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Putin's Colossal Anti-Magnitsky Blunder

By Richard Lourie

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President Vladimir Putin's initial response to the Magnitsky Act was right on the money: to accuse the U.S. government of monumental hypocrisy by focusing attention on Washington's record of torture and illegal rendition of terrorism suspects. That reaction also had the tit-for-tat structural symmetry that is standard in such cases.

More important, it allowed the Kremlin to take territory it had not occupied since Soviet days: the moral high ground. Back then, Soviet officials would counter U.S. criticism of human rights violations with the standard question, "And what about your blacks?" Historian Martin Kenner even contends that progress in the civil rights movement was accelerated by the criticism from Moscow, a sort of social-justice race running parallel to the arms and space races.

Apart from symmetry and high ground, there was also an excellent contextual reason to attack the U.S. for its practices of torture and rendition. The subject is very much in the air again because U.S. President Barack Obama has nominated John Brennan, currently his chief counter-terrorism adviser, to be the new CIA director. Four years ago, that nomination proved

impossible because of Brennan's favorable remarks about rendition and waterboarding. In addition, the new film "Zero Dark Thirty" detailing the manhunt for Osama bin Laden was controversial even before its recent release because its violent opening scenes of waterboarding suggest that this torture led to actionable intelligence. This was an ideal moment for Putin's attack to resonate with U.S. popular cultural as well as on Capitol Hill.

A significant percentage of Americans, especially among those who voted for Obama in November, are still angered by the damage that former President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney caused to the U.S. global image. If Putin's idea was to stick it to the U.S., he couldn't have found a better means and moment to do it.

Yet Putin's big mistake was when he turned his initial symmetric response into a foolish asymmetric one. By denying Americans the right to adopt Russian children, the reasoning must have been some combination of "The Americans are sentimental, this'll hurt them!" and "Who do they think they are, coming here and shopping for our blond, blue-eyed darlings!"

In the end, of course, it is Russia's own orphans who will suffer the most. The old Russian saying, "Beat your own so others will fear you," was probably not designed with kids in mind.

Patriarch Kirill has called on Russians to adopt more children. It's a good idea. This is also a moment where the opposition or spontaneous groups that are changing Russia slowly from the bottom up could come forward with a mass adoption program. But it seems that they, like Putin, are also letting a rare and valuable opportunity slip by.

What makes this whole business even odder is how adroitly Putin dealt with French actor Gerard Depardieu, grabbing world headlines and changing the perception of Russia as a place where artists like the punk group Pussy Riot are persecuted to making it a rather safe-haven for international movie stars fighting for reasonable income tax rates.

Yet only time will tell whether Putin's play on Depardieu was smart. It may turn out that like many post-Soviet people Putin has thrown out the dialectical baby with the Marxist bath water. Dialectics stressed that things inevitably turned into their opposite. Russian citizen Depardieu may yet end up on Red Square protesting the arrest of some fellow "Russian" artist, a sight the world media would gobble up. Stay tuned.

Richard Lourie is the author of "Sakharov: A Biography" and "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin."

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