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Putin's Arrested Development

By Richard Lourie

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Recently, in a bookstore in Buenos Aires, a title caught my eye: "Gombrowicz in Argentina." Witold Gombrowicz was a Polish writer famous enough from his novel "Ferdydurke" to have been invited aboard a Polish ocean liner's maiden voyage to Argentina in August 1939. No sooner had the ship arrived than the Nazis invaded Poland, stranding Gombrowicz in Argentina. He didn't get back to Europe until 1964 and never saw his homeland again.

"Gombrowicz's" great theme was immaturity. Inside most adults with their clipped moustaches and booming, confident voices sits a small and stunted being. That arrested development is usually, though not always, connected with sexuality. The descriptions of the furtive sex acts between U.S. President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky read like two teenagers down in the rec room. Dominique Strauss-Kahn seems even more primitive, like a rutting wild boar. The Catholic priests who molested thousands of children over decades are perfect examples of men in positions of power whose inner selves can hardly be termed mature. ⊠⊠⊠⊠

There is no particular aura of sexual immaturity around President-elect Vladimir Putin as

there is, say, around his good buddy ex-Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi and his "bunga bunga" nights. (Though it is suspect that of all Western leaders, he was the one Putin bonded most closely with.) Putin's arrested development seems more that of an adolescent who defines being a real man, a muzhik, in terms of pecs and guts. Putin says it was spy movies and books that inspired him to adopt a KGB career, believing that "one man's effort could achieve what whole armies could not." Though Putin says real experience working within the KGB disabused him of any romantic notions, something of that spirit can be seen in his various photo ops and publicity stunts. Putin practices martial arts and is clearly in good shape. But he's pushing 60 now, and somehow all that tiger hunting and scuba diving does not seem very age appropriate — especially when the tiger that Putin boldly tranquilized in the Siberian wild may actually have been a sedated zoo animal and the ancient Greek amphorae Putin "discovered" in the Black Sea had definitely been planted there for him in shallow water.

Gombrowicz, who was well aware of how large bodily functions loom in the childish mind, would no doubt delight in the expressions that Putin tends to use. One radio station pours "diarrhea" over him, Chechen terrorists must be blasted in the outhouse, opponents are snot-nosed.

But what matters now is not only the undigested elements behind Putin's facade, but the depths of character there. ⊠

Something like real politics has returned to Russia, meaning at least a minimum of two entities are vying for power. Putin will find himself at the center of pressures coming from various directions⊠— the now protesting middle class and everyone who has a stake in the status quo, the past with its patterns and examples, and the future where the promise of a renewed Russia will be fulfilled or scuttled.

Putin is going to have to make judicious choices, take the long view, and decide what Russia must really do if it wants to be anything more than a nuclear petrostate in a world in which both nuclear weapons and petroleum are likely to play a diminishing role. His efforts can now in fact be those that "achieve what whole armies could not." We know Putin is a muzhik. Now let's see if he's a mensch. ⊠

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