The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Good Is Putin at Spearfishing Really? (Op-ed)

Not very good, expert analysis suggests

By Simon Saradzhyan

August 09, 2017



Vladimir Putin **Kremlin Press Service**

That Vladimir Putin went spearfishing the other day isn't surprising. He's reportedly gone before, as have Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, his deputy Dmitry Rogozin and even Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

But never before this weekend's Siberia trip has there been footage of the president actually shooting fish, as released by pro-Kremlin NTV channel, the Defense Ministry's Zvezda channel and RT.

While shots of Putin's spearfishing expedition might impress those with no knowledge of the

sport, likely the bulk of his voters, seasoned spearos in and out of Russia, who know about diving for fish "on breath hold," will see little more than a novice in Putin.

Embed:

And that's no matter how many times state-controlled TV channels say the Russian president "chased a giant pike for two hours before catching it with [his] bare hands."

The videos show that Putin doesn't even dive to shoot his prey. Instead, he swims on the surface of the water and shoots a pike—of rather modest size for the wilds of Siberia, even if RT did call it "giant."

Here, I should add that pike is sometimes speared from the surface in shallow rivers. You glide down the current, watching for pike hiding in grass or amid sunken branches.

But in lakes or slow-moving parts of rivers, spearos typically dive down and then slowly explore or lie on the bottom, hoping the predator will come check them out.

Another sign of Putin's lack of skill is that the Russian leader doesn't even dive to retrieve his speared trophy. The NTV footage clearly shows someone else, with a camera on his forehead, diving down to take hold of the fish and then helping Putin handle it.

And no way did Putin catch the pike "with his bare hands" as claimed in Zvezda's headline for the video.

That Putin holds the pike by the eyes shows that his spearfishing instructor or cameraman, who appears to hand him the fish, knows a thing or two. The fact that this assistant is wearing a smooth-skin freediving suit—which is more elastic and generates less friction, but can easily be torn if not handled with care—also indicates he has some diving skills and experience.

Zvezda's footage also clearly shows that the Russian president doesn't know the technique of swimming in long free-diving fins. Instead of making long movements from the hip with legs outstretched, as free divers and free-diving spearos do, he makes frequent up-down movements with knees bent, which is what novices instinctively do.

Rather than carry weights on a diving belt on his waist, Putin wore a diving vest. This can be hazardous in freshwater because the vest can get entangled in sunken trees and isn't as easy to ditch as a belt. But this could be to protect his back, which has given him trouble before.

On the other hand, you've got to hand it to Putin. That was a pretty good shot, given his distance, the length of the gun and the angle. That said, if Putin really did "chase the pike for two hours" as his spokesman said, then we don't know how many times he shot and missed before finally nailing the sharp-toothed beast.

Related article: Sanctions? What Sanctions! President Putin Goes Fishing

Interestingly, two different spear tips appear in the footage. In RT's, Putin is shown jumping

into the water with a speargun whose shaft ends in a trident, which also appears in Zvezda's footage. NTV's footage, however, shows Putin firing at the pike and swimming back with it with a shaft that ends in a single bullet-like tip.

I'd also note that Putin was not practicing what he preaches in terms of "import substitution."

He was wearing a diving suit by OMER, an Italian brand that recently became part of California-based Aqua Lung, whose suit, incidentally, Putin wore to retrieve ancient jugs from shallow waters in the Black Sea in a photo-op that invited criticism for being staged.

The rear-handled pneumatic speargun that he used for the shot also looked to be a classical European design, most likely Italian or French, in contrast to Russian-made spearguns, which normally sport a handle in the middle, giving more maneuverability in murkier waters and around submerged trees.

Prime Minister Medvedev is more oriented toward Russian producers in his choice of suits: He's switched from an American Riffe to Neopro, one of Russia's leading manufacturers.

Simon Saradzhyan is director of Russia Matters, where this article was originally published, *and a former MT journalist. He is also a prolific spearfisher.*

The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/08/09/how-good-is-putin-at-spearfishing-really-a58622