

# Behind The Lines!

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## PUTIN FLEXES AND PERPLEXES: BENDING FRYING PANS AND YOUTHFUL MINDS

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin as Russian prime minister and leader of the United Russia Party continues to play a quixotic role in the Russian presidential game while unabashedly enhancing his public image as a *muzhik* ("a man's man"). During his visit in early August to a youth camp at Lake Seliger, Tver Oblast where he regaled the *Nashi* ("Ours") nationalist youth group, he accepted the daunting challenge from two robust young males to actually bend a stout metal frying pan with his bare hands. As the most popular politician in Russia, Putin's macho image riding bare-chested on horseback, striking the pose of a Master of Sports *sambo* (Russian acronym for "self-defense without weapons") wrestler, or taking the wheel of a Formula-1 race car for a spin resonates strongly with the Russian populace which reveres a vigorous and valiant leader in the hero mold of the epic Russian *bogatyr*.

Putin's domestic political focus is to rally two key elements of contemporary Russian society – the re-emerging modern Russian military culture and the new generation of increasingly vocal Russian youth. Russian young people in organized national groups such as *Nashi* ("Ours"), *Molodaya Gvardiya* ("Young Guard") and *Nasha Strana* ("Our Country") bring back stirring images of Komsomol youth groups from the Soviet period. These youth tend to be very supportive of Putin and readily express their political views with a palpable anti-American sentiment. He stirred new emotions of nationalism while invoking patriotic phrases such as "love for the Motherland." The opportunity was not lost on his young supporters as they represent a formidable voting block for the future. Moreover, Putin chose the occasion with his young and impressionable audience to grab a quick headline when he described the American economic system as "sponging on the monopolism of the dollar."

Vladimir Vladimirovich has never been shy about availing himself of photo ops with military personnel and hardware. Whether he is ensconced at the controls of a Tupolev bomber attired in full flight gear or demonstrating his sea legs aboard a nuclear submarine, his objective is always the same: promotion of his public image as a true leader and strong defender of the Russian state. This image of a vigorous, intrepid Putin stands in stark contrast to that of the benign, mild-mannered President Medvedev. This "bad cop, good cop" image is assuredly not lost on the Russian public or the military. Putin recognizes that a strong military component is essential to restoring Russia to its status as a formidable world power. Military reforms to streamline the armed forces as a more mobile and lethal fighting force to support this objective are indeed underway, albeit at a slow pace. Russia continues to probe for soft spots and opportunities along its periphery such as South Ossetia and Belarus in an effort to restore some parts of the former Soviet Union, especially where there is a sizeable ethnic Russian/Slavic demographic.

Let's face it – Russians and Americans just don't trust each other. Historically there has never been long-term, genuine trust between the United States and Russia. Even during wartime and the Nazi threat to both the U.S. and the Soviet Union as so-called allies during World War II, Stalin was anything but benevolent in his view towards the United States. Perhaps Ronald Reagan captured the real emotion of the Russian-American relationship best with his succinct "trust but verify" <доверяй но проверяй> during the waning Soviet period. Despite U.S. efforts to implement a so-called "reset" (*perezagruzka*) in Russian-American relations, a distinct disconnect between the two competing cultures exists to this day. U.S. plans to deploy a missile defense system in Europe, along with NATO military assets in close proximity to Russia's state borders, are a case in point. The Russian response is to place the highly sophisticated S-400 "Triumf" (NATO designator "Growler" [SA-21]) land-mobile, surface-to-air missile system with high-explosive warheads in the Kaliningrad region near Poland and the Baltic states.

The overall tone of current Russian politics is palpably anti-American. Whether Putin, Medvedev, or possibly even a "party crasher" who suddenly appears in dramatic Russian fashion stands for election as president in March 2012, history and politics – as well as critical economic decisions to sustain unparalleled domestic growth – point to a tested leader who can meet the formidable, long-term challenges facing a changing Russia. Parliamentary elections to the State Duma in December may provide a clue to Russia's next venerable leader. V. V. Putin fits that profile. Or perhaps not.

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