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Putin No Longer 'Darling' of Russians

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Vladimir Putin has ceased to be the "darling" of a Russian people afflicted by a sense of aimlessness and alarmed by a state apparatus offering little protection from arbitrary abuse, veteran Russian commentator Vladimir Pozner said.

Pozner, a television compere with high-level contacts to elites stretching back to Soviet times, said the losses suffered by the prime minister's United Russia party in Sunday's parliamentary election reflected anger over a lack of clear vision for the future.

"In addition to that, there's a feeling of being totally unprotected. If anyone from government wants to go after you, you have nowhere to go. The feeling is that the courts are not courts, police can pretty well do what they want," he said Monday in an interview.

"If someone wants to take over your business, they can take it over. There's a sense of 'What can I do?'"

President Dmitry Medvedev has repeatedly promised to reform the nation's judicial system to bolster the rights of the individual in dealing with state institutions, curb corruption and enforce fairness in business.

Medvedev and Putin announced in September that they had agreed in 2008 that Medvedev would serve only one term as president, allowing Putin next March to reclaim the presidency he had been required to relinquish after two successive terms.

"You understand that whatever Mr. Medvedev said, he would not be able to follow it through and had no intention to follow it through, which makes it even worse," Pozner said.

Putin built his popularity after first rising to national power in 1999, restoring order and stability after the chaos of the immediate post-Soviet period.

Pozner said the fall in support for Putin's United Russia party to just under 50 percent from 64 percent served as a warning that the population did not like what is going on.

"Putin is no longer the darling of this country," Pozner said. "[But] I think that when the presidential elections come around, he is going to win. Who else can you possibly vote for?"

Putin's popularity has sunk in recent months in a way that for most of his eight years in power would have seemed inconceivable. He was booed at a sports event last month — a rare affront for a Russian leader. Though still Russia's most popular leader, for the first time he is subject to scrutiny.

Pozner said Putin, himself a former KGB spy, needed to retain the support of the siloviki, the security forces and army crucial to any Russian leader

"He has to play a really clever game," he said.

"It will be interesting to see what he does now ... to what extent he changes his tune, to what extend he realizes the dangers that exist for him."

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