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Putin More Frank With Foreigners Than Russians

By Vladimir Frolov

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Perhaps a true measure of rulers' distrust of their people is when they choose to be more frank with foreigners and rush to tell them what they are not in a hurry to communicate to their fellow citizens.

It is ordinary for both Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev to announce a major policy initiative or make a frank assessment of the nation's state of affairs in a foreign media interview, or in a meeting with foreign intellectuals, instead of with the Russian public.

Putin's meeting with members of the Valdai Discussion Club last week was particularly offensive. Putin held a three-hour closed-door session with foreign academics and journalists. What secrets was he discussing there that he could not share with the Russian public? Why were the Russian media barred while foreign journalists, not to mention a few former senior intelligence analysts, got to question Russia's supreme leader?

Putin is a public figure, and his public meetings should be covered in full by the Russian press. It is unimaginable that U.S. President Barack Obama would huddle secretly with foreign academics and media types without U.S. reporters in attendance.

Two weeks before the official launch of the presidential campaign in which Putin is the unquestioned frontrunner, the public still does not know why he is returning to the presidency and what he intends to do with his six or even 12 more years in the Kremlin.

Yet, at the Valdai Club meeting, Putin shed some light on his plans. According to some participants, he admitted that his government "had lost the trust of its people" and pledged to introduce "direct democracy." He promised to fix the political system and devolve some powers and tax authority back to the regions up to the point of reinstituting direct elections of governors. He hinted that the new government under Medvedev as prime minister would be innovative, flexible and have significant policy freedom. He told his guests that "he had a plan for Russia for the next 15 years."

These are important statements we have not heard from Putin before. But why discuss them first with foreigners who do not even vote for you?

The purpose of this year's Valdai was to improve Putin's image abroad. But it's hard to see how this could be accomplished by showing disrespect to his fellow citizens.

Vladimir Frolov is president of LEFF Group, a government-relations and PR company.

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