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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Hello, 1937

By Victor Davidoff

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All week, one of the most popular images in the Russian blogosphere has been a photograph of an old coin issued in 1937, the year that marked the peak of the Stalinist purges.
The caption reads: "In circulation once again." The joke was carried further when the darkly humorous Twitter hashtag #privet37god (hello, 1937) topped the trending charts.

There is a basis for this black humor. Moscow hasn't seen such a flurry of activity of the political police since the collapse of the Soviet Union. On Saturday, six people were detained, suspected of involvement in the violence on May 6, bringing the total arrested in this case to 12. On the same day, eight people were detained in front of the Moscow police headquarters on Ulitsa Petrovka for protesting the earlier arrests.

Monday was a banner day for the political police in Center E, the Center for the Prevention of Extremism. Early in the morning, they began to search the homes of opposition activists. "Cool," Alexei Navalny managed to joke on Twitter. "My home is being searched. They almost sawed through the door. Actually, they did."

That was his last tweet before the police took his phone away. The police searched seven

apartments, including those belonging to opposition leaders Sergei Udaltsov and Ilya Yashin. The apartments of Maria Baronova, an aide to State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov from the Just Russia party, and Alexei Sakhnin, a leader in the Left Front opposition movement, were also searched. The police climbed through balcony windows to get into Sakhnin's apartment.

All the searches were carried out like in a Hollywood movie. The building entrances were guarded by police with automatic weapons at the ready. No one was permitted to enter the apartments, including lawyers. Photographs taken in Navalny's apartment after the 13-hour search show that authorities left his home in total chaos, with books and children's toys strewn all over the floor.

The search of socialite and opposition activist Ksenia Sobchak's apartment was characterized on the Russian blogosphere as "Putin blowing a kiss to her." At one time, President Vladimir Putin was a close friend of her father, the late Anatoly Sobchak, former mayor of St. Petersburg. Putin is her godfather. The police scored the biggest haul in her apartment: more than 1 million euros in cash stuffed in envelopes, which they confiscated. At the apartment of Sergei Udaltsov, who lives a much more modest lifestyle, they didn't take money, but they did take "a large amount of literature with anti-governmental slogans," according to a statement issued by the Investigative Committee, as well as "a list of people supporting his views." These formulaic statements are very familiar to anyone who lived in the Soviet Union. They read verbatim like KGB protocols.

Just Russia Duma deputies Ponomaryov and the father-son duo Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov harshly criticized the police actions. "We believe that this might provoke an irreversible rise in tension in society and close the door on the evolution of the Russian political system," Dmitry Gudkov wrote on his LiveJournal blog.

The deputies do not believe that the searches had anything to do with the events of May 6. The goal was clearly to isolate the organizers of Tuesday's rally and scare off potential demonstrators. But both opposition supporters and opponents are, oddly enough, in agreement that these actions are counterproductive.

Even loyal Putin supporter and United Russia Deputy Alexander Khinshtein tweeted: "I don't support methods like searches and other similar scare tactics. The authorities are turning these people into martyrs."

For what is surely the first time in his political career, opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov agreed with Khinshtein. "Searching the apartments of opposition activists will lead to more people on the street and will radicalize them," he told Ekho Moskvy radio.

The movement against the Putin regime is certainly becoming radicalized at a fast pace. Six months ago, the opposition called only for honest elections. Now the list of demands has grown exponentially. At the top of the list is a call for the immediate resignation of Putin. There are already a dozen groups on social networks that have the ultimate goal of overthrowing the authorities and revolution. Soviet dissident Nikolai Ivlyushkin wrote on Facebook: "Maybe the revolution has already begun. Regime change is the endpoint of revolution. No one ever notices how it begins. Egyptian newspapers didn't run headlines 'The Revolution Has Begun!' the day after a group of people gathered on Tahrir Square."

But the Kremlin doesn't share this view. The leaders seem to view the opposition as something between a natural disaster and a terrorist attack. In any case, Putin seems to be guided by the same principle he used with the terrorists during the Dubrovka theater and Beslan school hostage crises: Never negotiate with the enemy.

There will never be a new "liberal" version of Putin. He isn't going to follow former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's path of liberal reforms. He seems more likely to follow the path that combines the worst elements of Leonid Brezhnev and Yury Andropov. And everyone knows where that leads.

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