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The Fear Behind Vladimir Putin's Jokes

Crude, rude and inappropriate jokes are Putin's calling cards.

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Russia gave the world not only the word "intelligentsia" but the concept of the intelligentsia — or so people say. The words "satellite" and "perestroika" definitely came from us.

That was all true in the past. But now our leaders — former President Dmitry Medvedev, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Dmitry Rogozin — the head of a succession of grand ministries — and many others talk like street punks and make dirty jokes. It's as if the ruling system can't exist without vulgarity. And the head joker is Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation.

At the very beginning of his career he promised to "rub out terrorists in the outhouse." Then he told us that if your grandmother had male genitals she'd be your grandfather. And now his latest achievement is explaining the West's focus on developing renewable — what Putin called "unconventional" — energy as the interest of Western leaders in homosexual relations.

The degradation of public language reflects the degradation of Russian public policy. But it also reflects the worldview and preferences of our state's top officials.

Putin is, I believe, sincere and authentic in his "edgy" remarks. His style is not the product of speechwriters and PR people who have carefully analyzed the political consequences of what he says. It reflects the president's personality and his view of the world. Style is the man.

Judging by what he says "from the heart" and not his speeches written ahead of time, the Russian president's picture of the world is quite simple. The main thing is strength and striking first. This is supposedly what he learned on the streets of St. Petersburg, although I grew up in the same years in the same city and even in the same neighborhood, and the city was not at all the way Putin describes it.

The "syndrome" of his worldview includes sexism. Do you remember how he told the Israeli delegation that we envied their president — "what a man!" — while he was under investigation for sexual harassment? He also demonstrates homophobia. Proof of this is not only his comments on modern energy, but the whole homophobic wave of propaganda in the country today, which could not have emerged without his approval.

Might makes right. Force, not treaties. Like Peter the Great, we do not invade, we take back what is ours. Signed agreements, recognition of borders, and so on are irrelevant. The important thing is that we consider it ours, that we have a historical right to it and the power to take it back. There are problems with the last part, to be sure...

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Power gives you the right not to answer questions and to be rude to the questioners. In any case, they won't be allowed to ask another question — the times of unscripted interviews are long gone. The president's press conferences and live broadcasts have been transformed into a show, a concert, where he entertains his fans by humiliating his absent opponents and shows off how "cool" he is.

The level of boorishness and arrogance, of course, varies from case to case. Sometimes it is almost invisible, sometimes it is off the charts. It depends on Putin's state of mind and mood, but that's not all. The most important factor is how unpleasant the issue is for him, and how much the topic alarms or frightens him.

You can tell by the president's level of boorishness and aggression what he considers a threat to himself and to the country.

In this sense, his latest "joke" about linking alternative energy to homosexuality is more than revealing. The enemy of the raw material economy — any country's economy, not just Russia's — is technological progress, for it weakens dependence on resources. Once upon a time, the production of wool saved people from dependence on the fur-bearing animals traded by Russia. Then mankind drastically reduced its dependence on wood as an energy source. Now in developed countries trees are burned only for pleasure, in fireplaces and fires, but not for heat. Imagine how hateful the development of oil extraction and refining was to the rich landowner, whose well-being and power were derived from his vast forests — the

source of wood that his neighbors, who had never heard of oil, depended on to survive.

Today, technological progress is reducing people's dependence on oil and gas, both through more efficient technology and through the alternative sources of energy that infuriated the president. The downward trend in this dependence may be slowed, it may even be reversed for a while by war or other misfortunes, but these delays do not cancel out the long-term trend that is clear to everyone — including, it would seem, Putin.

But he has no answer. Trillions of petrodollars have not turned into new technologies in Russia. We still have nothing to offer the world. Except, of course, rudeness and cursing, which Putin has unfortunately demonstrated.

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