

Putin Playing With Fire by Courting Rogozin

By [Michael Bohm](#)

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If patriotism is the last refuge for scoundrels, as 18th-century English author Samuel Johnson famously said, it might also be the last chance for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to stem a drop in United Russia's ratings.

This may explain why Putin has decided to press hard on the nationalist button by reincarnating Dmitry Rogozin and his 100,000-member nationalist organization, Rodina-Congress of Russian Communities, whose chief mission is to "defend the rights of ethnic Russians."

The Kremlin first played the Rogozin card in 2003, when it helped his original Rodina party get 9.2 percent of the vote in the State Duma elections. But two ugly incidents caused a rift between Rogozin and Putin. First, in January 2005, 14 Rodina members signed a petition to the Prosecutor General's Office to outlaw all Jewish organizations in Russia, claiming that "the world today is under the monetary and political control of international Judaism." The petition was released on the same day that Putin went to Poland to commemorate the 60th

anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. (Rogozin was not one of the signatories, but he refused to condemn the Rodina members who signed the letter, saying they did it in an individual capacity only.) Then, in November 2005, Rodina placed an openly xenophobic political advertisement on television titled “Clean Up Moscow’s Trash” that pejoratively depicted dark-skinned people from the Caucasus.

As it turned out, Rodina’s nationalist campaign from 2004 to 2006 was much more popular among Russians than Putin had expected. For the Kremlin, the threat was not so much that this would lead to a new wave of interethnic violence, but that Rodina’s rising popularity would take too many votes away from United Russia — or even overtake United Russia in the majority of federal and regional elections. This is why Rogozin was forced to step down as party head in 2006 and then “exiled” to Brussels to serve as Russia’s envoy to NATO. Rodina was merged into a more moderate and tamed A Just Russia.

You would think that Putin would be more careful after having been bitten by Rogozin’s brand of nationalism. But United Russia is facing its worst crisis ever with ratings dropping below 40 percent in June, according to a Levada poll, and the Kremlin — out of desperation, it would seem — has little choice other than to co-opt Rogozin and exploit his nationalist rhetoric.

While there are other prominent nationalistic politicians available to fill the role, few are as articulate and effective as Rogozin, 47. Liberal Democratic leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, 65, who has ranted and raged for more than 20 years about protecting ethnic Russians, has become an overplayed card.

Rogozin, who is itching to get back into Russian politics despite his public comments to the contrary at Rodina’s convention on Wednesday, has also agreed to serve Putin and United Russia — at least for the time being. In exchange, Rogozin may be offered a deputy speaker position in the next Duma, particularly since 19.8 percent of Russians said they would like to see Rogozin back in parliament, according to an August Levada poll. If so, Putin, who usually avoids placing charismatic and ambitious politicians in prominent public roles, would need to keep Rogozin on a short leash to avoid being burned again — particularly if Rogozin has his eyes set on running in the 2018 presidential race.

In a sign of how much Putin has embraced Rogozin, the Kremlin invited him to deliver a speech earlier this month at the Yaroslavl Global Policy Forum, where he did not mince his words. Rogozin argued that the West had infected Russia with multiculturalism and “excessive tolerance” toward minorities. As a result, non-Russians have been given too much preferential treatment, while Russians have become part of the “social and ethnic discriminated majority.”

Curiously, at the same conference President Dmitry Medvedev warned against the danger of rising nationalism in the country.

Rogozin’s thesis that a tiny North Caucasus minority can discriminate against or humiliate ethnic Russians who make up 80 percent of the population is, of course, ridiculous. If Rogozin were really interested in defending Russians, he should focus on those people who humiliate and discriminate against Russians the most — the Russian bureaucrats who regularly extort money from them at will.

A day after Rogozin spoke at the Yaroslavl forum, he appeared on Russia One's "Poyedinok" (or "Duel"), a popular television debate program. He argued that one of the biggest problems causing interethnic strife in the country is that young people from the North Caucasus come to Moscow and other cities and conduct themselves aggressively and provocatively, and do not respect Russian cultural norms.

One of Rogozin's supporters during the show — Valery Solovei, a professor from the Moscow State Institute for International Relations, the country's main incubator for career diplomats and political analysts — expanded on Rogozin's thesis: "Our young men are being murdered ... Our young girls are being raped. Our cultural norms are neglected and scorned insolently and cynically. Our major cities have been crippled by ethnic criminality."

This sounds disturbingly similar to what inveterate segregationists in the U.S. South used to argue. The problem with this thesis, of course, is that criminality is not limited to a particular nationality or race. For every crime committed by someone from the North Caucasus, there are many more crimes committed by ethnic Russians. The Kushchyovskaya organized crime group and the many others like it are cases in point. But for Russian nationalists, crimes committed by people from the North Caucasus against Russians are worse than when Russians commit crimes against Russians. This is much like when public opinion — and juries — in the United States condemn and punish black-on-white crimes much harsher than black-on-black ones.

A good example of this double standard is when Rasul Mirzayev, a world champion in martial arts, was arrested in late August after he punched Ivan Agafonov, who later died from his injuries. Why did the Russian media and public opinion place so much importance on the fact that Mirzayev was a Dagestani and the victim was Russian?

As Vladimir Solovyov, host of "Poyedinok," rightfully pointed out, "When Mirzayev wins a match for Russia, he is a 'Russian boxer.' When he commits a crime, he is a Dagestani."

Or take the Dec. 6 death of football fan Yegor Sviridov in Moscow, in which Aslan Cherkesov from Kabardino-Balkaria was charged with murder, which prompted 5,000 nationalists and football fans to riot on Manezh Square on Dec. 11. Many were quick to condemn the "wealthy Caucasus diaspora" for allegedly paying the police to free five suspects, but they conveniently ignored the fact that the ethnic Russian police was more than happy to accept the bribes.

Putin also sent a strong signal when he paid his respects at Sviridov's grave and then met with football fans, whose members include many nationalists. If the tables were turned — if Sviridov had killed Cherkesov — would Putin have laid flowers at Cherkesov's grave?

Who is discriminating against whom?

Putin and the United Russia leadership are playing with fire by courting Rogozin and his dangerous brand of nationalism and xenophobia. This may, indeed, be the only measure available to boost United Russia's ratings, but in a country that is so divided along ethnic lines, stirring up Russian nationalism and anti-Caucasus sentiment can only lead to a rise in extremism and violence against ethnic minorities, particularly as Russia enters its second wave of the economic crisis.

The only thing worse than scoundrels who use false patriotism for political gain are those who use xenophobia and racism for the same purposes.

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