

Leadership 101: Learning to Talk Like Putin

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Putin is consistently rated as one of the best orators in the country. Above, a man watching Putin give a speech on televisions in an electronics store earlier this year. **Igor Tabakov**

Josef Stalin spoke with a Georgian accent. Leonid Brezhnev slurred words. Mikhail Gorbachev's southern twang made some ordinary words sound almost foreign.

Although Russia's experience with orators has not been without extremes, current President Vladimir Putin is topping the charts for speaking skills, and some Russians think he is worthy of imitation.

Putin is consistently rated as one of the best orators in the country. He topped the list of best Russian orators in 2011 at the Kiev-based J.F. Kennedy Institute of Rhetoric, beating out actor Ivan Okhlobystin and leader of the Liberal Democratic Party Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

Another 2011 rating named him the sixth-best orator in the world, behind Hugo Chavez but

ahead of Hillary Clinton.

"[Putin's] speech technique is ... difficult to find fault with," said Dmitry Ustinov, a rhetoric coach at the Syntone Training Center in Moscow and personal speech coach to one of the post-Soviet prime ministers. "There is clear sentence structure [and] word emphasis and a skillful use of pauses. It's almost clean speech with a minimal amount of trashy words."

Ustinov includes Putin among the list of the best orators to study. Other speech experts praise the combination of humor and aggressiveness in the president's speaking.

The Putin technique is already trickling down to the masses. Some government officials, particularly younger ones, and businessmen have a tendency to copy his intonation and straightforward rhetoric. And ordinary Russians easily notice how similar the speech tactics of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev are to those of his mentor.

"The leader of the country dictates the fashion in speech," said Natalia Kozelkova, television host and speech trainer at Moscow's Orator Club. "Our elite has noticeably switched from the blurry phrasings of the '90s to the clearer speech forms of today's ruler."

Putin speech expert Valery Apanasik is helping ordinary Russians to speak like their president.

Apanasik's book "Govorit kak Putin? Govorit Lucshe Putina!" ("Speak like Putin? Speak Better than Putin!"), which he wrote in collaboration with Grigory Ogibin, was published in 2011. Businessmen and politicians are among the book's target audience.

Even if people don't agree with the president's politics, they will appreciate his skill as an orator, Apanasik said.

"Putin is not some ideal orator, but a real one," Apanasik said. "It is much better to learn something based not on some elevated examples, but from ones that show the strong and weak points of oratory art."

"If your line of work requires you to perform, debate and convince ... you have something to learn from Putin," the book's prologue says.

It is not surprising that the president's style is setting oratory trends in the establishment, Ustinov said. Not only Medvedev but also opposition leader Mikhail Prokhorov is copying Putin's tactics, though probably unconsciously, he added.

Duma deputies, ministers, bureaucrats and businessmen have approached Ustinov to study, but he cautions against complete imitation of Putin's speaking style.

"Don't speak completely like Putin. Have your own style," Ustinov said. "As the president himself said, 'We are not going to ape.' But if, in the bright moments, your speech and [the president's] speech are similar, that's only a reason to celebrate."

The Putin Mystique

Ustinov's own rating of the president's oratory skill places the Russian ruler in the top three along with U.S. President Barack Obama and former French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Putin's speech skillfully combines strength and reservation in contrast to some of his political rivals, including Zhirinovsky, whose speech "though strong, goes wild in terms of emotional amplitude," Ustinov said.

Putin aims to speak to the audience at their level and reacts quickly, Kozelkova said. Other strengths speech experts identified include Putin's ability to speak without a script and his presumed quick wit. Some of the president's aphorisms, such as "every day for me is a Monday," are widely known.

But Putin wasn't always a role model for aspiring orators.

Speech experts remember that when he first came to power he was quiet, uncomfortable and nervous. Apanasik said Putin looked like a "10th-grader" in an interview he gave to journalist Sergei Dorenko while he was still prime minister.

Putin's speech got a facelift in 2008. Apanasik noticed that he became more "insolent" and that the number of his attacks on interviewers noticeably increased.

This rigid style is favored in Russia, where orators need to be more aggressive to be successful, Apanasik said.

"Bourgeois emotions such as shedding a tear or marveling at nature don't really interest the Russian voter," he said. "Putin's rigidity is in his favor."

But Putin's popularity as a great orator may be waning as opposition to his politics grows.

The president's weakness as an orator is uncontrolled emotions, Apanasik said. This trait was on full display during his famous debate with rock musician Yury Shevchuk in May 2010. Putin had avoided answering questions and later received overwhelmingly negative comments from YouTube viewers.

Alexander Sosland, lecturer at the Moscow State University of Psychology and Education and member of the European Association for Psychotherapy, wrote an article that explained the success of Putin's image, including his oratory skills, in 2000 but said Putin's actions starting with the Mikhail Khodorkovsky trial and the raid on NTV's offices have cast a shadow on this image.

"The events showed that behind his quiet demeanor there was a rigid personality," Sosland said. "He didn't change on the outside, but the reality has changed. His reserved manners now suggest something else. They are associated with corruption."

But as far as ratings show, the president is still considered a better orator than his political rivals.

Zhirinovsky is usually the runner-up to Putin in oratory. The flamboyant head of the Liberal Democratic Party was particularly popular after he came into the political limelight in 1993. One of his former disciples, Alexander Glamazdin, even taught a course on speaking like Zhirinovsky.

The Practical Putin

You don't need to be a prime minister or even a Duma deputy to "speak like Putin." The Putin technique is just as applicable to a president as it is to the workingman, Apanasik said.

His book has a section that outlines how to apply the technique in everyday situations. Some scenarios described in the book involve co-workers who try to weasel out of doing work, friends who talk about their hobbies and someone accused of stealing money.

The Putin debate tactics can also be applied to family feuds and to shopping at a farmer's market, although some of the approaches are questionable, Apanasik cautioned.

Kozelkova teaches rhetoric not only to businessmen and politicians but also to cosmetologists and auto service personnel, among others. The only ones who might not need the courses are street cleaners, she said.

Ustinov has also taught people from a range of professions, including doctors and bankers.

"The approach and the methodology for everyone are the same," Ustinov said. "If you possess these skills, it is not important which audiences they are used for and which audiences you try to influence. You'll achieve these goals no matter what."

It's possible even Putin is turning to professional speech coaches. The speech he made near Red Square after winning the presidential election in March and the uncharacteristic tear rolling down his cheek during the episode suggest that he has taken a couple of oratory lessons, Sosland said.

But training the president in his speech technique is not a dream job for everyone.

"Changing image is not an easy task for Putin," Sosland said. "It is clear he himself is not thrilled about it."

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