

President Putin's Political Challenges After Divorce

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A divorce rarely constitutes a neutral development in a politician's career. Divorces often successfully blur the line between the private and public lives of elected officials. While their potential effect on political image can be mitigated by how effectively they are managed, the allaying of any impact on future electoral support requires outright strategic acumen and determination.

President Vladimir Putin's divorce is no different. What's at stake for the president is not only the upkeep of his well-crafted political image today, but also his future electoral support among two key voting constituencies: the millions of socially conservative Christian Orthodox believers and female voters. How successful he is in managing his political image now is going to prove far less important than how he chooses to manage his private affairs moving forward.

If Putin had an

affair with a woman half his age, this could alienate his core constituency.

First ladies in Russia have traditionally shied away from the political and media limelight. Lyudmila Putina has been no different. Possibly, her very public approach as a political wife has shielded Putin's political image in the past amid continued media gossip of alleged extramarital affairs on his part. But notwithstanding the past apparent or real strength of their marriage, their divorce today is real.

Putin's personal life has thus become a legitimate matter in the country's political discourse and is subject to potentially shifting perceptions among the electorate. There is no doubt the president's camp is fully aware of such implications. Look no farther than how well his public divorce has been managed to date.

Divorces always fall into the negative category of a politician's personal life. They will always strive to influence the public face of their divorce and to control its timing as much as it may be feasible.

Putin has successfully managed to keep his divorce civil and amicable. Any rumors of infidelity have remained hearsay. This says as much about the president's own handling of the divorce as it does about his wife's support for her husband. It takes both parties to achieve such a level of control.

The timing of the announcement also says a great deal in terms of image management on the part of Putin. It is no coincidence that the divorce falls early in his presidential term. The dust has just settled from the last year's presidential election and the next election, being five years away, is nowhere on the political radar of the electorate. This gives the president time to reassert control over his personal life in relation to future political aspirations. The timing gives Putin a much needed political window of opportunity.

Key issues on the mind of critical groups of voters — social conservatives and female voters — involve whether the president will remarry or embark on any new and public relationship. These voters are also likely to take into account the identity of the new spouse or partner. Will Putin's new relationship stem from an affair developed during his 30-year marriage? Or will it represent a whole new relationship? In other words, will it be a materialization of an alleged past affair with a woman such as former Olympic gold medalist Alina Kabayeva or former spy Anna Chapman?

For Putin, the answers to these questions may represent a litmus test of his 2018 feasibility.

Confirmation that Putin was involved in an extramarital affair with a woman half his age could be seen both as disrespectful toward the sanctity of the institution of marriage, particularly by social conservative Orthodox voters. It could also be seen as humiliation not only of Lyudmila Putina, but of all Russian women.

Putin the campaigner has traditionally wooed both types of voters. He has appealed to conservative rural voters who value Orthodox Christian traditions and courted women voters in general who tend to be more active than men at the ballot box.

When the above is viewed within the context of a declining overall support for Putin, hanging on to these crucially relevant segments of the electorate becomes ever so important.

Today's approval rating for the president stands merely above 60 percent. That's from an all-time high of 85 percent in 2008 and followed by a steady decline ever since. A harshly competitive election in 2018 and one won by a narrow margin could become highly problematic for Putin. It is much more difficult to brush aside allegations of voter fraud standing tall on a 20 or 30 percentage point margin of victory than it is while barely hanging on to a 3 or 4 percentage point margin.

The successful management of political image amid a negative personal development is certainly possible. Putin is proving to do just that. But avoiding the potential and future alienation of key voting constituencies can surely be a serious challenge. Putin will be forced to walk a fine line. Staying the course electorally will require strong determination in making personal choices, including limiting them greatly if necessary.

Lyudmila Putina has faithfully stood by her husband for nearly 30 years. For more than half of those years, she has gracefully done so in the public spotlight, albeit in a limited way. Going forward, any misstep — or any perception of a misstep — on the part of Putin could prove detrimental for his political future.

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