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Moscow Fears Regional Officials Who Obey Law More Than Those Who Don't, Russian Commentator Says

By Paul Goble

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SAVANNAH, Georgia &mdash The nature of the current Russian political system was shown by the response of the central government to the demonstrations in Kaliningrad, a Moscow commentator says. The powers that be at the center responded not when regional officials acted within the law but when they failed to violate it to suppress an anti-government demonstration.

In an article in today's Yezhednevny Zhurnal, Vladimir Nadein, who explicitly says he does not like Putin, that the prime minister has done "enormous harm" to Russia, and that he should be removed and tried for his crimes, argues that Moscow's reaction to the events in Kaliningrad is itself an indictment of Putin's system.

"When people in Kaliningrad came out with signs reading, "Down with Putin!" he writes,

"this was entirely legal. When the police there, unlike in Moscow, Vladivostok, Yekaterinburg, and Rostov, did not tear the placards out of the hands of the peaceful demonstrators and did not beat them with truncheons, this also corresponded to the letter and the spirit of the law."

In normal countries, Nadein continued, the behavior of the police in Kaliningrad would not strike anyone as out of the ordinary. But in Russia, immediately after the demonstration, the central powers that be sent a high-powered commission, something Moscow had never done in other locations when the police violated the rights of citizens.

Consequently, however Moscow PR specialists try to present this decision, only one conclusion is possible, the Yezhednevny Zhurnal commentator says, and it is a truly disturbing one: "It is not the violation of the Constitution but its observance that elicits panic among [Russia's] powers that be."

That is just one of the aspects of the nature of the Russian political system as it has emerged under Putin that should be a matter of concern, Nadein continues. He points out that the powers that be in Moscow are more likely to be panicked by someone who tells the truth than by someone who tells a lie.

All kinds of regional officials in Russia have told Moscow what it wants to hear in the hopes of preferment or at least survival, but when one told the truth &mdash and "a truth which the whole world knew even without his comments" &mdash the central powers that be flew into a rage and began plotting his removal.

That happened, Nadein says, when Bashkortostan President Murtaza Rakhimov said, "there is no federalism in the Russian Federation," that Moscow makes all the decisions and takes all the money, and that the situation today in that regard is "much worse than it was even in the times of the despotic Soviet Union."

The Moscow commentator points out that the current powers that be in Moscow are not put off by hypocrisy as witness their positive reaction to Duma Speaker Sergey Mironov's attempt to present his party as independent of the regime or by the misuse of statistics, as in Putin's taking credit for demographic events that happened before his actions.

That gaps exist between what the Moscow powers that be say and what they do is no surprise: Such gaps can be found in almost all governments almost all the time. But when these gaps become so large and, what is more, as obvious as they have become in the Russian Federation, that creates a crisis of governance.

The powers that be may be able to continue for some time because of inertia or through the use of massive force &mdash that was how Stalin managed to declare the "most democratic constitution in the world" at the same time he was launching the Great Terror &mdash but at some point the gap between official declarations and official actions has to be reduced.

In Stalin's case, that happened after the German invasion of the Soviet Union when the communist dictator was able to present himself as the organizer of the defense of the country. But Nadein's analysis does not suggest any similar cataclysm that might allow the regime to regain legitimacy so easily in the near term.

Consequently, actions like those in Kaliningrad and, even more, the response of Moscow to them seem likely to corrode still further the ties between the population of the Russian Federation and its rulers, a trend that neither side of that equation can find comfortable and that each is certain to be thinking about how to change.

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