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Not Impressed by Putin's Condoms and Promises

By Victor Davidoff

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin held his 10th annual live televised call-in show on Thursday. This one broke his previous record for length and lasted more than 4 1/2 hours. During that time, Putin had a lot to say, although the audience was really only interested in the answer to one question: Did the authorities learn a lesson from the recent nationwide protests against election fraud?

The answer seems to be: Yes and no.

Television viewers saw the Putin they are used to seeing. He flashed his trademark crude humor and did his best to downplay the protests. "I didn't pay much attention to what was going on there [on Bolotnaya Ploshchad]," he said. "At the time, I was taking ice hockey lessons."

Putin refused to admit that there were any election violations and characterized accusations

of voter fraud as a figment of his political opponents' imagination. Typically, he chalked up the protests to the West, which he accused of trying to organize another Orange Revolution. And he said the organizers paid protesters to attend the demonstration — an accusation straight out of the play book of Yury Andropov, head of the KGB under Leonid Brezhnev.

Notably, Putin did not propose any serious reform of the political system.

Demonstrators were particularly offended by Putin's comparison of their white ribbons to condoms. This was not only an example of deplorable taste, but also a serious mistake that instantly backfired. Putin hadn't even finished speaking when Bozhena Rynska, a high-society chronicler and prominent demonstrator on Dec. 10, wrote a blog post suggesting that protesters wear inflated condoms marked with Putin's name at the next demonstration on Dec. 24.

But another tone could be heard underneath Putin's usual barracks humor. However indirectly, Putin had to enter into a kind of dialogue with the opposition and respond to their demands, at least verbally.

To prevent election fraud, Putin suggested installing web cameras at polling sites to monitor actions on election days. But this idea was shot down the very next day by officials who said that providing Internet access to all 90,000 voting sites, especially those in distant villages, would be prohibitively expensive and logistically impossible.

In response to the opposition's demand that governors be elected, Putin proposed a new and rather exotic plan. Instead of direct election of governors, citizens could chose candidates from a list proposed by the Kremlin. As political scientist Alexander Kynev noted caustically on his LiveJournal blog, "The only practice in the world analogous to this is in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where all the candidates are approved by the Guardian Council. Only then are citizens allowed to vote for them. Apparently this is Putin's understanding of 'modernization.'"

Putin also proposed that oppositional parties might be allowed to register, although his proposal was couched in theoretical terms. This would include the Party of People's Freedom led by Mikhail Kasyanov, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov, which was previously denied registration on various pretexts.

But the most important statement was Putin's recognition of the right of citizens to express themselves through protests, without so much of a hint of the threat of using force to break up the protests. "The fact that people express their point of view is absolutely normal," he said. "I'm pleased by it, and if that's the result of the 'Putin regime,' then that's just fine."

Nevertheless, Putin's performance pleased few of the protesters. Rustam Agadamov, one of Russia's top 10 bloggers, wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "Instead of uniting the nation, seeking and finding forms of dialogue, he gave us the same old Soviet witch hunt. Accusing civic activists of selling themselves and working for the West has become the paranoid response of our leaders."

Putin's performance didn't make a good impression on the demonstration's leaders either. Nemtsov wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "We don't need handouts from Putin. We demand

the registration of not only our party, but all oppositional parties. We demand that the authorities respect the law."

So despite a few verbal concessions, Putin and the opposition are on a collision course with no compromise in sight. Logically, Putin should make the first move, but his statements during the call-in show were counterproductive. Journalist Oleg Kashin even called his performance "self-immolation." Kashin's opinion had statistical support: The number of people who went on a Facebook site and clicked that they would attend the next demonstration Dec. 24 rose from 18,000 to 21,500 during the course of the show.

Unfortunately, another number is rising, too — the number of protesters who believe that violent actions are the only way to force the authorities to compromise. There are already calls on the Internet to block the entrance to the State Duma, occupy state buildings, and so on. As LiveJournal blogger Sapojnik wrote: "There were calls for more decisive measures before the Dec. 10 demonstration, but they were regarded as extremely marginal. But now this position is growing stronger. In other words, rallies and demonstrations might grow into a real rebellion."

When tens of thousands of demonstration gather, a protest can turn into an urban riot in an instant, as everyone saw during the Arab Spring. It's too bad that during the call-in show no one asked Putin why he is trying to look as if he doesn't know that.

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