



Putin's Pander

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Last Sunday, while returning home from Pakistan aboard Air Force One, President Bush received a telephone call from his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. The two men discussed several issues that threaten to disrupt U.S.-Russian solidarity in the war on terror--foremost, Russia's diplomatic support for Iran in the dispute over its nuclear program at the IAEA, and its decision to welcome Hamas, which recently won control of the Palestinian parliament, to Moscow. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is set to continue this dialogue in Washington this week in a series of direct talks with President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Unfortunately, absent from the agenda will be any discussion of the domestic factors that lie at the root of Russia's recent foreign policy maneuvers: namely, Putin's growing accommodation of terror at the expense

of Russian democracy and the safety of its own citizens.

A week before the Hamas delegation's visit to the Russian capital, the Russian authorities closed two regional newspapers--*Gorodskie Vesti* in Volgograd and *Nash Region* in Vologda--for printing the Danish Mohammad cartoons. The local prosecutor's office consequently charged Anna Smirnova, the editor of the *Nash Region*, with "inciting ethnic tensions"--an offense punishable by up to five years in prison under Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code. The Danish Refugee Council, a non-governmental charity that provides food, health care, education, and reconstruction in Chechnya, was likewise instructed by the authorities to suspend its work. The stated reason: "concerns of reprisals" from the predominantly Muslim population in the region.

Responding to this potential PR disaster that threatened to undermine Russia's aspiration to serve as the new global mediator between the West and the Islamic world, President Putin stated: "There are more than 15 million Muslims in Russia and I want to say on behalf of the Russian leadership that we denounce any manifestations leading to the fanning of inter-ethnic strife." Putin found some harsh words for the beleaguered Danish government as well: "One should reflect 100 times before publishing or drawing something," he said. "If a state cannot prevent such publications, it should at least ask for forgiveness."

Putin's groveling in the face of Muslim riots is part of a broader push on the part of his government over the past several years to reaffirm Russia's "unyielding commitment" to Muslim causes. This strategy has included gaining observer status to controversial organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Conference and cooperating with authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes that promote terror, such as Iran.

Putin's strategy is also intended to provide cover for his government's actions in Chechnya where, just a few days before Hamas was feted in the Kremlin, Prime Minister Sergei Abramov resigned from his post. Moscow hastily promoted the 29-year-old first deputy prime minister Ramzan Kadyrov, son of the late President Akhmad Kadyrov, to lead the region that is Russia's chief source of Islamic terrorism.

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Since the assassination of his father in 2004, Ramzan Kadyrov has *de facto* ruled Chechnya as his personal, semi-criminal fiefdom. On January 25, the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe issued a scathing report on the situation in Chechnya, citing continued instances of kidnapping, hostage-taking, and arbitrary detention by Kadyrov's personal militia (known as "kadyrovtsy") as well as the customary "excessively harsh behavior" of Russian security forces.

Kadyrov likewise flaunted his disregard for rule of law in closing the Danish Refugee Council, stating that, "Denmark has always supported terrorists . . . In any case, these [NGOs] have never cooperated with the authorities. They collected information. They were like spies. We had very little use for them." As Alexei Malashenko, one of Russia's leading Caucasus and terrorism experts, observed: "Ramzan Kadyrov has long played the 'Islamic card'--jihad against jihad."

Yet for Putin's grand strategy of restoring Russia's waning influence abroad, Kadyrov is the man of the hour. Putin's constant praise of the young prodigy and Kadyrov's take-no-prisoners style have already earned him Russia's prestigious "Order of Hero" in 2004.

Putin's strategy, evidently, is to repress ordinary Muslims at home while pandering to Islamist extremists abroad.