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Why Putin Is So Angry

By Ivan Sukhov

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The Internet is rife with mean-spirited jokes: At a news conference during recent talks in Milan, President Vladimir Putin made an off-color comment regarding a grandfather's genitals that caused a greater stir than the time back on Oct. 12, 1960, when former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev pounded his shoe against the podium while addressing the United Nations.

But honestly speaking, people have deliberately distorted the truth in this regard.

To begin with, Khrushchev never banged his shoe on the podium during his speech. The scandalous episode in question took place during the 15th session of the UN General Assembly when Khrushchev merely twirled his shoe in his hand during an official report in order to show his complete lack of interest. That might have gone beyond the bounds of conventional etiquette, but it was far from the picture we are given of a leader angrily pounding the podium with his shoe to underscore his words.

And since the previous story turns out to be untrue, there is nothing with which to compare the current episode. In fact, Putin has repeatedly taken the liberty of telling off-color jokes

in public — even using the grandfather joke on previous occasions — and many of his counterparts in other countries also make risque comments from time to time.

The difference here is that the Russian president is clearly angry. That anger comes through in his facial expressions, gestures, jokes and the biting comments he makes from the corridors of international meetings at which he is either on the verge of brawling with the Moldovan president or raising his voice to German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Even the fact that he was late to his recent meeting with Merkel indicates that he is angrier than usual: this time he preferred watching a military parade in Belgrade to keeping his appointment schedule.

Of course, the modern world is structured in such a way that the anger or other emotion of any single individual — including the president of the world's largest country — should not have a significant impact on anything. At least, we assume the world is built that way.

But when the Russian president's anger begins violating all the rules of diplomacy, it is worth asking what has caused it. This is important to know, at the very least for anyone engaged in negotiations with Russia.

The answer is simple: Putin's anger is born of frustration. He has repeatedly been unable to convince his negotiating partners in the West of what seem to him to be obvious truths.

For example, it is obvious to Putin that the West has been pressuring Russia for many years, possibly since the beginning of the post-Soviet period. It is the West that has encroached on Russia as European Union and NATO borders have steadily expanded eastward toward his country. To put it bluntly, Moscow views that as Western aggression.

The Russia-Georgia War in 2008 was largely a response to the NATO summit in Bucharest at which the West confirmed its readiness to discuss procedural matters for including Georgia and Ukraine in NATO, completely ignoring Russia's concerns.

Moscow is convinced that it is crucial for Russia to maintain its influence in Ukraine in order to preserve stability at home. And yet the West continues to ignore that concern, even after the dramatic events in Ukraine have led to more deaths than the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In a sense, Putin sees himself as someone barely managing to hold the front door of his home open even as the outside world is trying to slam it shut in his face. For him, and for the vast majority of Russians who unconditionally support him, Crimea is like a foot that Russia has managed to wedge into the door to prevent it from closing completely.

But that only caused the outside pressure to increase, even while the one doing the pushing continues to publicly declare the person inside the house as the aggressor. Imagine yourself in that situation. You want to call 911, but know that the same crusher pushing on the door will probably be the one to pick up the receiver. You have to agree that anyone in such a situation would get a little angry.

And as it turns out, the person inside the house is also deaf to all arguments that Russia's quietest border is its border with NATO, that NATO and the EU are absolutely transparent

and modern organizations devoted exclusively to implementing progressive structural reforms in countries that have recently joined them and, finally, that no one is planning to attack Russia.

To add to his problems, the man inside the house overestimates his strength, imagining Russia to have the might of the former Soviet Union and, along with that power, a claim not only to the house, but to the sprawling front and back yards as well. And he feels this way more out of habit than anything else, using terminology that has long gone out of use.

All Russian fears of NATO expansion are based on articles of Soviet military doctrine written 50 years ago stating that the priority was not even national security but the ability to deliver a crippling "counterstrike from the grave" against a Western attack. Obviously, those lines no longer have any relevance.

For many people in the new post-Soviet Eastern Europe, Russia would remain a familiar and potentially desirable partner if only it offered something besides the constant call to kowtow to Moscow. Whether we want it or not, relationships in the modern world are based on whom you like — and there is not much to like about modern Russia.

Of course, everyone is responsible for their own happiness. But in all honesty, nobody bothered to explain to Russia how to make itself likable at that unforgettable moment when, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it entered the international community as an uncertain teen. The world was much more interested in knowing how Russia would manage its inheritance.

In the end, Russia's dialogue with the rest of the world was like talking through a small, grated opening in a door to someone on the other side. It seemed preposterous to suppose that, stuck on its own side of that door, Russia might start to like itself and develop the same hopes and aspirations as its adult European neighbors on the other side.

Russia and the West will inevitably script out new episodes in the ongoing saga of their relations. It remains unclear when this new "television series" will begin or who will play the leading roles, but I like to believe that when it does start, all the actors will do a better job of taking into account each other's habits and interests.

Ivan Sukhov is a journalist who has covered conflicts in Russia and the CIS for the past 15 years.

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