

Why Putin Believes His Critics Are Monkeys

January 24, 2012

The  Moscow Times

In the six weeks since the protests began at Bolotnaya Ploshchad, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has made one fatal, but inevitable, error. He broke his vow of silence.

Until now, one of the most conspicuous features of Putin's rule had been his silence on every subject that had been a source of public outrage.

It was always President Dmitry Medvedev who went out of his way by promising to "get to the bottom" of the latest injustice — for example, the possible cover-up of the fatal car accident involving a LUKoil executive on Leninsky Prospekt, the death of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, the brutal beatings of journalist Oleg Kashin and the persecution of Khimki forest highway protesters. But because Medvedev never made good on his promises, he came off looking like a windbag.

Putin, however, always maintained an Olympian silence on issues of concern to the country. There were small exceptions, such as when he mentioned in passing the greed behind the small-time owner of the Bulgaria riverboat that capsized and took the lives of 122

passengers, or the way the Khromaya Loshad nightclub fire, which claimed 155 victims, reflected all the problems inherent in Russia's bureaucracy. But he took such liberties only when it was clearly established that the people responsible for those tragedies bore no relationship to his own tight circle of friends and colleagues.

But when it came to the big stuff, like the Magnitsky killing, he never uttered a word. According to Putin's thinking, any public acknowledgment of Russia's complete lawlessness is a sign of weakness. Arkady Mamontov, a reporter with state-controlled Rossia 1 television, accused human rights activists of having ties with British intelligence, but Putin remained silent.

And yet, a lingering suspicion always remains: What if Putin really is above all of this? Maybe it is only we, the ordinary people, who trouble ourselves over such trivialities as Magnitsky being killed by the very people he exposed on corruption charges, or a LUKoil vice president who may have gotten off scot-free after his Mercedes plowed into a small car, killing two women.

Putin rules from above, regulating global crises and the price of oil, wielding his UN Security Council veto like Zeus brandishing his lightning bolt.

Then suddenly he opened his mouth and said: The protesters' white ribbons look like condoms, they are all a bunch of monkeys, writer Boris Akunin is actually a Georgian, and the U.S. State Department is paying the students to protest.

By speaking, the great National Leader committed three errors at once. First, he focused the entire protest movement against himself. Second, according to his own rules, Putin demonstrated weakness by speaking. Third, he revealed how little he really understands the problems facing the country.

Under Putin's decade-long rule, Russia earned 1.6 trillion petrodollars and yet failed to build a single modern highway while reportedly having 26 personal palaces built for Putin's use. Meanwhile, Putin refuses to debate other presidential candidates and believes that anyone who opposes him is a condom, a monkey and a Georgian.

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