

"Where the Prime Minister Stands on the President's Second Anniversary"  
Article by Andrey Kolesnikov - Slon.ru - March 2, 2010

In the past two years the functionality of First Vice Premier Oleg Soskovets has been raised to the level of government chairman. Moreover, to that not of a technical premier, but a political one. Whereas in the swashbuckling nineties (the blessed nineties, the roaring nineties, and so forth), the performance of the rites to our native industry, patronage of the real sector, -- that is to say, the sector lobbyists -- and hands-on economic management (the Commission for Operational Questions) were in the jurisdiction of one of the first vice premiers, who was counterbalanced to a special first vice premier of a liberal tendency responsible for macroeconomics and finances (nowadays the role of this collective Chubays is fulfilled by (Finance Minister) Aleksey Kudrin, (Central Bank Chairman) Sergey Ignatyev, and (Minister for Economic Development and Trade) Elvira Nabiullina), this is not the case today. State interventionism is not counterbalanced by a special liberal functionary, and there is no arbiter at the top, a role fulfilled in those times by Viktor Stepanovich Chernomyrdin, who wisely noted: "And those who survive will themselves laugh later."

The other day an article appeared in The Washington Post by Anders Aslund, the well-known Swedish economist, who nowadays works in the Peterson Institute, but earlier was an adviser to the Russian, Kyrgyz, and Ukrainian governments. He wrote that the Putin model of economic management is close to exhaustion. Which is true. Just as it is also true that it is simultaneously at its peak: Never before have such a huge number of questions been resolved in hands-on mode.

This is not the planned economy. It is not interventionism in the strict sense of the word. Because what sort of plan can one man have, who is an interventionist to himself? And at other times a liberal to himself, incidentally: If in your country not a single institution works, sometimes you have to take upon yourself the role of the invisible hand of the market, and not just that of the blind hand of the state. For example, the function of compelling people to implement the correct law: So that the oligarchs should start fulfilling investment programs in power engineering, Vladimir Putin bawled them out. Now there is hope that the programs will begin to be filled with funds -- a balm for the heart of Anatoliy Chubays.

If this is interventionism, it is a fairly strange interventionism whereby a very solitary interventionist, a metaphorical Soskovets in the guise of Putin, can with full justice say: "L'etat, c'est moi." An essentially tragic role, supplemented by absolute loneliness in the political sphere. Because the ruling party is also "moi." And the Constitution too, "c'est moi." And the campaigner against corruption, "c'est moi." An excessive burden, perhaps, for a single person...

At the end of the day, there are only two ways out of this situation.

The first is escapism, relaxation in Goa (or Tuva), retirement to tranquil rest with guarantees of personal immunity and the welfare of friends (cronies). In Yeltsin's times such people were called The Family (in the political sense of that word). Second: A return to Luzhniki (stadium). In the sense of a second "Luzhniki" speech with a subsequent final "crackdown." It is possible, of course, also to continue to work as a Soskovets, but this functionality is exhausting itself morally and psychologically, as well as biologically. Most likely Putin will try on a new role. And in that case it is possible to seek the answer to a new, accursed, Russian question: Who will Mr Putin be?