev's associates -- one in particular -- to keep him weak and dependent. Discrediting his election may be a way to keep Medvedev from getting ideas above his station.

Perhaps the Kremlin operatives are looking ahead to future contests. Open elections are not just about picking a winner. They allow new political personalities to emerge and grab attention. In many countries, losers from one election return refreshed to fight the next -- for example, Senator John McCain in the U.S. primaries. The goal in 2008 may be to keep the field empty and ensure no credible opposition candidates are waiting in the wings in 2012.

Finally, the Kremlin's determination to obtain by trickery what it could win fair and square may relate to economics, not politics. Although Putin dismisses allegations that he has amassed a personal fortune, it is no secret that some of his friends and acquaintances have become extremely wealthy. The next few years are crucial for Putin's inner circle; they face the task of rapidly privatizing the state assets they now control. The point of heavily managed elections -- and managed democracy in general -- may be to prevent revelations in the press and attacks by political rivals that might jeopardize the consolidation of this business empire.

My guess is that the true explanation combines several of these factors. But the economic interests seem increasingly dominant. Kremlin insiders appear to view political controls as a necessary complement to their use of law enforcement to win business battles.

If so, they have missed an important point about democracy -- in the long run, it can be the most effective way to protect the interests of insiders. Clear, honestly enforced rules of political competition favor those who have the resources and experience to win at such games. Even in the most democratic systems, insiders can usually tilt the rules in their favor. Fair competition between political parties can occur within the limits of a basic agreement on respecting the core interests of the wealthy -- or even, in some countries, on a certain level of protection for the security services.

The alternatives are less predictable. If politics is forced out of public institutions, it spills out onto the streets. The administration is right to fear mass demonstrations, not because Kasparov's supporters are likely to storm the Kremlin, but because there comes a point, as demonstrations grow, at which individuals all along the "power vertical" start to reevaluate their positions. During the August 1991 coup attempt, Generals Pavel Grachev and Yevgeny Shaposhnikov chose not to follow the orders of the organization that tried to implement the putsch, the State Committee for a State of Emergency, as did various second and third-level officers. Such sudden changes of perspective among their mid-level subordinates are what should keep the Kremlin's strategists awake at night.

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