

Putin Is Joining the Dictators' Club

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If President Vladimir Putin had hoped that Western leaders would receive him more or less warmly in his third presidential term as they had during his first two, he is sadly mistaken.

Putin did not attend the Group of Eight summit last month, and he will not attend the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. His first trip abroad as president was to visit Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko.

But the most startling development was his subsequent visits to Berlin and Paris, where Syria was the main topic of discussion and Putin found himself completely isolated.

His first stop was Berlin, where German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle had said several days earlier that Russia's support of Syrian President Bashar Assad was exacerbating the violent standoff between government forces and rebels. Meanwhile, hundreds of protesters surrounded Putin's meeting place with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and shouted anti-Assad slogans.

Western media reported that Russia's Professor Katsman cargo ship had recently arrived at the Syrian port of Tartus to deliver weapons to the Assad regime. But at the Berlin news

conference, Putin could only come up with this feeble answer: "Russia is not delivering arms that could be used in a civil conflict."

His reception in Paris was even worse. The media reported that Putin's meeting with French President Francois Hollande was "ice-cold" and that their talks were a "dialogue of the deaf." When asked during a news conference how he liked Hollande, Putin stood silent with a gloomy face. He then answered another question, saying that Assad had visited Paris more often than Moscow.

It appears that Putin is on a dangerous course. He is gradually sliding down into the category of other rogue leaders, such as former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, former Libyan President Moammar Gadhafi and Assad.

Some of the reasons for Putin's estrangement are objective. It was impossible for him not to elect himself president for the third term, and it was impossible for the West to ignore the accompanying anti-Putin protests.

While the West has supported the Arab Spring movements to overthrow dictators in the Middle East and North Africa, Putin has taken the opposite stance. He is trying to use his opposition as a bargaining chip with Western powers, effectively saying, "We won't help dictators in the Middle East if you won't criticize our elections." But that whole idea collapsed under its own weight.

Every time Western leaders tried to avoid aggravating the bully by making concessions to the Kremlin, Moscow took that as a confirmation of its policy. But when the West refused to bow to Moscow's demands, the Kremlin perceived it as a personal insult, a sign that there is an exclusive club of chosen leaders that reaches agreements on how to rule the world. For some reason, the West never includes Putin in its consultations. By this line of thinking, Putin was left with no choice but to form alliances with the likes of Assad and Gadhafi.

After that, two of Putin's main psychological traits came to the fore: his sympathy for bloodthirsty dictators and his imaginary role as the point man in the geopolitical confrontation with Washington. The leaders of Venezuela, North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Sudan and Zimbabwe also follow this course. This puts Putin in good company.

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