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Opposition Pushes Putin's Panic Button

By Richard Lourie

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On May 7, I watched Vladimir Putin's inauguration live on television in Moscow. The two things that struck me most then seem even more striking almost three months later.

Putin was driven from the White House to the Kremlin through absolutely empty streets. No one called his name or held up placards with his image. But that emptiness was also a presence, the silence eloquent. It echoed the unexpectedly huge demonstration that had occurred the day before in central Moscow. There his name had certainly been called — "Putin is a thief" — and his image had been held high — in a red circle with a line through it.

By wishing to keep his route free of demonstrators, Putin only brought them back to mind and showed how important they were to him.

Putin's first election as president was a mix of happenstance and manipulation, while his second was almost a shoo-in given how well the economy was doing and the lack of any real rival. But his third, and possibly final, election needed to have been a triumphant return, a serious validation after his gimmick when he went into "exile" for four years as prime

minister.

The May 6 opposition demonstration not only rained on Putin's parade, it also caused him to have no parade at all.

My second strong impression had to do with Putin's demeanor and expression on inauguration day. Never for an instant did he seem triumphant, exultant or even quietly satisfied. On the contrary, he looked upset, cold and almost physically ill. The previous day's demonstrations had been an affront and an assault to him. Putin's pride, honor and vanity had all clearly been wounded. He had taken offense and would soon take the offensive.

But the demonstration had struck on a level even deeper than personality because it questioned the very legitimacy of Putin's rule.

This is a panic point for Putin. This is dangerous because negative emotions begin to cloud his judgment and vision. In Putin's nightmare version of the world, the questioning of his legitimacy by the protesters can only lead to further covert action on the part of the "foreign agents," aka nongovernmental organizations. Efforts to clamp down on "unauthorized demonstrations," the Internet and the insidious NGOs will, in turn, inflame the demonstrators and inevitably lead to a violent clash on the streets.

Foreign commentators, followed by foreign leaders, will start speaking of Putin as a leader who is losing his legitimacy. His name will be mentioned in the same breath as Hosni Mubarak, Moammar Gadhafi and Bashar Assad. United Nations resolutions calling for him to step down will be proposed.

Even if Putin truly believes that this is the West's actual intent, it would not matter to him greatly if he did not also believe it could easily occur. In Russia, neither rulers nor the ruled exhibit any confidence that the current political arrangement, the amorphous and nameless entity known as post-Soviet Russia, has any great staying power.

Each element of Putin's post-inauguration behavior — the laws on unauthorized demonstrations, the Internet and NGOs, and the die-hard support of Assad — could have been predicted separately given his record, but it was the force of the demonstration on the eve of the inauguration that intensified his reaction and pushed him to bundle several reactions into one.

For Putin, the personal, psychological and political spheres are one. This must be remembered by those seeking to analyze and predict his behavior.

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