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A Stalin Slip and Putin Trick

By Victor Davidoff

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's May 6 speech in Volgograd finally put an end to the questions that have been asked for the last three years: Who is ruling Russia, and who will rule Russia after 2012?

It was a canonical speech by a national leader who is both trying to help the party he heads, United Russia, in December's State Duma elections and who is priming himself for the presidential race in 2012. The speech painted a rosy picture of Russia today and an even brighter picture of the future if, of course, the country maintains "stability," which when translated from post-Soviet newspeak means "the status quo of United Russia and the siloviki in power for many years."

Befitting a former chekist, Putin's speech requires a certain amount of deciphering, particularly when he proposed creating something he called the "All-Russia People's Front." According to Putin's vision, the United Russia party would become an electoral umbrella for nonpolitical organizations such as trade unions, women's and youth organizations and veterans' groups. Members of these groups could receive up to one-fourth of the spots on

United Russia's list of candidates to the Duma.

For those not familiar with the subtleties of Russian politics, this might seem like something from the theater of the absurd: The leader of a party — who isn't a member of that party — proposes nominating people who also have no relationship to the party into the Duma on the party ticket. But in Russia, everything that seems to be politically absurd is, in fact, quite rational.

Putin's proposal is primarily crisis management of his United Russia project. As journalist Oleg Kozyrev wrote on his blog: "The reason for creating the All-Russia People's Front ... is the falling popularity of United Russia, which is almost universally called the 'party of crooks and thieves.' This meme has become so widespread you don't even have to mention the party's name. Just say 'crooks and thieves' and everyone knows what you are talking about." Political scientist Alexander Morozov added, "The nomenklatura also knows that Putin doesn't want to head a party list of crooks and thieves. This will be a 'new list' of sorts — a sleight of hand to deceive the voters in December."

Putin has taken a page right out of the Soviet political handbook. Although there was a strict one-party system during the Soviet period, on paper there was also a mythical bloc of "Communists and independents" who always seemed to win 100 percent of the seats in the legislature. Or perhaps East Germany was Putin's model. Odd as it sounds, there was always a "multiparty system," although the parties played the roles scripted for them by German and Soviet communists.

Political scientist Alexander Kynev wrote: "These politicians don't have any source of inspiration other than the Soviet period. Their inability to respond to a different public mood and changes in the country and world is combined with their refusal to give up the 'sovereign democracy' that brought the country to a dead end."

Journalist Alexander Petrochenkov is even more pessimistic about the future: "It looks like the end of political competition in Russia. It wasn't enough to have the dominant one-party United Russia system. Now there will be the totalitarian silence of the cemetery."

Putin's proposal only makes sense if the presidential candidate from the All-Russia People's Front is Putin himself. After all, as the founder of the front and presumably an "independent," he is the ideal candidate. During the Volgograd speech, Putin made an intentional linguistic slip that was understood by his audience. As the blogger El-murid wrote: "One of his key phrases was a sentence tossed out seemingly by chance: 'Where else could the creation of the people's front be announced but in Stalingrad?'" (The city's name was changed to Volgograd in 1961 as part of Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign.)

"Putin was given a standing ovation. It looks like Putin is ready to run for president without complicated schemes and justifications. Putin's reference to Stalingrad sent a strong signal: Putin has decided to run on an anti-liberal and patriotic platform," El-murid wrote.

Now a new question emerges: Is there anyone in Russia — including President Dmitry Medvedev — who will dare to challenge Putin and his people's front?

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist whose blog is Chaadaev56.livejournal.com

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