

Why Putin Was Booed

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When Prime Minister Vladimir Putin entered the ring to congratulate fighter Fedor Emelianenko at a mixed martial arts bout at Moscow's Olimpiisky stadium last Saturday, he was unexpectedly embarrassed when fans jeered him with catcalls. At least, that is how it looked on a YouTube video filmed from the stands. But maybe it did not happen that way.

Within hours, Putin's spin doctors announced that there had been no catcalls or hissing. Then they backtracked, saying they were catcalls, but they had really been directed at the losing fighter, American Jeff Monson. Then they said the sounds were not catcalls, but actually cheers for Putin. And last, we heard that the fans were shouting only because they were blocked from using the restrooms for more than an hour by Putin's security forces.

I rarely attend mixed martial arts fights or visit the Olimpiisky stadium, and I was not present during the match, but this is one of those rare occasions when I am ready to believe and even

agree with the version of events offered by Putin's propagandists.

After all, why would those fans want to boo Putin? Did he personally offend them in some way? It isn't likely that Putin seized their oil companies or took over the media outlets where they worked.

The fans had no more gripe with Putin than with the Man on the Moon, and they should have behaved toward him with, if not enthusiasm, then at least the same respect he has been accorded for the last 12 years.

But there is one problem that Putin — and everyone who will ride his coattails to certain victory in the Dec. 4 State Duma elections — has created. For 12 years, United Russia has said all power comes from Putin, that the party and Putin are the only real authority in the country and that everything else is a lie.

But for most Russians, the government or state is not Putin, the Duma or the presidential administration. The government is the countless bureaucrats they encounter every day at schools, courts, hospitals and police stations. They leave their marks with poor communal services, long lines at state hospitals and traffic cops who try to extort bribes.

For the people, the government they know all too well is several million indifferent state employees with lifeless eyes. They are, for example, cops who will put innocent people behind bars for years simply because their bosses must fulfill quotas for crimes that their precincts supposedly solved. Or it is an obtuse doctor who refuses to save a dying child because he was registered in a different district.

Putin did not create these bureaucrats, and even if he leaves office tomorrow these state employees will remain the dull and incompetent robots that they always have been. And they are the ones who form the grassroots of the power vertical.

That is why, even if fans at the Olimpiisky stadium were booing Putin for a simple reason only — that they really had to use the toilet — they were still protesting against Putin's system as a whole, a system that allows security guards for no reason at all to arbitrarily stop people from using the bathroom.

Yury Saprykin is the editorial director of Rambler-Afisha. This comment appeared on "From the Pulpit" ("Проповеди"), a joint television project between Dozhd TV and The Moscow Times. "Проповеди" can be seen on tvrain.ru.

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