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Satire Thrives as Putin Likened to Brezhnev

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A doctored image of Putin

Vladimir Putin's face superimposed on a portrait of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev has gone viral on the Internet since the prime minister announced plans to reclaim Russia's presidency.

The doctored image, showing Putin digitally aged and decrepit, captures the mood of many Russians who say the prospect of 12 more years of Putin in the Kremlin could result in political and economic stagnation comparable to Brezhnev's 18-year rule until his death in 1982.

The manner in which Putin announced his plans at a stage-managed convention of his ruling United Russia party on Saturday, following a deal with President Dmitry Medvedev to carve up power between them, has revived fears of democracy receding.

For many Russians it is all too much, and they are reverting to satire to cope.

"Satire always offers the sharpest and most accurate diagnosis of societies' problems. Tell me what a country is laughing about, and I'll tell you what kind of country it is," satirist

and writer Viktor Shenderovich said. "Today that is Putin and his United Russia party. In the last few days, the Internet has filled up with caricatures and jokes depicting a Brezhnev-like Putin: The analogy is obvious."

The jokes about Putin in recent years tended to underline his role as a strong leader at the expense of Medvedev, who was often portrayed as a puppet. But a new type of joke has now emerged, Shenderovich said.

In one, a man walks through Moscow traffic knocking on car windows: "Terrorists have kidnapped Putin and threaten to douse him in oil and burn him alive if they aren't paid a $10 million ransom. Will you make a donation?

"One driver answers: 'I'll give you five liters.'"

Shenderovich said the caustic jokes and satire suggested that people were increasingly fed up with the way things were going in Russia, and with Putin.

"As a historian of anecdotes, it's a completely new theme that people are so tired of Putin that they'd rather give oil to see him burn," he said.

He and other observers say mockery of Russia's rulers has burgeoned in private as State Duma elections approach in December, and before the presidential election in March, with people frustrated about having little real say in politics.

One acerbic joke goes: "Did you hear? The new presidential candidate Vladimir Putin promises to correct the mistakes made by Prime Minister Putin's government, which inherited the mess created by former President Putin."

In another, Putin asks Medvedev: "'Dima, guess who is the successor to my successor?' Medvedev waffles, 'Err, well, I don't know, who?'

"'You fool, Dima! It's me,' Putin crows."

When Putin was president, the Kremlin became less tolerant of political satire, humorists say, and the biting satire that flourished soon after the Soviet collapse in 1991 has all but disappeared from the airwaves.

Shenderovich's televised puppet show "Kukly" which satirized Russian politicians from 1994 until 2002, was one of the first programs axed after Putin became president. One scene had portrayed Putin as a screeching, foul-mouthed dwarf. The episode was one of the last.

"He didn't get the metaphor," Shenderovich said. "People told me he went into hysterics."

He said that beyond the Internet, where satire has its place, Russia had returned to the Soviet model where critical humor was largely confined to the kitchen. In Soviet times, people enjoyed many a long night telling jokes around the kitchen table.

"If people can't have their voice heard at the polls, at least they can laugh out loud," said Maxim Kovalsky, editor-in-chief of the Kommersant Vlast weekly.

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