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Putin Under Siege

By Michael Bohm

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The closer we get to this weekend's presidential election, the worse Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's siege mentality has become.

On Feb. 23, during a speech at the Luzhniki stadium, Putin said he wouldn't allow outside forces to interfere in Russia's internal affairs. Presumably, he meant all those pesky election monitors, like Golos, who reveal and publish evidence of electoral fraud.

Or perhaps he meant U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul — the "Orange Revolution specialist," according to Kremlin propaganda, who had the audacity to meet with leading opposition leaders a day after he met with top officials at the Foreign Ministry.

Or perhaps he meant the $85,000 grant that the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy gave to the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers to help Russian families fight against the hazing of conscripts and other abuses by the military, or its $50,000 grant to support the Perm-36 gulag museum.

Putin has good company. Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev also believed

that Western support of human rights, such as fighting for the freedom of Soviet dissidents and other political prisoners, amounted to "interference in Russia's internal affairs."

During the speech, Putin also warned against outside forces that impose their will on Russia. "We have our own free will!" Putin cried to 80,000 supporters in the stadium.

But the tens of thousands of street demonstrators and the millions of Russians whose views they represent have a completely different interpretation of that will — and whether it is free or not.

For the opposition, the country's "free will" is not exemplified by Putin's corrupt power vertical or what appears to be his lifetime rule, but by an open, pluralistic and democratic Russia that protects human rights and private property and allows for a free media and opposition parties to run in elections.

During the Luzhniki speech, conveniently timed on Defenders of the Fatherland Day, Putin urged his fans to not look to the West as an example to emulate. This sounded disturbingly familiar to the ubiquitous state slogan during the Soviet period about the "noxious influence of the West."

Putin also urged Russians to "not stray to the left and betray the fatherland." The hint was clear: Supporting the opposition is tantamount to betrayal.

In addition, Putin urged Russians "to love the country like we do — with all of one's heart." According to this casuistry, the opposition, by definition, is unpatriotic and doesn't love Russia for the simple reason that they don't support Putin. As one satiric quipped, "If I had a villa on Rublyovka and in Italy, the latest Range Rover Jeep and a fat Swiss bank account, I would love Russia just like Putin and his cronies."

Putin's siege mentality reached a climax at the end of his speech when, referring to the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Borodino, he cried, "The battle for Russia continues, and we will win!"

What continuing battle was Putin referring to, and what enemy is Russia fighting against? Surely, Russia's opposition, McFaul and the National Endowment for Democracy don't pose the same threat as Napolean's invasion of Russia in 1812.

Topping that, Putin quoted Mikhail Lermontov's famous poem about Russia's resistance to the French invasion: "We will die defending Moscow, like our brothers died!"

As the Kremlin tries to split the nation between pro-Putin "patriots" who love the country and the "fifth column" of opposition forces that are determined to destroy Russia, let's hope that Putin's reference to Lermontov wasn't a harbinger of street clashes that might break out between opposition demonstrators and pro-Putin forces after the election. If so, will Putin once again appeal to his loyal, "patriotic" supporters to "die defending Moscow?"

Putin ended his speech by quoting Vyacheslav Molotov, Josef Stalin's foreign minister who on the first day of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, also said, "The victory will be ours!"

What victory was Putin talking about and against whom? Given the wave of anti-Americanism over the past six months coming from Putin and state-controlled television and the message that the United States is Russia's greatest threat, the inference behind Putin's Molotov reference is clear: There is little that distinguishes those who are supposedly plotting an Orange Revolution against Russia and the Nazi invaders.

Putin's erratic outburst at Luzhniki shows how nervous — and desperate — he has become in the face of mass protests and challenges to his rule.

If that weren't enough, Putin's belief in conspiracy theories reached a new level of absurdity on Wednesday. While speaking to campaign workers, he suggested that the opposition might kill a prominent figure — presumably one of its own leaders — and blame it on the authorities to destabilize the political situation and mobilize protesters against the state.

On Sunday, millions of Russians will go to the polls to choose their next president. Let's hope Putin will show his love for the country by respecting the free will of the Russian people.

Let's also hope the real victory after Sunday will ultimately be Russia's firm course toward democracy, human rights, rule of law and an open, civil society. This surely beats a victory over imaginary enemies.

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