The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Coolest Leader in the World

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September 07, 2010



After Prime Minister Vladimir Putin cruised around the Far East in a Lada Kalina for 11 days, political pundits claimed that it was the start of his presidential campaign. But what is the point of conducting an election campaign in a country that has no real elections?

I have a much simpler explanation. Putin set out on his road trip just for the hell of it and to show how cool he is. Only losers like Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili squander their time building roads.

But Putin would do well to take a lesson from that Georgian loser whom he despises so much and whom he is itching to hang by his private parts. After all, Russia still lacks an uninterrupted asphalt highway from Moscow to Vladivostok (although Putin promised that it would be completed by 2008).

Putin is cool. Only cool leaders take road trips surrounded by dozens of black, bulletproof Mercedes Gelandewagens in the motorcade — and a couple of ambulances and spare yellow Ladas to boot.

The road trip underscores one of Putin's biggest problems as the national leader — how to spend his time. He certainly doesn't waste it by worrying about trivial problems such as health care reforms, corruption or modernization. He has a press secretary by the name of President Dmitry Medvedev to tackle the boring and tedious issues.

Putin's real challenge is in finding ways to fight off boredom. It's good to be the king.

Putin is not alone. His dilemma is shared by all absolute rulers. For example, Chinese emperors amused themselves by keeping harems, and Turkish sultans enjoyed shooting from the palace windows at passers-by as a way to kill time, so to speak.

But Putin has his own ways to have fun. He likes taking a minisubmarine to the floor of Lake Baikal, river rafting in Tuva, tagging Siberian tigers, riding in the cockpit of fighter jets and flying co-pilot in firefighting aircraft to drop water on the leaping flames. Now that's exciting!

There was another autocrat, Nero, who, as the legend goes, set fire to Rome and then sang an ode to Troy while watching the flames. Putin, thankfully, is not Nero, and he did not set fire to the forests. Instead, while half of Russia burned, Putin spent his free time singing with Russia's pitiful spies and riding a three-wheeled Harley-Davidson with bikers in Crimea. How could anyone criticize Putin for that?

Putin is leading a dream life. He calls all the shots, doles out money right and left to his friends and has lots of fun. Medvedev is stuck tackling the country's toughest problems, like corruption and modernization.

But there is only one drawback for Putin. Since he is still the country's national leader, he must limit his adventures to Russian territory. As much as he wants, Putin can't just go traipsing off at the drop of a hat to Mount Kilimanjaro, for example, like the oligarchs do.

But there is still plenty of adventure left in Russia for Putin. After all, where else in the world can you drive for 2,000 kilometers straight and not once encounter a modern highway? That might have been possible in China at one time, but now Russia is in a class of its own.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/09/07/the-coolest-leader-in-the-world-a1227