

How KGB Friends and Tanks Will Save Putin

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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Russian Railways president Vladimir Yakunin sent a strong message of support last week to Russia's leaders through the company's newspaper Gudok: "On behalf of the entire management of Russian Railways, we support the course of democratic development in Russia, and we consider it impossible not to respond to the unprecedentedly shameless campaign to discredit the Russian state. ... The filth that has been poured on the state and its leaders [from various opposition groups] has no connection with democracy. Moreover, it is a direct threat to the sovereignty of our country."

During Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's annual call-in television show two weeks ago, employees of Uralvagonzavod, a factory in Nizhny Tagil that manufactures train cars, called in and offered to help break up the Moscow demonstrations, if necessary. But there was a condition placed on this offer: Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, who has carried out the only truly progressive reforms in all the years that Putin has been in office, needs to be fired.

The Uralvagonzavod workers are quite representative of Putin's blue-collar constituency. Valery Yakushev, a Uralvagonzavod factory worker and State Duma deputy for United Russia, showered Putin with support during the call-in show. "We are up to our ears in work," Yakushev said in the beginning of the show. "During the Soviet times, we produced about 20,000 train cars a year. In 2011, we completed 24,000 train cars. ... I appeal to all Russians: Do not rock the boat and bring troubles upon this country."

An hour into the show, a caller from the same factory reminded everyone that in addition to producing train wagons, Uralvagonzavod is also the country's only manufacturer of tanks. He also reminded viewers that the situation at the factory is not as rosy as reported. Although state enterprises have followed Moscow's instructions and placed orders for train wagons, the military has stubbornly refused to buy tanks. Even Putin's stunt of climbing into a T-90S tank this summer and his praise for the factory's high-quality workmanship did not help. The military did not take the hint, despite the obvious hopes of factory chiefs. In fact, General Staff chief Nikolai Makarov announced the very next day that the T-90 tank was riddled with defects and that the military had no plans to purchase it.

The situation is the same with the Kalashnikov rifles that the military has stopped stockpiling this year. There have been no breakthroughs in small arms or tank technologies for the past decade. Moreover, in the military conflicts Russia is expected to face in the future, tanks will play a much smaller role than they did during the Soviet period. Times have changed dramatically. New tanks will not add anything to the military's combat capability. The 20,000 or so existing tanks are more than sufficient. But those whose livelihood depends on new tank orders cannot reconcile themselves to the new reality and they are ready to brand anyone who does not support their point of view as an enemy of the people.

And that is basically what happened during Putin's call-in show. A test driver from the Uralvagonzavod named Oleg said: "We are ready to improve and incorporate new technologies, but we get the impression that the defense minister has no need of that. The military is just overhauling old equipment without ordering anything new. You should get rid of Serdyukov and Makarov."

Oleg was basically saying, "Send us billions of rubles for the armored junk we slap together, and we'll come to Putin's rescue to disperse demonstrators in Moscow and other cities, when needed."

This is no surprise considering that the bright prospects for Uralvagonzavod recounted by factory worker Yakushev are a direct result of state subsidies — 2 billion rubles (\$64.2 million) last year and 64 billion rubles (\$2.1 billion) that Putin has personally promised for this year. And now, thanks to the live call-in show, we can see Putin's core constituency in full color — Russians accustomed to kind tsars giving them government handouts. In return, they are ready to turn a blind eye when those same leaders stuff ballot boxes, play musical chairs with the president and prime minister spots and give their close associates the richest chunks of state property. If necessary, they are even ready to rally in support of Putin so that state-controlled television can report a "balanced" picture of the demonstrations in Moscow.

One other interesting tidbit from the whole Uralvagonzavod affair: The factory's chairman

of the board is Yevgeny Shkolov, who, according to news reports, worked in the 1980s alongside Putin at the KGB station in Dresden. What's more, Russian Railways head Yakunin, whose subordinates so strongly express their support for Putin and who loves to buy up tens of thousands of train cars from Uralvagonzavod, also worked for the KGB. Yakunin, together with Putin, was also one of the founders of the Ozero dacha community in the Leningrad region in the 1990s.

And by a strange coincidence, most members of Ozero, who showed little business talent in the 1990s, suddenly became some of the country's most successful millionaires and billionaires at the same time that Putin rose to power. Meanwhile, Uralvagonzavod reached record levels of production when Putin's friend and colleague, Yakunin, took over Russian Railways and started ordering train cars as if they were hot piroshki.

But in Putin's world of close friends and privileged elites, there are no coincidences. There is only largesse and gratitude.

Alexander Golts is deputy editor of the online newspaper Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

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