The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin's Dive for IKEA Jugs

By Victor Davidoff

August 14, 2011



With four months to go before Russians cast their votes in parliamentary elections, the first signs of an emerging electoral campaign have finally appeared. In a democratic country, there would be rallies, campaign posters and public debates of the candidates. But not so in Russia.

Here the campaign was kicked off on the Internet by "Putin's Army," made up of what the enlistees themselves call "young, smart and pretty girls." The smartest action that these "smart" girls could think up was to rip off their T-shirts in public. This dubiously radical act was meant to express support for Putin's as-yet unannounced presidential campaign.

The army was followed by an anonymous group of "Girls for Putin" who produced a professional-looking video of the song "I Want to be Your Connie" — a reference to Putin's favorite pet dog. "I want to be your Connie / On the table and on the balcony," the singer croons to the prime minister as she takes off items of clothing one by one.

The object of this female adoration also showed his mettle on television, this time in diving gear in the Azov Sea. Followed by Channel One cameras, Putin dove into the water and

resurfaced with two broken sixth-century amphorae. The significance of this archeological find is indisputable. A veritable choir of archeologists noted that the area had been combed for almost 75 years, and finding something there — especially something lying on the surface of the sand — is simply impossible. Nonspecialists also noted that the amphorae looked too clean to be 1,500 years old. As Nikolai Uskov, editor of GQ and a historian by education, noted acidly: "Putin came out of the sea with clean but slightly broken jugs from IKEA. It was comical."

But the campaign isn't just made up of scenes from a Russian version of the movie "Wag the Dog." State Duma Deputy Andrei Isayev from United Russia unveiled the draft election platform of the Putin-led All-Russia People's Front called "Five Years of Sustainable Growth." The program has five major points, the first of which is "Raising Living Standards": "The country will have high-tech medicine, and everyone will have the right to choose their doctors. There will be accessible high-quality education. ... The median income and pensions will reach European levels." The economy will quickly grow, allowing the country to kick its fossil fuel habit and raise production of manufactured goods to more than 50 percent of gross domestic product.

The program promises that by strengthening the government and, first of all, rearming the military, Russia will regain its superpower status in five years. But the most amazing promise is that as a result of these policies, "our citizens will feel freer and more secure both inside the country and abroad. ... In the country, the multiparty system, basic political freedoms and democratic participation will be developed."

Many were quick to point out the contradictions in the draft document. For example, strengthening the state and the lack of separation of powers are more of a threat to political freedoms than a way to develop them. Public Chamber member Vyacheslav Glazychev told Actualcomment.ru, "The political elite must realize that solving two problems at the same time — modernization and sustainable growth — is impossible."

Needless to say, the document is silent about the most pressing and difficult problems facing Russia, like budgetary federalism, an independent judiciary, protection of property rights and the lack of oversight of law enforcement agencies.

As for "the development of a multiparty system" and democracy, United Russia already established a precedent in what party functionaries are now calling "primaries." Theoretically, the goal of these primaries is to nominate candidates to be on the party's electoral list. But in practice, information from several regions shows that people are voting for lists that have already been approved from above. And even this is being done with a variety of procedural violations. As one of the leaders of the democratic opposition, Ilya Yashin, summed up in an interview with Ren-TV: "In all its work, United Russia uses the technique of imitation. It imitates activity in the parliament, it imitates intraparty discussions, and now it's imitating intraparty democracy."

All the signs point to another imitation of the democratic process in the December parliamentary elections.

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