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Putin's Quadriga Problem

By Alexei Bayer

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Germans rarely treat us to a good laugh, so the decision to award this year's Quadriga prize to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was a precious moment. Although given by a private foundation, the prize is a semi-official undertaking couched in the somewhat clumsy do-goodnik cheerfulness that the Federal Republic of Germany has affected since the end of World War II.

The horses atop Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, for which the prize is named, symbolize "friendship, harmony, state wisdom and bravery," says the Quadriga web site, as well as "flourishing state, economy, art and sciences" that stem from these virtues. Most amusingly, "the Quadriga honors personalities and projects whose thoughts and acts are built on values." Since Russia during Putin's rule has become one of the world's worst kleptocracies, those values are likely to be strictly monetary.

But the Quadriga is a kind of worldwide Jubilee award given to friendly politicians, artists and projects to mark the Oct. 3 anniversary of German reunification. The list of political honorees includes former Czech President Vaclav Havel and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, but it also

includes some fairly questionable figures such as Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Giorgos Papandreou, the Greek prime minister and probably not the most popular man in Germany, given the Greek debt crisis.

In this lineup, Putin seems to stand out. Those who decided to honor him miscalculated badly. Both the Conservatives, who are in power in Germany, and the Greens came out sharply against the decision. Some prominent Quadriga board members announced that they were resigning and several past recipients, apparently including Havel, threatened to send back their awards.

Fearing a major scandal, the Quadriga found a face-saving solution: It canceled this year's award completely. Palestinian National Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who was to be honored with Putin, also had his prize taken away, marking yet another instance when a Palestinian fell victim to Great Power politics.

As an outside observer, I greatly enjoyed the outcry and cheered the outcome. But I also felt that the entire messy affair was a tragedy for Russia.

Looking at Putin's reputation today, we forget how many people in the early 2000s saw him as somebody who could restore Russia to greatness in the new century — particularly people on the right who thought that a former KGB officer could rebuild a strong state and introduce order and discipline into the free-for-all that replaced the Soviet Union. On the left, too, many remembered that the KGB had been the most reform-minded organization in the Soviet Union. They hoped that a Putin government could solidify the democratic gains of the previous decade and turn Russia into an orderly, prosperous and law-based modern nation.

Putin's rule began under extremely favorable economic auspices. The 1998 default and ruble devaluation revived Russia's industry, whereas rising oil prices filled government coffers. The decade to 2008 marked a period of rare prosperity. But just as many times in the past, Russia has been let down by its leaders. The expectations on the left and on the right were frustrated as Putin turned the country into a mafia state run by former security officers and systematically pilfered by its army of bureaucrats.

Among other things, the uproar over Putin's award and the swift reaction by the Quadriga organizers show that the West is starting to realize that Russia is not an honorable partner. Germany has tossed Putin off its Quadriga but, unfortunately, the Russian people have gone down along with him.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

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