

Putin's One Percent Doctrine

By Peter Rutland

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Former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, a vocal critic of the Kremlin, was barred on Sunday from running in the presidential election because of supposed irregularities among the two million signatures he collected in support of his candidacy.

Similar tactics were used to keep opposition parties out of the parliament elected last December, and to harass the street demonstrations organized by Garry Kasparov's "Other Russia" movement.

Why is President Vladimir Putin so allergic to allowing opposition groups to take part in the democratic process? Given Putin's avowed commitment to democracy, and his concern with burnishing Russia's image in the West, why doesn't he understand that he has more to gain by tolerating the opposition fringe than by persecuting them?

One possible answer is that the Kremlin's autocratic reflexes make it intolerant of any sign of loss of control. According to opinion polls, Mr. Kasyanov is attracting roughly one percent support – but even that is one percent too much for a leadership that seeks total obedience. One problem with this explanation is that the Communist opposition is allowed to function and compete in the presidential election (not that it poses a serious threat to the Kremlin).

The Kremlin's puzzling behavior may be grounded more in rational self-interest than in totalitarian neurosis. The Putin leadership was seriously alarmed by the prospect of a Western inspired "color revolution" in Russia. They watched the toppling of autocratic leaders in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) with increasing concern. The revolutions seemed to follow a script written in the West – to wit, Gene Sharp's manual for non-violent revolution, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*. The scenario involves confronting rigged elections with mass protests that trigger regime collapse. As Goldfinger said in Ian Flemings's 1959 novel of that name, "Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times it's an enemy action."

The Other Russia campaign seemed to be following the same screenplay as their predecessors from Belgrade to Kyiv – a youth movement with eye-catching symbols and protest actions, an appeal for Western support, and the creation of a broad, cross-party coalition. In Serbia's "bulldozer revolution" Gene Sharp encouraged the democrats to form an alliance with the nationalist leader Vojislav Kostunica in order to oust Slobodan Milosevic – similar to the way in which Kasparov joined forces with Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party. (Check out the party's website, <http://eng.nbp-info.ru/> to get a sense of their philosophy.) Why would a Western-oriented democrat make common cause with Limonov's semi-fascist thugs? According to Henri Duquenne, a French

researcher who spent some time with Limonov's group, their explanation was that Kasparov needed Limonov's muscular young foot soldiers to bulk up the street protests.

The chances of a color revolution in Moscow may seem remote to Western observers. But then, the chances that the Soviet Union would implode were also pretty remote – until it happened. That bitter humiliation is the formative experience for the Putin generation. The Kremlin knows that ordinary Russians are still unhappy with many aspects of their daily lives – and although Putin himself is extraordinarily popular, people have little faith in the electoral process. It is not completely far-fetched to imagine a scenario where the groundswell of popular discontent crystallizes around outrage over a stolen election.

In this respect, Putin seems to be operating on the same basis as Vice President Dick Cheney, as described by Ron Susskind in his book *The One Percent Doctrine*. Cheney reportedly said in a November 2001 meeting, “If there's a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.” A color revolution would be precisely such a “low probability, high impact” event for Putin. The costs of a color revolution would be extraordinarily high, in his eyes: the destruction of his country. The costs of him suppressing the democratic opposition are negligible. So the calculus of repression is clear. Unfortunately, in giving such vocal support to Kasparov and now Kasyanov, the West may be sealing their fate.