The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Bears and Mammoth Bones Keep Putin on TV

By Nabi Abdullaev

August 26, 2010



Putin watching a bear Tuesday at the South Kamchatka Federal Sanctuary. **Alexei Druzhinin**

Ever since his first flight in a Sukhoi warplane in October 1999, Vladimir Putin has dazzled the world with a machismo extravaganza and scored high popularity ratings that have became the backbone of the state he runs.

But nothing compares to the past few days.

A trip to the Far East this week turned into a public relations rampage that saw Putin shooting gray whales with a crossbow from a boat, studying the bones of mammoths at an excavation site, and watching a brown bear gobble up fish in a river just a stone's throw away from him.

Needless to say, the national media, especially the state-run television channels, played up the juicy images and Putin's trademark one-liners.

This week's hoopla followed Putin climbing behind the yoke of a Be-200 plane to extinguish

two of the hundreds of wildfires that devastated Central Russia this summer. He also was initiated into the Hells Angels biker brotherhood under the name Abbadona and, clad in black leather and high boots, drove a three-wheeled Harley-Davidson motorcycle in the company of bearded bikers.

This could not topped by President Dmitry Medvedev, whose glitzy PR achievement this week was to sip tea with U2's Bono in Sochi. But Medvedev did manage to pull a publicity coup of his own late Thursday by ordering a halt to construction of a highway north of Moscow amid growing protests.

With Putin's trip, government watchers are scratching their heads over whether the prime minister is campaigning for the ruling United Party, which he heads, in the run-up to October regional elections, preparing a presidential bid for 2012, trying to undo the harm inflicted by the government's disastrous response to the wildfires, or a combination of all the above.

But pundits agreed that Putin's photo-grabbing antics have not evolved much over the past decade and that while his exotic rambles do not look like "slavery in the galleys," as Putin once described his job, the images still play well to an audience whose only window to the outside world is state television.

Putin created a buzz as prime minister in October 1999 when he took a 10-minute flight in a Su-25 plane during a visit to a training base in the Krasnodar region.

Putin's trip to the Far East this week aimed to shore up support for United Russia in the October elections, said Lilia Shevtsova, a political analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

"He acts as a steam engine for the party, which is his most important power base now," she said.

After transferring the presidency to Medvedev in 2008, Putin assumed the post of prime minister and cemented his grip over the legislative branch by becoming the leader of United Russia, which enjoys an overwhelming majority in the State Duma and regional legislatures.

Putin has hinted that he might run for the presidency in 2012, most recently during the meeting with bikers in Crimea in July, when he said that whatever he did could be seen as campaigning.

"The logic of the Russian authorities is not to allow being seen as weak," Shevtsova said, referring to photos and reports where Russian authorities showed dismay and confusion over the wildfires. "Therefore the image of the national leader must be strengthened independently of anything else, and even a natural disaster becomes a suitable backdrop."

Tatyana Stanovaya, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies, said Putin's Far East trip was partly intended to sideline negative media coverage of how poorly United Russia and its youth branch, Young Guard, performed during the wildfires.

After reporting in the thick of the fires that local officials in some regions ordered volunteers to act only under the aegis of United Russia, state media have ignored a scandal over Youth Guard's faking of photos of its members fighting fires. But the fake photos have turned viral on the Internet and in the print media.

“The Kremlin just doesn’t know how to react to it,” Stanovaya said. “It is no longer possible to suppress such things, but admitting to them and starting a dialogue with other, nonofficial actors is still viewed by many Kremlin strategists as a dangerous departure.”

Putin also hopes to whip into shape his traditional power base — ordinary voters in provincial towns and villages, Stanovaya said.

The effectiveness of images of Putin showing an interest in animals and flaunting his masculinity has decreased since the early days of his presidency, especially among business people and the intelligentsia, but his appeal remains strong among the less politicized masses, she said.

“You must understand that Putin’s political base is comprised of common voters, not the elite,” she said.

A total of 78 percent of 1,600 Russians polled in August by the independent Levada Center approved of Putin’s actions as prime minister, while Medvedev’s approval rating was 73 percent. The poll’s error margin was 3.4 percent. The state-run VTsIOM pollster came up with 56 percent and 53 percent, respectively, in a similar study this month. The numbers do not differ much from regular ratings that the ruling tandem scores in surveys.

Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, a think tank, said Putin needs to make forays like the whale-shooting adventure this week to demonstrate to other power clans that he remains the national leader and the top decision maker.

“Amid the uncertainty over who will become the next Russian president, which Putin and Medvedev maintain, some players might start to question whether Putin holds the ultimate power,” he said. “Strong popular support will help Putin keep everyone under control.”

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/08/26/bears-and-mammoth-bones-keep-putin-on-tv-a952