

## Wanted: Happy Birthday

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There are some things you should never put into the head of a girl, but Ksyusha, whom I had last seen in December with not much more than her knickers on, was not afraid of a challenge.

She and 11 other members of the journalism faculty at Moscow State University had posed in various forms of undress for [a calendar](#) celebrating the birthday of our beloved, not quite legally perhaps but everyone thinks so, leader Vladimir Putin.

The calendar's cover has a close-up of cleavage, July's or April's almost certainly, with the words, "We Love You, Vladimir Vladimirovich" in Russian and "Happy Birthday, Mr. Putin" in English below.

Inside, each of the girls has set aside those pesky lessons about journalistic objectivity and remaining impartial, along with bits of clothes 'cause they lurve VVP.

This is conveyed with a "carry on up the power vertical" style innuendo. While January is asking VVP — which I'm beginning to think is not just an acronym for Putin's name — "What about a third time?" August is saying, "You put the fires out, but I'm still on fire." Most of the

rest are rather dull pledges of adoration, as if the girls had suddenly been taken over by a United Russia robot. But Nastya, November, journalism graduate, comes up trumps with the phrase, “I don’t need a fire bell, I need you,” which manages to combine opposition blogging, a national disaster and lust for a man almost three times her age, in just eight words.

(A blogger famously wrote to Putin to complain and blame him for the devastating summer forest fires and ask for a fire bell to be restored to his village. He got the fire bell; he didn’t get Putin.)

Ksyusha finishes the calendar with the words, “I want to congratulate you personally,” along with her mobile number.

She passed me on to a man who said his name was Vova Tabak or possibly Tupac. He explained that there were things he respected about Putin. “The calendar has nothing to do with politics,” he said. “I don’t want to get involved in a political discussion.”

When I mentioned that that sounded like Boris Gryzlov’s famous quote about the State Duma not being a place for discussion, he got flustered and said the calendar was a “joke.”

Ksyusha had answered first Wednesday, friendly and excited. She said she and her friends had done it ’cause they liked Putin. When I asked her why she hadn’t done a calendar for the other birthday boy of the week, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, she replied: “Why didn’t we do a calendar for Ramzan? We didn’t think of that. We definitely will do one for him.”

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