

Putin's Anti-Corruption Campaign May Backfire

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December 01, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

It may feel like hitting a political trifecta.

You defang the political issue that energizes your opponents. You restore your standing with the military and please your core supporters long clamoring for the corrupt elites' heads. You anesthetize your governing team with a fear of being on the hit list at the slightest sign of disloyalty. This allows you to buy a new lease on life after showing signs of political infirmity.

The fight against corruption could be President Vladimir Putin's new lethal weapon to achieve these results.

Putin fumbled during the first six months of his presidency with bizarre agenda picks — from cultural and class warfare to Orthodox fundamentalism and fighting "foreign agents" — and all of them failed to improve his sagging ratings. Now, he has stumbled onto an issue that

could be milked for years to come.

It seems tempting to cleanse the ruling class and bring in a "new elite" — incorrupt, hard-working, patriotic and personally loyal to Putin. There is already no shortage of volunteers, like Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, to clean house in a Twitter-era, Stalinesque purge.

But Putin is a reluctant crusader against corruption. He knows that the benefits from a tough anti-corruption campaign come at a price he might ill afford to pay.

It proves that opposition leader Alexei Navalny was right all along. Russia is drowning in government corruption, and fighting it is the opposition's positive agenda. It shows that the mass protests in Moscow have pressured the authorities hard enough to sacrifice some of their own to prevent people from protesting in the streets.

It also further discredits the system Putin has built. In much the same way that the anti-corruption campaigns against Communist Party bosses during Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika helped undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet system, the current flurry of corruption exposés cast a pall over Putin's rule. With corruption inquiries centered on key figures in his former Cabinet, it is increasingly untenable to argue that Putin was saving the country while proteges under his nose were plundering it clean.

Putin needs to keep the anti-corruption campaign going to give his core supporters something to cheer about. But in doing so, he will likely unleash a clan war and at the same time make more people disenchanted with the system that generates so much filth.

It's a perilous path to salvation.

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