

Putin's Power Vertical Stretches Back to Kursk

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Russia's 10-year anniversary of the sinking of the Kursk nuclear submarine played out as expected: maudlin prayers for the 118 crew members who perished, bombastic speeches and pompous television programs. Those who bore direct responsibility for the tragedy, such as former Northern Fleet commander Admiral Vyacheslav Popov — who was given a cushy job as a senator in the Federation Council — did not even attempt to justify themselves. Pretending to be benevolent, paternalistic commanders and speaking in affected, anguished voices, they remembered their subordinates who died so heroically.

The Kursk tragedy had a profound impact on determining Putin's management style for the 10 years that followed. The Kursk incident, more than any other single event, prompted Putin to construct his now-famous and ubiquitous power vertical. Putin's plan was to build an army-like hierarchy within his government in which subordinates are unconditionally loyal and obedient.

But there was only one problem with the military model that Putin tried to copy. Military leaders systemically lied not only to the people — a practice Putin considered absolutely normal and natural — but they also openly lied to him, their commander-in-chief.

The most blatant lie was when the admirals pulled the wool over Putin's eyes while he was on vacation during the first two days after the explosion occurred on the Kursk. They told Putin that the submarine was “in the process of being lifted” from the seabed and assured him that everything was under control. In reality, though, nothing was being done at all. The admirals were simply trying to buy time. Maybe, they thought, they would find a way on their own to save the Kursk without having to give Putin bad news. This was the main reason Putin didn't interrupt his vacation — something he was highly criticized for later.

As it later became clear, the admirals had no idea whatsoever how to save the Kursk. They then came up with a second lie to cover up the first one. The admirals spent months feeding journalists a cock-and-bull story about how a “NATO submarine” from Britain or the United States had sunk the Kursk.

One of Putin's biggest mistakes was that he was afraid to punish the admirals who openly lied to him and placed him in a terrible position. According to Putin's thinking, firing them or putting them on trial would have called into question the very foundation of the system he was planning to build. After all, it would have exposed huge, compromising deficiencies in military discipline and their lack of respect for the commander-in-chief.

After the Kursk tragedy, Putin was convinced that the reason things had gotten out of control was that there was no subordination among military leadership and high-ranking government officials. For Putin, the solution was clear: He must find reliable and, most important, loyal subordinates. The first place he looked was among former KGB officers, whom he appointed to key government posts.

His second decision was to appoint governors. In his quest for increased discipline and loyalty, he could ill afford to give citizens the right to choose their governors. The decision to annul popular elections for governors was made in the aftermath of Kursk, but it was not put into place until September 2004 after the Beslan hostage crisis in School No. 1. Putin felt that he needed a pretext, terrorism, although few Russians understood the link between Kremlin-appointed governors and the battle against terrorism.

Another decision directly tied to the Kursk accident was Putin's crackdown on independent television, which exposed the government's deceit, incompetence and gross negligence in connection with the Kursk rescue operation. As a result, Putin initiated the campaign to place the top two independent television networks — NTV and ORT (now Channel One) — under government control.

Fast-forward to 2010. Now there is little, if any, criticism of Putin on the major television stations. The State Duma and Federation Council have both ceased to be a place for hearings, investigation, discussion or debate. The nation's governors are loyal Kremlin appointees, and now the Kremlin has given regional legislatures, which are dominated by the pro-Kremlin United Russia party, the ability to fire popularly elected mayors for what the legislatures deem to be “the loss of public trust.”

When wildfires broke out last month, it immediately became clear that the power vertical that Putin worked so hard to construct was absolutely inefficient. The military leadership lied to Putin just as they did during the Kursk crisis. For several days, the chief of the central naval aviation logistics base was afraid to report to his superiors that the fire was approaching, and no preventive measures were taken. As a result, the base, located in the Moscow region, was burned to the ground.

The governors are just as good at lying as the admirals. Nizhny Novgorod Governor Valery Shantsev cheerfully reported that the territory under his jurisdiction was under his full control, and he turned down any assistance. Just like during the Kursk crisis, the motives were to not upset Putin, to try to hide evidence of gross negligence and to buy time.

One peculiarity of Putin's power vertical is that it inevitably attracts dishonest, corrupt and incompetent people to the ranks of "civil servants." In the absence of independent television, parliament and free and open elections, the people have no influence whatsoever on the power vertical and the army of bureaucrats who drive it.

Putin has not constructed a disciplined and loyal vertical power, but hundreds of thousands of corrupt and uncontrollable Frankensteins running rampant all over the country. In short, Putin has become a hostage to the bloated bureaucracy that he created. Bureaucrats have become so greedy that they have lost any sense of self-preservation. They are trying to grab as much as they can, while they can. The only possible thing that will stop them from stealing more money is if angry citizens, fed up with the vertical power bacchanalia, start attacking bureaucrats' luxury homes with axes and Molotov cocktails.

In the end, Putin can rely on nobody among his ministers, military brass and top bureaucrats. They continue to lie and steal right under his nose. It is fitting that Putin was forced to install web cameras in a desperate attempt to control the government-funded construction of homes that were destroyed by the fires. Of course, everyone knows that these cameras are useless as monitoring tools. Like always, a good portion of government funds will be stolen by bureaucrats, and Putin won't be able to do anything about it. So much for Putin's power vertical.

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