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A Modest Proposal  
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What to make of the recent report by the Institute for Contemporary Development (INSOR), a think tank associated with President Dmitry Medvedev, calling for major political reform in Russia?

The INSOR report (read it in Russian [here](#)) calls for a true multi-party system, a return to the direct election of governors and Federation Council deputies, lowering the barrier to win seats in the State Duma to five percent from the current seven, the abolition of the Interior Ministry and the establishment of a National Criminal Police in its place, and the break-up of the FSB, which would be split into a Counterintelligence Service and Federal Service for Protection of the Constitution.

INSOR, of course, is headed by Igor Yurgens, familiar to readers of this blog for his consistent calls for political liberalization over the past year.

But do reports like this matter? Does the INSOR report reflect the opinions of a critical mass inside the elite?

Speaking to Mikhail Sokolov of RFE/RL's Russian Service, opposition politician Vladimir Ryzhkov says yes it does:

"A year ago, the well-known political analyst Mikhail Afanasyev conducted a study of the Russian elite. He interviewed more than a thousand people in Moscow and in the regions, dividing them into 12 categories -- members of the security services, military officers, doctors, teachers, lawyers, businessmen, journalists and so on. It turned out that only two categories -- members of the security services and federal officials -- supported the vertical. All the others believed that it led nowhere, that it has brought more harm than good, and that it has become an obstacle to the development of the country. The majority of educated people are saying in one voice: we need freedom of speech, we need free and fair elections, we need political competition, we need the authorities to be accountable to the public, we need demonopolization of the economy, and we need to close the gap of power and property. This is a consensus. The policy that is currently in place under Putin is not supported by the most educated sectors of society. The INSOR report appeals to them."

Likewise, in a recent interview with "Svobodnaya pressa," Nikolai Petrov of the Moscow Carnegie Center says the consensus that something has to change is strong and growing:

"I think awareness is now growing of the fact that new realities are on the agenda - crisis, post-crisis, economic, and political realities. An awareness of the fact that Russia will occupy a completely different place after the crisis than it did before the crisis. Moreover, the ineffectiveness of the administrative system is becoming obvious. All this is giving rise to the

sense that that the gap is increasing between the domestic and foreign policy doctrines that were adopted and partially implemented at the end of Putin's second presidential term and the new realities."

But while that may be true regarding the elite broadly defined. But what about the elite that really has its hands on the levers of power?

Moscow-based political analyst Dmitry Oreshkin says those supporting the current system -- the security services and those profiting from the energy and commodities sector -- are not interested in change at all. In an interview with RFE/RL's Russian Service, he says they stand to lose too much in terms of property and power, and they have the power to keep real political reform from happening:

"The state as a unit is not interested in a radical change of ownership, or even in moving away from an economic orientation on commodities. It is necessary to move those people who are profiting from oil and gas flows - as well as on steel and aluminum. And do this is extremely difficult, because these people are in large measure form the foundation of the state."

And what about INSOR itself. It is often referred to in journalistic shorthand as "Medvedev's think tank" or "a think tank with close ties to Medvedev," giving the impression that it is one of the drivers of Kremlin policy (I am as guilty of this as anybody).

In his interview with "Svobodnaya pressa," Petrov says we should "not exaggerate INSOR's connection with Medvedev" or overestimate its influence over him:

"Yes, the president is chairman of the board of trustees there. But, as I understand it, Medvedev has met the heads of the institute a couple of times - and no more than that....It seems to me that the image of Medvedev's "think tank" is somewhat exaggerated. Yes, they are sending something to Medvedev. But I cannot even see any element in Medvedev's actions yet of him accepting these proposals, and even less of him implementing them."

Petrov goes on to say that INSOR has been issuing reports to Medvedev "and at best they got some kind of a monosyllabic response."

The decision to make the report public "looks like an attempt to throw off the deliberate shackles, which INSOR has imposed upon itself - with the intention of not frightening anyone and not looking excessively radical."

And is that an indication that political changes are coming? Here Petrov is cautious:

"In my opinion, this does not indicate any changes above, apart from the fact that among the political elite there is a growing sense that the current political system is not up to dealing with the problems and tasks facing the country, and that something needs to be changed."