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Booing Putin

By Richard Lourie

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There is a powerful scene in the movie "Doctor Zhivago" that goes a long way in explaining recent events in Russia. In the scene, a tsarist officer climbs onto a water barrel to address mutinous troops. At first, he quells their revolutionary rage with the timbre of command in his voice, but then suddenly the top of the barrel gives way under him and he falls in. Drenched, comical, he loses all dignity and authority. The soldiers make short work of him after that.

Political leaders of the strong man sort can afford to be seen as crude, cruel, indifferent, even at times inept. The one thing they cannot afford to be seen as is silly. And that's exactly what happened with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in early October during his now infamous scuba dive in the Black Sea. Wearing all the latest high-tech gear, Putin boldly descended to the perilous depths of 3 meters and re-emerged triumphantly with two ancient Greek amphoras that had been placed there for him to "discover" after having been scraped clean of the unphotogenic encrustations of the centuries.

At first, it seemed no more than another publicity stunt to burnish Putin's macho image, like

riding horseback bare-chested, bringing down tigers with tranquilizer darts, and throwing opponents in martial arts matches. But there already had been some questions about these photo ops — how dangerous was the tiger, how determined was the opponent? A chess champion summoned to the Kremlin to play with Stalin, when asked how the dictator played, answered lugubriously: "Bad." Stalin's lack of talent made him even more ominous. Putin's lack of diving ability just made him look silly.

There is a direct line connecting the scuba incident and Putin being booed at a martial arts match in Moscow in November while in the ring to congratulate the Russian winner on being a "real man." No doubt the crowd booed him because they did not want some politician, any politician, horning in on their event. But, more important, Putin was booed because he had suddenly become booable. The tsarist officer lost his authority when he fell into the water, Putin when he emerged from the water with his pre-planted trophies.

And the problem with macho charisma is that once it's lost, it's near impossible to regain. The rules are very strict on this point.

There is another straight line connecting the booing with the mass anti-Putin rally of Dec. 10. The cries of "Russia Without Putin," "Retire Putin" and "Putin is a Thief" were the verbal, political equivalents of the boos at the martial arts match.

You even have to feel a little sorry for Putin, who has to keep his balance between a semi-sham democracy and a real but soft authoritarianism. Rulers in the past had it much easier. For example, Tsar Nicholas I not only forbade criticism of himself but praise as well, considering it an impertinence.

In fact, my compassion for Putin has moved me to a verse that plays on the Russian word for KGB station chief:

"A New Term for Putin"

There's nothing highfalutin
About Vladimir Putin
Even though history has set him a task
That's more than any world leader could ask:
To combine the KGB
With democracy.
So, I'd like to propose, though still a bit hesitant,
That his post be renamed — the (P)rezident.

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