

The Kremlin's Court Jesters

By [Alexei Bayer](#)

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The State Duma is a walking joke.

Start from its makeup. It includes boxers, hockey players, gymnasts and pop singers. One singer, Soviet-era crooner Iosif Kobzon, has been repeatedly denied a U.S. entry visa because of alleged ties to organized crime. The authorities in Britain, meanwhile, would love to see another deputy, former KGB operative Andrei Lugovoi, stand trial for the 2006 murder in London of former Federal Security Service officer and defector Alexander Litvinenko. But repeated extradition requests from Britain have been turned down by the Kremlin.

Lately, the Duma has been on a vicious anti-foreign, and especially anti-American, kick. It has banned adoptions of Russian orphans by Americans and required nongovernmental organizations receiving funding from foreign sources to register as "foreign agents." But its virulent nationalist rhetoric has been sent up by anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny, who has been revealing Duma members' clandestine links to the West almost every week. Vladimir Pekhtin, once a prominent member of United Russia and former chairman of the Duma ethics committee, resigned his seat when Navalny found his two luxury apartments in Miami. United Russia Senator Vitaly Malkin quit after Navalny alleged that he had

undeclared foreign property and Israeli citizenship to boot.

Judging by the new Duma laws, the lower chamber of parliament is more of a circus than a serious legislative body of a great nation. Take the recent bill against obscenities in the media, which neglects to define actual obscenities — something that, given the structure of the Russian language, is probably impossible to do. Or the bill that would fine or even imprison those who are found guilty of "offending religious feelings of others" or spreading "homosexual propaganda."

Whenever the Duma passes another surreal law or presents a new feat of buffoonery, I can't help thinking of the 1656 painting by the Spanish Baroque artist Diego Velazquez titled "Las Meninas." This masterpiece portrays Spanish Infanta Margaret Theresa and her entourage of maids of honor, chaperones and body guards, including two of her personal dwarfs.

Velazquez had a fondness for dwarfs and buffoons, who were plentiful at the Spanish court during his time. In fact, the Prado has an entire room containing a dozen or so portraits of the King's retinue of fools.

Fools and buffoons played important and diverse roles at royal courts. They amused the royal family and their courtiers, who liked to laugh at their stupidity and physical deformities, which supposedly served as a contrast with the beauty and refinement of the court. Dwarfs were prized and collected, like works of art or antiquities, and paraded before visiting foreign dignitaries. Of course, fools could sometimes tell the truth to the powers that be, although usually, as in the case of King Lear, such declarations tended to come too late.

But perhaps the most important function of various buffoons was that they symbolized social order in absolute monarchies. In 17th-century Spain, the sovereign held all political power. All of the rights, freedoms and privileges emanated from the king, who was both the lawgiver and the law unto himself. While there was a hierarchy of different classes in society, their standing was equal in relation to the sovereign. They were all his subjects. In other words, the rich and magnificent courtiers were no different from royal fools.

This is exactly what Velazquez's paintings show. A buffoon nicknamed "Red Beard" deemed himself an authority on military arts, and so the painter portrays him dressed as a ferocious warrior. Another fool, nicknamed Juan of Austria after the admiral who defeated the Turkish fleet at Lepanto, is shown against the background of a fierce naval battle.

Absolute monarchy is modeled on the family, so that the sovereign's subjects are his children. Being adults of small stature, dwarfs visually present the king as the only adult in the room. In "Las Meninas," the king's daughter, though only a small child, is nevertheless the only adult among her entourage, the fact that is underscored by the presence of her dwarfs.

The Russian political system is often described as a monarchy, in which the president is little different from a tsar. Indeed, over the past 100 years, five of its leaders died in office and only one resigned voluntarily, a record comparable only to the Vatican. But lifelong power is only part of the problem. While alive, the Russian leader holds all levers of power: executive, legislative, judicial and even religious. He can jail former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky or grant Russian citizenship to French actor Gerard Depardieu — all on a whim, like Louis XIV. His power is highly personal. President Vladimir Putin remained Russia's sovereign even

while Dmitry Medvedev sat in the president's chair for four years.

In this monarchy, the Duma plays royal fools to the modern Russian autocrat. The world-renowned athletes and serious businessmen with million-dollar fortunes making up the Duma imitate or mock serious legislative activity. Their performance serves to show that the only real adult in the country is Putin, the national leader. He makes or breaks laws and is the law of the land. The only difference with Spain 400 years ago is that no artist of Velazquez's stature has painted Duma deputies' portraits.

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