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After Sinai Plane Crash, Russians Wonder: Where Is Putin?

By Eva Hartog

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Military investigators from Russia stand near the debris of a Russian airliner at the site of its crash at the Hassana area in Arish city, north Egypt, Nov. 1, 2015.

President Vladimir Putin on Monday afternoon made his first public appearance since the country experienced its largest-ever plane disaster: the crash of an Airbus A321 carrying mostly Russian tourists from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula on Saturday.

Looking straight into the camera and speaking in a subdued voice, Putin reiterated his condolences to those affected by the "terrible catastrophe" and called for an "objective picture" of the crash, in which 224 people died, a video of his short speech published on the Kremlin's website showed.

In a country where the president's every move is given broad coverage on national television, Putin's largely absent reaction has raised eyebrows.

“Where is Putin?” Alexei Naryshkin, a journalist for the liberal Ekho Moskvy radio station said Saturday in a comment on his Facebook page. “Today I am waiting for [Putin] more than ever. Not a Kremlin press release, but the real (forgive me) president. Just snap your fingers, all these state television channels will come to your home,” he said.

Putin was reported by Russian media on Saturday as having expressed his condolences to the victims of the crash. A statement on the Kremlin's website also declared Sunday a day of national mourning in the president's name.

Delay Tactic

According to some analysts, Putin's delayed reaction is a sign there is still uncertainty over what caused the plane to break up mid-air.

Dmitry Oreshkin, an independent political analyst, told The Moscow Times that Putin's silence was a sign he had information the crash could have been caused by more than a technical failure.

“[Putin] doesn't know yet what stand he will take,” he said.

When the Kursk submarine sank 15 years ago — in one of the worst disasters in Russian naval history — Putin did not appear in public for days until the full gravity of the incident had been assessed, Oreshkin said. Putin canceled his vacation in Sochi only five days after the tragedy began, leaving his officials to take the heat.

“As usual, the second and third tiers of the leadership paint a picture [of what happened], and the leader is silent, so that he later isn't caught on his words,” Oreshkin told The Moscow Times.

Job Description

An alternative version is that Putin does not consider it part of his job description to console his electorate in case of national tragedies.

“This is not like with Western politicians, where people are accountable to their voters. Putin is not interested in domestic events at all. ... He doesn't consider he should get involved in this,” Stanislav Belkovsky, director of Moscow-based think tank the Center for National Strategy, told The Moscow Times.

The Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, which was downed over eastern Ukraine in July last year, killing all passengers on board, was “ a completely different case,” Belkovsky said, because it concerned an event that could have broader political consequences.

In that case, the Kremlin published a video late that same night of Putin expressing his condolences at a government meeting.

“[With that appearance] he was telling [U.S. President Barack] Obama: I didn't down that plane. But this is a purely Russian problem that does not disquiet him at all,” Belkovsky said.

Stay Positive

Putin's recent absence from television screens could also betray a Soviet-era heritage that restricts leaders to being the bearers of only good news, analysts said.

"[Putin] made many appearances talking about the Syria conflict because he thought it would end well. But this [the aftermath of the plane crash in Egypt] will end badly, so you have to appear [in public] less," Oreshkin said.

With 88 percent of Russians following the news mainly through television coverage, according to data from the state-run Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) pollster in April, visual images of the president alongside news of the tragedy could frame the leader in a negative light.

"In the Russian tradition, an unscheduled appearance by the head of the government could mean misfortune in itself — regardless of the reason," political scientist Yekaterina Schulmann said.

No Expectations

Analysts agreed most Russians did not resent Putin's passivity in the wake of national tragedies and that some even preferred it.

An online poll by Ekho Moskvy radio published Sunday showed that 57 percent of more than 70,915 online respondents said they had not expected Putin to play a more active role, compared to 36 percent of voters who said they did.

"The lack of a public reaction from the higher authorities paradoxically has a soothing effect on a Russian audience — the declaring of [days] of national mourning means that misfortune has taken place, but since no one says anything else, it must mean that that is all. In Russia's political system, what is frightening is not the catastrophe, accident or terror attack itself, but the authorities' reaction to them," Schulmann said.

Even those Russians who would have wanted Putin to be more active were unlikely to bear a grudge for long, Oreshkin said.

"[For most Russians], Putin is the only beam of light. This clinging to Putin's [positive] image means [Russians] are willing to forgive him anything," Oreshkin said.

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