

Supporting Putin and Yourself Simultaneously

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Since the Dec. 10 protest on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, the authorities have adopted a change of tactics. They are fighting back against the protests using their best methods.

Their first line of defense involves neo-Nazis and the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth group. That tactic was given a test run at a protest rally in St. Petersburg on Sunday. Arriving one hour early, neo-Nazis and Nashi members staked out their position directly in front of the podium. During the rally itself, the neo-Nazis climbed onto the podium, while Nashi activists shouted catcalls during a speech by Just Russia Deputy Oksana Dmitriyeva.

That tactic had two advantages. First, whoever controls the first rows of spectators controls the meeting because the speakers cannot ignore what is happening directly in front of them. If the first rows are booing and hissing, the speaker has trouble continuing. Second, this tactic spoils the photo ops that rally organizers would ordinarily have.

The second line of defense may be called diversification.

The current system is designed so that only chief Kremlin ideologist Vladislav Surkov can approve new presidential candidates. Indeed, before the protests, there was no question that Putin would have few real competitors in the March presidential race. But right after the protests, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov announced his intention to run for president, several days after the deadline for submitting applications. The Central Elections Commission simply announced that the necessary paperwork had actually been received on time.

It might seem that these two tactics are contradictory, but even that is part of the plan. They represent an attempt to turn a strategic failure into a victory by technical means.

The government puts out mixed signals — and not always intentionally. The owner of Kommersant Vlast magazine fired the publication's editor-in-chief, Maxim Kovalsky, ostensibly for "violating journalistic ethics" by publishing an obscene message against Putin that a voter presumably scribbled on his ballot. But the real reason was to place a limit on how far Putin could be criticized in the mass media. At the same time, however, Putin said during his annual call-in show that he was happy to see "fresh faces" at the protest rallies.

But it seems that Kovalsky's dismissal did not produce the intended results. First, Kovalsky wasn't exactly sacked. He was handed a generous golden parachute to help ease his transition. Second, had the Kremlin not overreacted to the publication, only the 10,000 or so subscribers to the magazine would have seen the offensive message. But now the image has been seen by millions on the Internet. Some enterprising individuals are trying to reproduce a high-resolution, blown-up copy of the ballot with the insult to be used on protesters' posters.

All supporters of kleptocracy suffer from the same bad habit: excessive self-interest. Russia is certainly no exception. Even those who claim to serve Putin are really using his hold on power to pursue their own vested interests. I believe that if the authorities pay the Nashi youth to create a counter-rally of 25,000 Kremlin supporters, the organization will recruit only 5,000 and pocket the rest of the money. Then they will coerce every unwitting soul they can find to fill out the ranks without pay. As always, Putin's supporters are really only looking out for themselves.

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