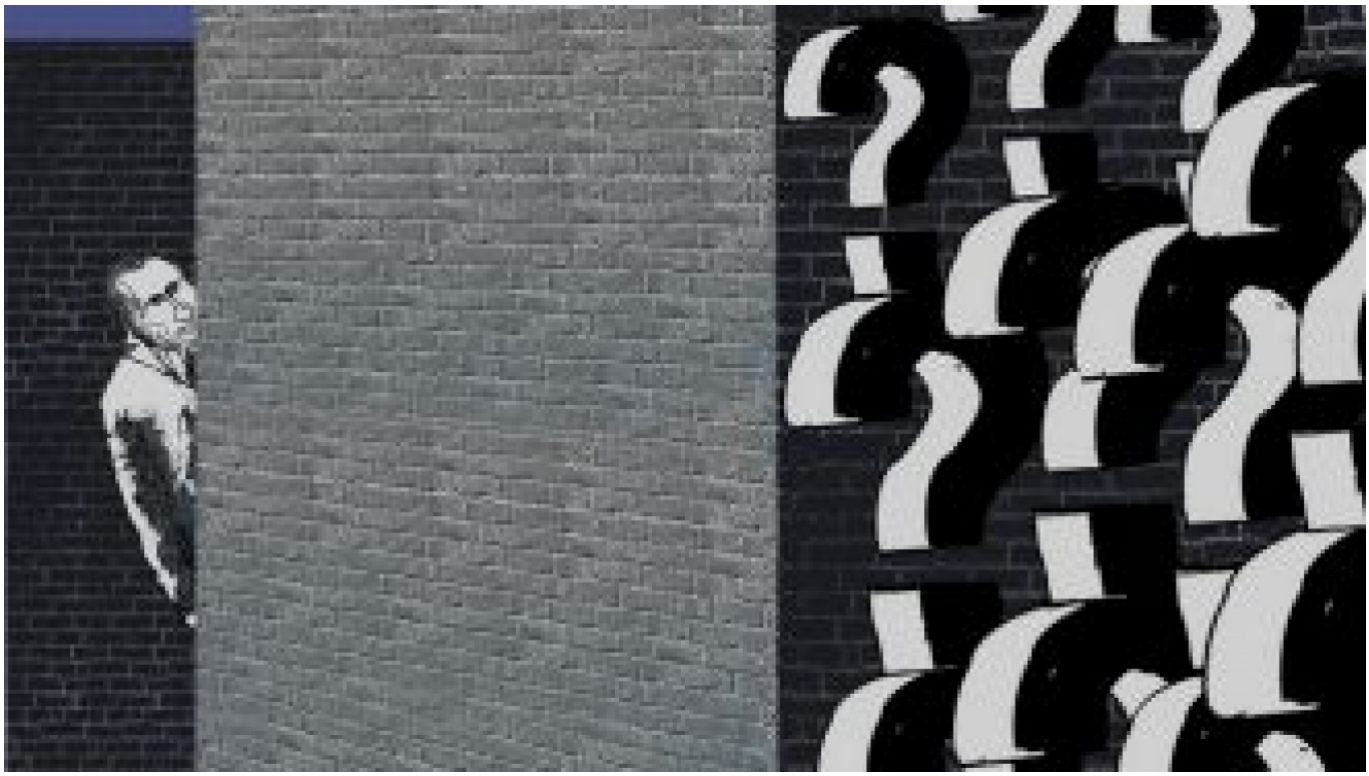
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Why Putin Is So Scared of Debates

By Michael Bohm

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Once again, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has refused to participate in presidential debates. He skipped out in the 2000 and 2004 presidential races, and two weeks ago Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman, announced that Putin was too busy to participate in the 2012 debates, scheduled for next month. Taking time off for debates would "impede his ability to carry out his duties," Peskov told Interfax.

This explanation is hardly convincing. Throughout his decade in power, Putin has found the time to conduct 10 live call-in shows — each lasting from three to four hours and famous for their soft, staged questions. He also found time to dive for amphorae, meet with bikers and drive a yellow Lada 2,000 kilometers across Siberia — an adventure that took four days to complete. But he apparently has no time to debate his rivals in an important election year polemicized by large street protests and tainted by election fraud.

Even more ridiculous was Putin's statement that he could just as well send one of his authorized representatives to debate in his place. United Russia pulled this trick during the debates before the December State Duma elections when the party's leader, Boris Gryzlov, sent other party functionaries on his behalf to debate with leaders of other parties.

Putin would have been better sticking to the "I'm too busy to bother" excuse. His blunder about sending someone else to debate for him became the butt of many jokes. Satirist Viktor Shenderovich quipped on Ekho Moskvy radio that sending a representative to debate in your place is like finding a trusted friend to fill in for you when you are too tired or disinterested to fulfill your "marital obligations" to your wife.

At the same time, however, it is understandable why Putin is more scared of debates this time around. A Levada Center poll in early January showed that only 42 percent of voters would vote for Putin in the first round. By facing even mildly uncomfortable questions from the other four candidates in the debate, all of whom are considered Kremlin friendly, Putin would still run the risk that this rating could drop even further before the election. Despite Putin's superior orator skills and sharp mind, he prefers to play it safe and opt out of the debates.

Meanwhile, the Levada poll that gives Putin only 42 percent support is causing serious concerns in the Putin campaign because it wants to avoid a second round at all costs. If this number doesn't increase by March 4, this would mean that electoral manipulations and fraud of about 10 percent of the vote are inevitable to push Putin over 50 percent in the first round. As the country's national leader, Putin will probably want to show at least 53 percent, which is what he got when he was a little-known novice back in 2000. It is a matter of honor and pride.

This may be one of the reasons why the Central Elections Commission announced Tuesday that Yabloko founder Grigory Yavlinsky would be disqualified from the presidential race. Although he was expected to receive only about 1 percent of the vote, if he had been approved as a presidential candidate, more than 57,000 Yabloko members would have been allowed special access to monitor polling stations on March 4 — and this would have been dangerous for Putin. After all, Putin promised honest elections this time around, and the last thing he wants is liberal do-gooders from Yabloko raining on his parade by presenting evidence of election fraud.

Putin has always been the ultimate "Teflon president" — but certainly not in the Ronald Reagan sense of the word, for whom the phrase was coined and who participated in numerous presidential debates in 1980 and 1984 election campaigns. Putin's brand of Teflon is clearly made in Russia — with several components imported from Belarus — and the product is marketed extensively on the country's state-run television every day. In an election year especially, Putin would like to apply a couple of new layers of Teflon, and walking away from debates provides this added protection.

But tough questions during debates are the sine qua non of any democratic election. A leader's refusal to participate is clear evidence that he is shirking his main public responsibility of being accountable to the people and shows that he is not willing — or able — to defend his record. It also undermines the legitimacy of the election itself.

Remember how much attention rock singer Yury Shevchuk attracted in May 2010, when he posed a sharp question to Putin about the sad state of democracy under his rule during a videotaped roundtable discussion that went viral on the Internet. The event was remarkable precisely because it was so rare to see Putin facing a tough question publicly. It shouldn't be this way. In real democracies, of course, leaders face tough questions virtually every day — from journalists, lawmakers and other members of civil society.

Opposition parties have been lobbying for years to change the election law to require all candidates to participate directly in debates for Duma and presidential elections. But as long as Putin has been in power, every one of these attempts has been defeated by United Russia.

In February, Putin needs to step up to the plate and debate his opponents — even the soft ones.

Imagine, for a second, a debate between Putin and opposition leaders who are not loyal to the Kremlin, such as Boris Nemtsov or Vladimir Ryzhkov. Now this would be a real debate. Putin would have to answer for the toughest, most incriminating issues that he has eluded over the past 12 years.

Sparks would definitely fly if Nemtsov or Ryzhkov were given the chance to grill Putin about, for example, the botched Beslan and Dubrovka rescue missions that resulted in more than 460 civilian deaths; Baikal Finance Group and the Yukos affair; how Gennady Timchenko, the Rotenberg brothers and dozens of other Putin friends and colleagues got so wealthy so quickly; or even allegations that Putin plagiarized part of his doctoral dissertation, a topic that would be fair game in a presidential debate.

Of course, Putin could grill Nemtsov and Ryzhkov about their records in public office, too.

In the end, live televised debates would allow voters to make an informed, balanced decision and help them decide which candidate is more qualified to run the country. Debates are much more effective in this regard than staged call-in shows or long-winded, tedious political manifestos.

What's more, a majority of Russians want to see live televised presidential debates with all of the candidates participating directly. In a November VTsIOM poll, Putin was the candidate Russians most wanted to see participate in debates. Unfortunately, the 2012 presidential debates will be without Russia's main hero.

There is a popular saying in Russian: "The truth comes out in an argument." But Putin's latest refusal to participate in presidential debates shows how little he wants the truth to be known.

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