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Putin Divides and Rules

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It was no coincidence that President Dmitry Medvedev decided to fire Mayor Yury Luzhkov while he was on a state visit to China, a country where "losing face" is much more important than in European cultures. The conflict between Luzhkov and Medvedev reached its climax on Monday, when Luzhkov returned from vacation and dug in his heels. He flatly refuses to resign despite reported offers from the Kremlin to resign on good terms. Thus, Medvedev had to act quickly: Fire Luzhkov as soon as possible or disgrace himself in the eyes of the Chinese and Russians.

The heated conflict, which is now a month old, has less to do with Luzhkov than it does with Medvedev. In reality, Luzhkov played second fiddle in this scandal; he was only used as a tool to humiliate Medvedev. This tool may be a one-shot deal, or it may very well be used again in the future.

Regarding the much-discussed wedge between Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, there could be something to this. Medvedev and Putin have not been seen together in public for two months. When one member of the tandem is in Moscow, the other is traveling in other cities or countries. What's more, on Sept. 14 — Medvedev's birthday — while Medvedev was

in Yaroslavl, Putin was meeting with United Russia activists in Nizhny Novgorod.

But this psychological schism should not be interpreted as a political conflict between the two. Take, for example, the relationship between a person and his shoelaces. There could not be a political conflict between them, but there could very well be a psychological conflict. The shoelace could be offended when it is treated like dirt, but the owner could also be offended when the shoelace rebels and trips up the owner from time to time.

One of the reasons Putin is able to maintain such a tight grip on power is that he skillfully exploits a quasi-Stalinist system of divide and rule. Stalin, of course, didn't invent divide and rule. It was first adopted in the Achaemenid Empire of Persia more than 2,500 years ago. While democracies have replaced this feudal system with a more civilized one that is based on separation of powers and checks and balances, autocratic rulers like Putin rely heavily on a system that sets rival clans against each other.

When Medvedev became president in 2008, a major reorganization of Kremlin clans was already firmly in place. This was executed after Putin in 2007 demoted a key clan leader — former deputy head of the Federal Security Service Viktor Cherkesov. As a result, two new rival clans emerged: the "modernization" clan and the siloviki clan.

The debate over the Khimki forest was the trigger that started the Luzhkov scandal. When Putin was cruising around the Far East in his yellow Lada, Medvedev, alone in Moscow, made a critical mistake in Putin's opinion: On Aug. 26, Medvedev, after meeting with U2 frontman and activist Bono, caved into public pressure and agreed to reconsider the plan to build a highway through the Khimki forest near Moscow. According to Putin's autocratic mindset, any concession to public opinion is a sign of weakness — particularly when the road is being built by his friend, Arkady Rotenberg — and, more important, a threat to his vertical power structure.

Shortly thereafter, on Sept. 1, Moskovsky Komsomolets ran opinion articles in defense of Luzhkov and criticizing Medvedev for leading Russia toward an Orange Revolution.

Luzhkov showed so much bravado on Monday because he thought that the only way Medvedev could force him out of office was to have the Prosecutor General's Office file criminal charges against him. But Luzhkov was 100 percent confident that Putin would never give Medvedev the green light for such a radical move.

It is scary to think what is now going to happen to the huge empire that Luzhkov's wife, Yelena Baturina, has built since Putin came to power. My guess is that it will be transferred in one way or another to Putin's loyal colleague Gennady Timchenko, who also managed to build his own empire over the same time period — Gunvor energy trading company with 2009 revenues of $50 billion.

The Luzhkov scandal is a classic Putin-orchestrated setup and intrigue. Luzhkov and Medvedev devoured each other in public while Putin emerged unscathed and stronger than ever. Don't believe for a second analysts who claim that Luzhkov's firing is a victory for Medvedev — that he was able to come out of Putin's shadow and make a very bold, risky and independent decision for the first time. I assure you, Medvedev couldn't have made this kind of decision without Putin's approval. Far from being a Medvedev victory, expect another

public scandal where the president is humiliated.

And don't believe for a second that the smear campaign against Luzhkov has put a dent in Putin's vertical power structure. After all, Stalin had a fondness for "uncovering" traitors within his ranks, such as Nikolai Yezhov and Nikolai Bukharin. As a result, Stalin emerged ever stronger and more vicious.

It is difficult to predict what will happen with Luzhkov, but one thing is already clear: Medvedev will not serve a second term as president. If he did have such ambitions, the scandal over Luzhkov has squashed them completely. As the ancient Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu once said, "The greatest victory is to win before the battle begins."

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