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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Bachelor-in-Chief

By Victor Davidoff

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The news that President Vladimir Putin was getting divorced instantly became the top story in the world's media. It also unleashed a flood of jokes on the Russian blogosphere.

"On June 6, Lyudmila Putina was appointed acting wife of the president until the election of a new wife can be held."

"Dmitry Medvedev supported the president's initiative and announced that he, too, would divorce Lyudmila Putina."

"The regional branch of the United Russia party in Dagestan decided to follow the president's example: All members filed for divorce from their wives."

"The Investigative Committee is studying video of the ballet 'Esmeralda,' after which the Putins decided to divorce. There are plans to search the apartments of the ballet's authors, in particular of the writer Victor Hugo, who wrote the novel that served as the basis for the ballet."

There may be a new first lady before the opening of the 2014 Winter Olympics in February. After all, some believe, Putin would love to appear in the spotlight with an athletic, young wife.

Although the divorce announcement seems to solely concern the personal life of the Putin family and is outside politics, the response on the blogosphere was neatly divided by attitude to the regime and the president. Bloggers well-disposed to the president praised him for his "civilized divorce," while critics congratulated Lyudmila Putina for getting out from under his thumb. The oppositional leader Ilya Yashin wrote on Twitter: "If only he'd get a 'civilized divorce' from the country! That relationship is full of smashed china, fights and physical violence."

Joking aside, separating the personal from the political in a country where the head of state is a semi-sacred figure is actually quite difficult. For example, it's difficult to understand how Putin's actions jibe with his calls for a "return to traditional values," including a strengthening of the traditional, large family. In fact, the State Duma Committee on the family just published a draft of Russia's policy on families, which proposes that fines be levied against men who initiate a divorce.

It's even more difficult to understand how the Putins' divorce can be reconciled with the canons of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church is far more liberal than the Catholic Church with regard to divorce and permits couples to part for a long list of reasons. But the reason Lyudmila Putina cited — "the kids are grown up, and we practically never see each other" — does not appear on that list.

It's also not clear how the divorce will affect the president's ratings. The sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya asserts that it won't harm him. But, she continued: "We've only seen the first act of this drama, and we don't know yet if there will be a second act. ... If a young wife appears, the reaction of society might be extremely varied."

The name of the possible "young wife" is already known. Despite the secrecy surrounding the personal life of the president, it has been common knowledge that the Putins lived separately for a long time. Since 2008, there have been persistent rumors about the president's liaison with gymnast and Olympic medalist Alina Kabayeva. Since 2007, Kabayeva skyrocketed to success in politics and show business. Anyone who knows how things are done in Russia wondered if she had a secret, highly placed guardian angel to help

her career. What is known is that Kabayeva visited Putin in Sochi in 2008 as one of a very small group of Putin's inner circle.

The Western mass media, citing dispatches of U.S. diplomats published on WikiLeaks, reported that in 2009 Kabayeva gave birth to a son whose father was allegedly Putin. Photographs of Kabayeva with an unidentified fair-haired little boy have been circulating on the Internet, although Kabayeva insists that the boy was her nephew and categorically refutes rumors about a relationship with Putin. All the same, Vedomosti wrote on its Facebook page that the Putins' divorce announcement led to one question: "Maybe the rest of it is all true, too?"

Writer Andrei Malgin believes that after the divorce there will be a new marriage and a new first lady. "At the Winter Olympics in 2014, Putin wants to appear in the spotlight with an athletic wife." But the president's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, hurried to placate the public. He announced that "there is no other woman in the life of the head of state."

Over the course of his career, Peskov has proved to be an unreliable source of information, so only time will tell if he's telling the truth now. In the meantime, the only thing that's for sure is that Putin has committed an act that is unprecedented in recent Russian history. The last Russian leader who got divorced was Peter the Great, and that was over 300 years ago.

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