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Why Putin Is Afraid of the People

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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After Moscow's large protests on May 6 and the following days, we can easily dispel two widely held opinions — that the protest movement had fizzled out and that Putin had overcome his fear of demonstrations. As it turns out, the protest mood among Russians is stronger than ever and the paranoia of the ruling regime is getting worse.

On the way to his inauguration on May 7, Putin's motorcade traveled along completely empty Moscow streets. Minutes later, he accepted the oath of office in marble- and gold-bedecked Kremlin halls, where he was met by a more than 3,000 members of his loyal political elite who owe their privileged status to his generous patronage.

While jubilant supporters of French President Francois Hollande filled the streets to celebrate his victory on May 6, the deepening chasm between Putin's regime and the people resounded with an ominously hollow echo along Moscow's empty streets a day later.

Despite his claims that the people adore him, Putin has become even more frightened of them. After the inauguration and the chilling reception in Moscow, it is no surprise that he rushed off to Nizhny Tagil — an island of pro-Putin supporters only because it is home to the

Uralvagonzavod tank and train-car plant that prospers because of generous government contracts ordered by Putin himself. Putin is afraid to meet with people who are not dependent upon his largesse. Private-sector workers are still the majority of Moscow's population, and that is why Putin fears Muscovites most of all. This explains why he didn't want to encounter them on the day he ascended the Russian throne for the third time.

Few thought that the March of a Million rally on May 6 would have a large turnout. Only 7,000 people had registered to attend on Facebook, and it seemed that most opposition-minded Muscovites would leave the city for the weekend to take advantage of the rare warm weather for early May. But more people showed up on May 6 than they did on Pushkin Square and Novy Arbat in March.

In addition to the large protest on May 6, writers Boris Akunin and Dmitry Bykov and musician Andrei Makarevich led about 15,000 people on Sunday on a writers' walk from Pushkin Square to Chistiye Prudy. All of this shows that dissatisfaction with Putin and his regime remains high and that people are prepared to take to the streets, even at the risk of being beaten by police. Another, perhaps even larger protest rally could take place in Moscow on Russia Day, a national holiday on June 12.

The May 6 protests could have ended in serious violence. The more radical protesters happened to be at the front of the crowd and seemed to be eager to clash with riot police. The authorities, for their part, were well prepared for a confrontation. Riot police carried tear gas and gas masks, and behind police cordons several water-cannon trucks stood ready. The situation could easily have degenerated into a massive, deadly riot. Fortunately, the violence did not escalate, although many were injured.

In contrast to rallies in December, February and March, the May 6 rally was not well organized. What's more, some of the leaders planned beforehand that they would remain at the site after the approved time for the rally had expired. This led to clashes with police, who broke up the unauthorized action.

The authorities also took advantage of the poor coordination by rally organizers to create an artificial bottleneck, leaving only a narrow corridor for thousands of protesters to enter Bolotnaya Ploshchad. This caused havoc and provoked demonstrators to clash with police. Most of the blame for the violence lies with the authorities, but the event organizers are partially to blame as well.

For the first time since Dec. 10, a protest rally ended with police disbursing demonstrators before they could formulate explicit demands to the authorities. Coverage by state-controlled television focused on protesters clashing with the police, but it ignored the opposition's political motivation behind the rally. It is even possible that provocateurs were planted in the crowd to trigger the violence. They were active in previous opposition rallies. After all, it is advantageous for the authorities to portray demonstrators as anarchists or radicals who commit gross violations of law and order in an attempt to lead the country into chaos and revolution. Not surprisingly, that is exactly how the state-controlled media described the events of May 6.

The radicalization of the protest movement plays into Putin's hands. It gives him a carte blanche to unleash both the state-controlled media and the police force against

demonstrators. By contrast, the regime is threatened by peaceful rallies with clearly defined political demands, where organizers maintain order and hand over provocateurs to the police.

The country's leaders have no arguments to oppose the opposition's demands and complaints, and are helpless in the face of large, peaceful rallies. We should learn lessons from the May protest to make the June one larger and even more effective.

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