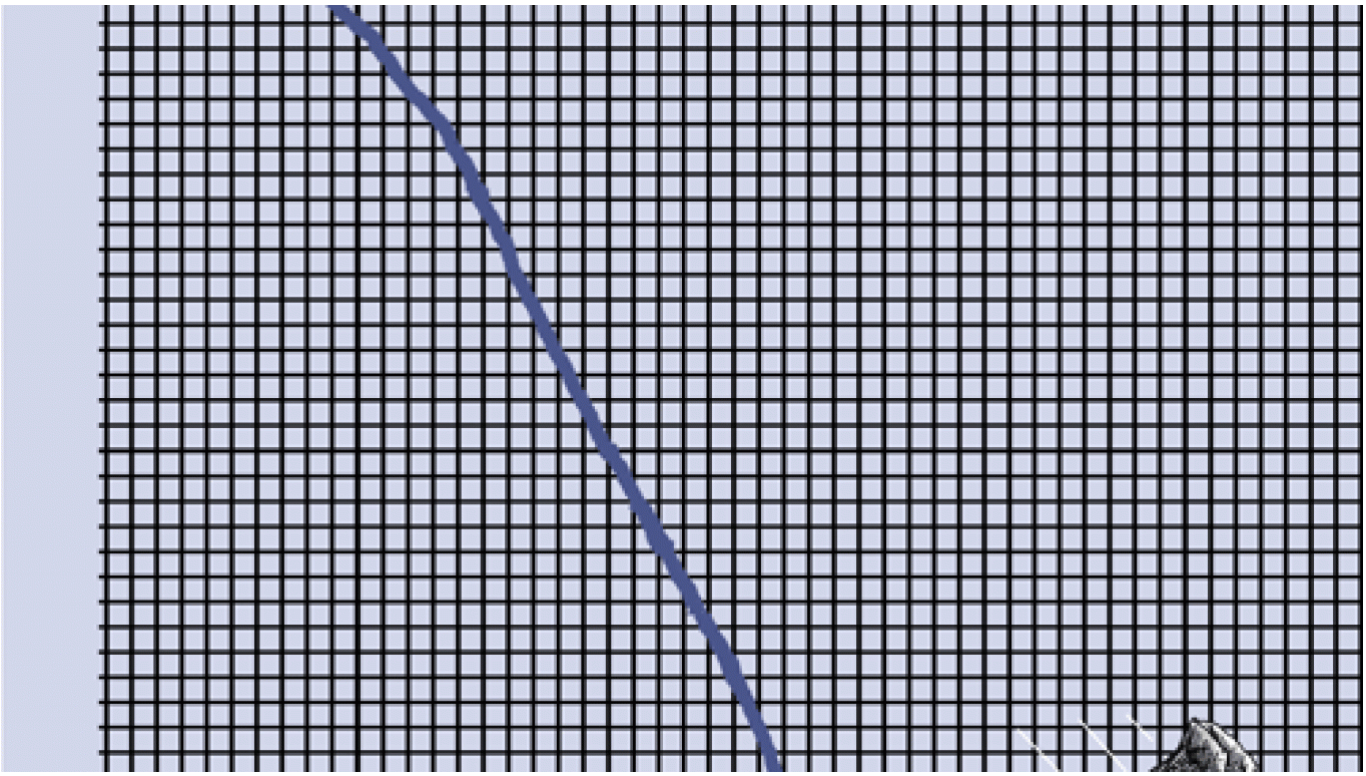
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Putin's Halcyon Days Are Over

By Michael Bohm

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In 2007, right before he stepped down after his second term in office, then-President Vladimir Putin was at the height of his political career, enjoying ratings of 80 percent. Since then, however, Putin's popularity has dropped significantly. But you wouldn't know it judging by his cool, confident behavior in the past few weeks, despite the widespread protests. It's as if Putin is stuck in time — stuck in the halycon days of 2007. This happens when absolute power not only corrupts leaders, but also distorts their sense of reality.

In 2007, Putin had become the epitome of a "strong hand" that so many Russians admired. He was a leader who "soaked" not only terrorists and certain oligarchs, but also bashed the United States and NATO when necessary. According to his army of supporters, Putin was precisely the strong man Russia needed to bring at least a modicum of order to a country that seems to be historically doomed to permanent chaos.

But now, Putin's strong arm isn't performing the same wonders that it used to. Russians are placing new demands on him and his government. After millions witnessed blatant election fraud on Dec. 4, tens of thousands of people across the country demonstrated under the slogans "We are not cattle!" "Stop lying to us!" and "We demand respect!"

But the anger goes much deeper than election falsifications. Many people are fed up with an arrogant, corrupt government that blatantly lies to them.

In the good old days, Putin got away with the traditional principle, "the tsar is good, the boyars are bad." But this trick, too, is not working anymore. On the contrary, an increasing number of people believe that "the fish rots from the head" and are holding Putin personally responsible for the systemic abuses of power under his rule. This is truly a tectonic shift in how many people relate to their national leader.

Thus, it is not surprising that in December, Putin's approval rating has slid to a record low — 51 percent, according to VTsIOM. What's more, his trust rating has plummeted to an unprecedented 25 percent.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said this drop is only a temporary phenomenon, that people have just gotten worked up emotionally after the elections. Peskov is confident that Putin's popularity will soon return to its previous levels when the people see once again how much the government is doing for them. But this appears to be wishful thinking.

Another example of how Putin seems to be in a state of denial and out of touch with reality was when he claimed during his call-in show a week ago that he didn't hear how the crowd catcalled him last month in the ring at the Olimpiisky stadium. The millions who watched and listened to the tape on the Internet would find this hard to believe. It is no wonder that Putin also didn't hear the even louder catcalls against him at the protests.

Putin believes that there is only one explanation for the protests: Tens of thousands of "Bandar-log" monkeys across Russia acted at the bidding of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who, we were told, paid them to show up and shout anti-Putin and anti-government slogans. At the same time, however, Putin tried to show that he is not too worried about it. "Let the guys earn a little money," Putin said condescendingly during the call-in show.

According to Putin's version of events, the U.S. State Department and CIA are trying again to make an Orange Revolution in Russia, and they are doing so through locally hired "Judases" and other agent provocateurs. Putin is trying to warn Russians that the enemies are not only at the gate, that they have also formed a powerful internal fifth column that is trying to destroy the country with the help of the West. After all, they already destroyed the Soviet Union in 1991.

As journalist Leonid Parfyonov said during his speech at the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protest, all of this talk of internal and external enemies and Western plots is "shameless rubbish." U.S. President Barack Obama put it a bit more mildly two years ago when he said that Putin "has one foot in the old ways." It is hard not to agree with him.

It seemed as if Putin went out of his way during his call-in show to insult the majority of Russians who were angered by the vote-rigging. Putin said he thought that the demonstrators on Bolotnaya Ploshchad had condoms pinned to their chests and had gathered in a campaign to fight AIDS. After all, why would 50,000 people possibly demonstrate against election fraud when, as Putin said, the elections were carried out honestly and objectively, and their results reflected the opinions of the people?

It is strange that he even noticed the Bolotnaya protests. After all, Putin was unaware of a Dec. 5 protest on Chistiye Prudy because, by his own admission, he was too busy attending hockey lessons.

Of course, Putin has the right to express himself any way he likes — that U.S. Senator John McCain is crazy and bloodthirsty, that Russian Judases and jackals who take Western money are trying to destroy Russia; that it is necessary to strengthen the punishment for Russians who "carry out the orders of foreign states"; and that U.S. foreign policy is similar to that of the Third Reich.

The problem is that Putin wants to have his cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, he has said repeatedly that Russia subscribes to democratic values and believes that the country is a legitimate part of the Western world. At same time, however, his provocative words and actions, such as allowing election fraud, alienates Russia even further from the West and brings Putin down to the level of Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Unfortunately, global reputation is usually not a constraining factor for autocrats — and particularly so if the autocrat rules a nuclear-armed country rich in oil and gas.

Putin often points to Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was elected U.S. president four times, to justify his own time in office. But Putin should listen to a much more modest man from his own circle — Boris Gryzlov, who last week resigned as speaker of the State Duma, saying, "It is not right to serve more than two terms."

When referring to Roosevelt, however, Putin conveniently ignores the fact that after Roosevelt's presidency, the United States concluded that more than two presidential terms is not only wrong, but it is also potentially dangerous and harmful to the country. That is why in 1951, the United States ratified the 22nd amendment to the Constitution to limit future presidents to two terms in total.

Former President Boris Yeltsin made a big mistake when he did not pay attention to three small but important words in Article 81 of the Constitution that limits the president to two terms — "in a row." As a result, Russia now has a leader who will likely appropriate what amounts to a life term in office.

Putin did an amazing snow job on everyone thanks not only to the Constitution that allowed him to leave the presidency and come back, but by constructing a power vertical that gave him virtual monopoly political control. And if you ask Putin about it, he would surely answer with his trademark complacent grin and a spark in his eyes that it was all done in complete accordance with the Constitution.

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