

News Analysis: Message to Workers Aggravates Middle Class

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin tried to appeal to his core constituency — blue-collar workers and public sector employees — in his Thursday speech, where he ridiculed a wave of middle-class protests against him, analysts said.

He attempted to reach out to his critics at the same time, announcing minor concessions to the "angry urban communities" that form the backbone of the protests.

But conflicting signals are not enough, and his contempt is bound to boost the protest mood further, convincing many fence-sitters to join a new mass opposition rally on Dec. 24, experts and politicians told The Moscow Times.

In what sounded like a carefully calculated slight, Putin said during his televised call-in show that he mistook a symbol of the protests, the white ribbons, for condoms.

"I'll be honest, though it's rude: I thought it's anti-AIDS propaganda — that they are contraceptives," Putin said at the beginning of his record 4 1/2-hour show.

He added insult to injury by saying student protesters were paid to attend the rally at Moscow's Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Saturday. The rally was the biggest opposition gathering since 1993, attended by between 30,000 and 60,000 participants, according to independent estimates.

The Internet community was quick to react, with a photoshopped picture of Putin wearing a condom on his lapel sweeping blogs and social networks.

The number of those who signed up on Facebook for the Dec. 24 rally on Moscow's Prospekt Sakharova rose to 20,000 as of late Thursday, up from 13,000 earlier this week.

Sweetening the pill, Putin added that he welcomes the young generation's political drive. "If that's the result of Putin's regime, I am glad," he said.

He also warmed up to a comparison to French President Charles de Gaulle and the way he reasoned with street protesters during the famous civil unrest of 1968, combining pressure with compromise.

"It's important to always respect the minority. Don't try to get rid of it, don't push it to the sidelines of political life, and maybe there would be no need to apologize," Putin said.

But independent political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky said the comparison does not hold because, unlike de Gaulle, Putin is not seeking a compromise.

"He could have supported Bolotnaya Ploshchad by responding to some of its demands, instead he was just rude to them. By calling the protesters 'American agents' he has offended Moscow's inhabitants, who came to the square without being paid anything," he said by telephone.

Putin has previously insisted that the protests were instigated by the U.S. White House.

Belkovsky was echoed by liberal politician Leonid Gozman, who said Putin

"underestimates the public's negative attitude toward this government."

In another apparent attempt to boost his popularity ahead of the March presidential election, in which he is running, Putin fielded questions from a number of prominent public figures during the call-in show. During the nine previous annual events, he spoke almost exclusively to public unknowns.

Among the speakers Thursday were world-famous conductor Valery Gergiev, respected pediatrician Leonid Roshal and glitzy film director Fyodor Bondarchuk. All of them asked critical questions, but also expressed loyalty to Putin.

In a nod to the middle class, Ekho Moskvyy radio's editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov was allowed to be the first studio guest to field a question, asking about the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protests. Meanwhile, the de Gaulle comparison was brought up by French writer Marek

Halter, a friend of many Russian dissidents, including Andrei Sakharov.

Still, some observers remained unimpressed, noting the incoherent nature of Putin's message.

"I don't think he was very clear himself about whom he wanted to reach, though it seemed that it was more or less his supporters," Gozman said.

"He showed no sign of trying to address people who participated in the protests," Gozman said. "In fact, he probably strengthened the protesters in their views by saying people who came to Bolotnaya Ploshchad were being paid for that."

"The people he was primarily appealing to were his core electorate. It's a rather big group of people, given that his public support stands at about 40 percent," said political expert Iosif Diskin, a member of the Public Chamber.

"This core is very heterogeneous, from simple workers to businesspeople who profited from this government," Diskin said.

Public welfare has improved greatly during Putin's previous tenure as president from 2000 to 2008. Though most analysts put it down to windfall from skyrocketing oil revenues, much of the populace still associates the progress with Putin's performance.

In any case, the lower class seemed to be the main target audience of the Thursday speech. In one telling exchange, workers of a tank-manufacturing plant told Putin that they are ready to travel to Moscow and help crack down on protests.

"If our police won't manage, we and the other guys are ready to stand up for our stability — of course, within the framework of law," said Igor Kholmanskikh of Uralvagonzavod, the legendary plant located in Sverdlovsk.

In the end, even some analysts were left confused. Alexei Mukhin, head of the Center for Political Information, praised Putin for "improving his image and showing he is open for new paradigms and dialogue."

But at the same time, he noted that Putin "boosted irritation and probably made people want to go out on Dec. 24, rather than appeasing them."

Intern Rina Soloveitchik contributed to this report.

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