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[The Fate of Putin's Minister](#)



On the international stage, President Vladimir Putin caught global attention with his trip to Syria this month. But domestically, December has been a dry month for Russian politics. The main choreographed event of December proved to be Putin's statement that he would, after all, participate in the presidential elections of 2018. It was confirmation of what very few hadn't already predicted.

The exception has been a dramatic [closing statement](#) in a court case where Alexei Ulyukayev, a former Minister of Economic Development, is on trial, accused of bribery. His last words at that trial have almost eclipsed the first words of presidential candidate Putin.

Ulyukayev's speech was deeply downbeat. If it were not for the context, it could even be called vulgar. In general, it looks like the sort of [poetry](#) which Ulyukayev did not hesitate to publish in his more carefree years.

But the context, as the rule goes, is more important than the content. It is in the Russians' blood to feel sympathy towards the "miserable" that have fallen under the wheels of the repressive state machine, regardless of the degree of their real guilt, as Fyodor Dostoevsky might put it. In addition, Ulyukaev's speech has two dimensions: the former minister talked mainly to "his own" (we will return to the question of who they are later), but he has also asked everyone for forgiveness. That is a significant concession. It is hard to remember which, if any, high-ranking officials have had enough courage to do that. Probably only Boris Yeltsin.

Unlucky devil

In his closing statement, Ulyukayev effectively compares the main man behind his troubles, the head of Rosneft Igor Sechin, with the devil. He however does not call him by name, but the association is understood by everyone.

What is clear to most observers is that the reason for these court proceedings is Ulyukayev's attempt to criticize the scheme of the Bashneft deal, conceived and then implemented by Sechin. Some insiders claimed and continue to assert that this is not just an obvious reason, but the only reason. Improper words addressed to the president's protege, it turns out, is enough to turn one from a minister into a suspect. Is it not a sign of the omnipotence of Igor Sechin within Russia's ruling circles?

It turned out that this legal action had been in the works for a long time; Ulyukaev was wiretapped, and the results were presented to Putin personally. In other words, for several months Putin continued to allow a person suspected of a crime to attend important meetings, gave him serious assignments, including international ones. It all looked strange and a bit humiliating. It is possible the president did not know anything about the preparation of the attack on Ulyukayev; he was simply presented with facts after the ambush and had to act -- then it becomes necessary to display awareness in hindsight. In which case, the president does not control his closest associate, and the security service of Rosneft is a much more serious organization than the state secret services. Or, the president did know about it; this would confirm that the stories about the wiretaps are true and conducted by the secret services; but then, it turns out that Putin is ready to sacrifice his own prestige and the prestige of the state, all for the sake of Sechin.

The course of the trial showed that these are all premature fears. Immediately it became clear that the openness of the court is not good news for Sechin, and certainly not what he had hoped for. It seems that the head of the Rosneft had a clear scenario: closed meetings and the inevitable punishment for a guilty minister as the outcome. But someone with more influence changed the rules. In general, the most interesting feature of the trial was Sechin's own fall from grace. He started out as the omnipotent mastermind but turned into an offended schoolboy, who gives rare and caustic comments and runs away from court appointments. It is obvious that Sechin got frustrated with the leaks from the hearings and about the case itself.

As a result, Ulyukaev is of course crushed, but the all-powerful Sechin does not look like a winner, either. And the rumors about the ring of omnipotence allegedly held by Sechin seem somewhat exaggerated.

An impossible sentence

No one of course has doubts about this mysterious person, who had "slightly" upset Sechin. What's happening now fits the good old formula: "Putin once again outgamed everyone". The verdict for this case is expected not from the court, but Putin himself. By and large, the verdict will be the first serious step in the election campaign. An guide for how life will evolve after the election.

The president has options, but not so many. It is impossible, for example, to let Ulyukaev off the hook. To clear the charges of Ulyukaev is to admit that Sechin provoked a bribe and carried out a false denunciation, and these are all criminal offenses. In that instance, Putin either starts a case against Sechin or risks his own image tremendously. Any case against Sechin is a suicidal blow to the system, the scrapping of all the informal hierarchies and ties that have been propping up power here for years. Quite a nasty way to start another presidential cycle, which already does not promise to be easy.

It is difficult to imprison Ulyukaev as well. At the very least, the prosecution's request cannot be satisfied. Neither ten, nor five years in prison are workable. This has nothing to do with the point that no convincing proof of the ex-minister's guilt was ever provided; neither is it about considerations of sympathy.

It has more to do with when the verdict will be read out -- December 15. The day before is a big press conference for Vladimir Putin, already a candidate for the presidency of the Russian Federation (and if you call things by their proper names - the future president of the Russian Federation). This is the real start of the campaign; there will be witty and wise speeches, filled with sparkling jokes; state media outlets will have to be feeding the public with many of these soundbyte at least until the end of the year. But the imprisonment of the minister the day after Putin's meeting with journalists is a very noticeable event that could derail this propaganda train. To imprison Ulyukaev is to allow him to interrupt Putin's positive news agenda over the Christmas period, and this is an unacceptable miscalculation for the number one candidate and his staff.

The only option remaining is a large but suspended sentence. The phrase "a large but suspended sentence" looks, of course, like an oxymoron, but Russia knows such precedents. In 2002, Anatoly Bykov, a mafia boss, was sentenced to 6.5 years of suspended sentence for preparing a contract killing of another "businessmen", Pasha-Tsvetomuzyka (Vilor Struganov). That's right - a person was found guilty of a particularly serious crime and punished with probation. The audience laughed, of course, but the system did not collapse.

"His own" and ordinary people

A small and even more suspended sentence will fully satisfy the systemic and semi-systemic liberals of Russia. In a state where the percentage of acquittals steadily tends towards zero, this is the maximum possible humanity. In addition, loyal liberals will be able to interpret this decision of the court (that is, Putin) as their own victory, and as a promise to soften the regime during the next presidential term.

They will be able to invent pleasant but delusional hypotheses for themselves, remembering, however, that all this has only a psychotherapeutic significance. The [fragment](#) about the "gladiator with a cardboard sword" from the last word of ex-minister Ulyukaev, is much more important for them than anything approaching the reality of how the court has come to its decision. It's about them, about "his own", about systemic liberals: "This case has aroused considerable public interest, not unlike a circus. An elderly gladiator at retirement age defends himself with a cardboard sword, and people sit back to watch the whole thing happily, all from their comfy seats. Whether the thumb points up or down will decide his sentence. It was said long ago for whom the

bell tolls. I want to say now that the bell could start tolling for any of you.”

Both liberal leaning officials and businessmen who successfully cooperate with the state, but who want to be the citizens of the world perfectly understand that Ulyukayev is addressing them with his words. And that Ulyukaev is telling the truth. They understand that for the sake of revenge over the insults of another (or the same) royal protege, they themselves can be easily struck down one by one. They understand that, but will probably not speak out: why risk that, if they can, of course, be struck down?

The exclusion of liberals from real politics, while at the same time displaying a cowardly loyalty, is one of President Putin's notable achievements, and the sad demise of Ulyukayev is simply a way to view this achievement with all possible clarity. It is in vain that he tries to move or somehow touch “his own” people or even surprise them, at least until they themselves pass into his own new category of the fallen.

But as for ordinary people that an ex-minister asked for forgiveness from, they will sigh, of course, but will remain in their world where Putin is a great leader, or just an acceptable leader, and any of his underlings could well be notorious embezzlers. Yet again, they will not see any contradiction in this.

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