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Protests' Ogre Churov Insists He Is Apolitical

By Alexander Bratersky

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Caricatures of him as a sneering, bearded magician are seen at almost every protest, and the Russian blogosphere is filled with satirical diatribes painting him as an evil puppet master manipulating the electoral system from behind the scenes.

Central Elections Commission chairman Vladimir Churov has grown weary of the criticism, and insists that he has been wrongly portrayed as a political mastermind when, in fact, he is just a civil servant filling a bureaucratic post.

"I don't have political opponents. I am not a politician. I am not even a man. I am the chairman of the elections commission," Churov said in response to a question from The Moscow Times.

While he tries to maintain a strong outward appearance, the public fury seems to be having some effect on the 62-year-old Churov.

"They clearly understand that I can't answer back while I am in this post, so they are beating an unarmed man," he said as he raised a glass of champagne during an informal chat with reporters last week while celebrating Russian Old New Year at the commission's office.

In person, Churov appears more like a soft-spoken college professor than the malevolent force he has become in the eyes of critics, who have howled for his resignation at mass street protests that erupted following allegations of widespread vote-rigging during the State Duma elections.

When President Dmitry Medvedev boasted to Churov after the elections that "some party leaders call you a magician," the evil wizard parody was born, with protest posters frequently showing him as Lord Voldemort, the sinister sorcerer of Harry Potter fame.

A longtime confidante of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Churov is also a serious history buff and author of numerous essays on theater. He was far more ready to discuss his softer side than politics, recalling his years as a journalist during Soviet times fondly.

A physicist by background, Churov wrote articles on space and science when he was younger under a pen name. He said he got involved in journalism through his mother who was an editor at several prominent Soviet literature magazines.

"My scholarship was 40 rubles and I earned 80 rubles from writing. Only Pravda paid more," Churov said, referring to the old Communist Party mouthpiece.

Reporters cracked smiles when Churov said one student newspaper he wrote for was called Golos — the same name as the independent elections watchdog group that came under fire in pro-Kremlin media prior to the elections, with accusations it answers to foreign benefactors.

Golos was among the most vocal critics of the election results, which preserved a narrow majority for Putin's United Russia party. The conduct of the elections was also heavily criticized by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and other Western watchdogs.

In a December report, the ODIHR said the voting was "characterized by frequent procedural violations and instances of apparent manipulation."

When asked about the report's findings, Churov was, surprisingly, overwhelmingly positive.

"A very good report. You should just leave politics aside in observing the election process," Churov said.

Churov also pointed proudly to findings that the elections were "well administered" and that they "complied" with election procedures.

The elections commission chief is known for his attention to detail and said he always takes care about even little things like the lighting at polling stations.

A frequent theatergoer — his favorite musical is "West Side Story" — he has collected hundreds of programs, which he used to write a book of essays in 2011 on Leningrad theater.

"I still keep all of them in a shoe box," he said proudly.

But critics say that by paying such close attention to details, Churov has lost sight of the larger essence of the electoral process.

"For those kind of people, digging through details is not just a satisfaction, but a part of their character and required by their state of psychology. But today a political situation needs a different reaction, but he couldn't say 'stop,'" said one reporter, who spoke on condition of anonymity so as not to disturb his relationship with the commission chairman.

Former Duma Deputy Konstantin Zatulin, who served with Churov on a Duma committee in 2003, said he was surprised when his former colleague was appointed to head the federal elections commission.

"He always tried to maintain the style of being an informal man among the power elite, but he didn't appear to me like a manager. I think that he is more presiding then governing," Zatulin said.

While many of Churov's friends raised eyebrows when he was elected to the Duma in 2003 on the ticket of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, experts say his nomination was probably part of a deal hammered out between the party and the Kremlin.

Churov's ties to LDPR prompted a heated exchange Thursday at a Duma hearing discussing the upcoming presidential election, in which Zhirinovsky screamed: "He is your man, not ours!" in response to a question from United Russia Deputy Alexander Khinshtein about what had happened in the December vote.

Churov himself has never hidden that he is close to Putin, having worked as his deputy in St. Petersburg's city government in the mid-1990s.

In 1999, Putin even asked Kremlin-connected reporter Andrei Kolesnikov to interview Churov for Putin's first authorized biography, "First Person."

The elections commission chairman is also known for his trademark phrase: "Churov's first rule: Putin is always right," he said while serving as a Duma deputy. The phrase later became an opposition bumper sticker slogan now widely used to mock him.

But Zatulin scoffed at the line of attack.

"All those attacks on him are easily made, since he is a useful scapegoat," Zatulin said.

At Thursday's Duma hearing, the head of United Russia's faction, Andrei Vorobyov, argued that Churov was "just a counter" of votes and not a political functionary.

Ironically, Churov is not known to 64 percent of Russians, according to a recent survey conducted in 43 regions by the FOM polling agency. But only 5 percent of those who responded said they had a positive opinion of Churov. His resignation has been demanded by three Duma opposition parties.

Churov said he was angered when he recently became a victim of an embarrassing prank

phone call, in which the caller — posing as presidential adviser Arkady Dvorkovich — told him he would have to resign. A recording of the call quickly circulated on the Internet.

Churov didn't immediately take the bait and told the caller that he would have to speak to Putin and Medvedev first. Churov says he didn't immediately recognize the call as a prank because he didn't know Dvorkovich's voice well and was upset by the fallout.

"I like to make jokes, but those have to be peaceful ones. This one was not a joke, but a provocation," he said.

Despite all the criticism, he said he tries desperately to keep a calm state of mind.

"I have become thick-skinned. So please, write less about me. I already feel myself becoming a monument like a bronze rhino," Churov said.

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