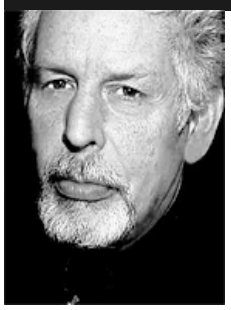
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Divorce a la Russe

By Richard Lourie

June 16, 2013





Richard Lourie

Sometime in the late '70s I was with a group of Soviet dissidents watching a doddering Leonid Brezhnev speak on television. Suddenly, one of them, a woman who had not fared well under his regime, exclaimed: "The poor man!"

It was a remarkable leap of compassion across the political divide. And indeed politicians do pay a high price for their power — they age rapidly, forever lose the right to just take a walk down the street and have even less privacy than a U.S. phone caller.

President Vladimir Putin as a public man does not, of course, deserve any special consideration. But some of the snarkiness that greeted his announcement of divorcing his wife of 29 years seemed mean-spirited and beside the point. What matters with Putin is the psychology of a leader who probably has more power than Brezhnev did. The Politburo could oust Nikita Khrushchev and keep Brezhnev in power to his dying day; there doesn't seem to be anything of the sort within the power structure restraining Putin.

Remarks made by Putin's wife, Lyudmila, in a 2002 interview about their marriage reveal, unsurprisingly, a secretive and authoritarian personality type. She did not even know her husband worked for the KGB until a friend's wife informed her. "I always submitted to Vladimir Vladimirovich's wishes," she said, telling how Putin squelched her wish to name their first daughter Natasha, saying "no, it'll be Masha."

Putin never helped in the house; everything from diapers to dishes was women's work. To a man with such attitudes, a delegation of Martians would have seemed closer and more compatible than Pussy Riot.

Yet even a submissive wife retains some powers. She is the witness to how much a man may have changed over time and how much he may have betrayed his best self in the process. In the interview, Lyudmila was quite proud that Putin was always himself with everyone, never "twisting his soul," to use her nice Russian expression. Would she say the same today? To an interviewer? To Putin himself?

It's a rare wife who does not sometimes speak frankly to her husband in private. Putin was very much in need of good wifely advice after the May 6, 2012, demonstrations on the eve on his inauguration. It might have helped him dispel some of the cold fury that was clearly evident the next day during the ceremony in the Kremlin.

Out of all of Stalin's gang, it was Khrushchev who preserved the most humanity, which I always attributed to his having a good wife. The ability to remind a man of his best self, his failures, his humanity — those are some of the essential functions of an old wife, something from which Putin has now cut himself off.

A new, young wife has other values and attributes but cannot influence her husband in the same ways as a woman who has known a man for 30 years. That means Putin will now be even freer to pursue his disastrous course — failing to diversify the economy from its dependence on gas and oil, refusing to engage the opposition, and using the judiciary as an instrument of repression. This has led to an alienation of affection of the middle class that now accounts for a quarter of the country. And so it may be more than merely coincidental that such leading figures as Sergei Guriev and Garry Kasparov have just now announced a trial separation, if not yet an outright divorce, from Putin's Russia by choosing to remain abroad.

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

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/06/16/divorce-a-la-russe-a24955