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MINNPOST

The politics of Putin's torso: marketing a tough guy

By **Nick Hayes** | 08/17/09



REUTERS/Philippe Laurensen

World leaders are working on their tans -- and public images -- while on vacation. French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife, Carla Bruni, hit the beach on the Mediterranean earlier this summer.

This August I found myself paying more attention than I should to the world leaders on vacation file.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown self-righteously refused vacation time and instead put in a week of community service work in Scotland. The British press scoffed at the gesture. French President Nicolas Sarkozy posed on Mediterranean beaches in his swimming trunks. Because he posed side by side with his bikini-clad wife, Carla Bruni, few noticed that the French press had air-brushed his love-handles out of the photo.

But the prize for poor judgment in vacation photography goes to Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, whose August vacation set a new standard for tackiness by a national leader.

There was a precedent. Two summers ago there were photos of Putin fishing in the Yenisei River near the Mongolian border. He posed standing before the camera with his khakis deep into the water, a knife in his belt, and a bare-chested torso worthy of a pictorial for Men's Fitness magazine.

In the first week of August, however, he outdid the earlier photo essay. A photo series of a macho



Putin accompanied news stories about his vacation in Siberia. One showed Putin propelling himself through the water by a power breast-stroke. A few others tracked the wandering Putin decked out in camouflage military fatigues and hiking in the mountains. A photo spread of Putin as the bare-chested equestrian put the story of his Siberian vacation over the top. One in particular — a beefcake shot of a bare-chested Putin riding a horse — is sure to become an icon in the history of bad taste.

And last week, home in Moscow from his vacation, he kept up the macho image. On the evening of Aug. 12, he

and
his



REUTERS/RIA Novosti/Pool/Alexei Druzhinin

A shirtless Vladimir Putin riding a horse on vacation in Siberia earlier this month. More “Brokeback Mountain” than “Rambo”?

protégé, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, pulled a surprise visit to a local sports bar in Moscow.

Flirting with waitresses

Although the visit was supposedly spontaneous and unannounced, **the media** were on hand to cover the event. Dressed like a couple of ordinary guys in sweat shirts and jackets, the two Russian leaders took a table, watched the football game between Russia and Argentina on TV and downed a few pints. For the cameras, Putin tossed in a little flirt and photo op with two blonde waitresses.

Was it merely coincidental that Putin's superhero act for the media over the past few weeks coincided with the first anniversary of last year's war in Georgia or the 10th anniversary of his ascendancy to power in 1999? Putin spun the media to divert it away from serious journalism about the legacy of either last summer's war or his decade in power. Instead, the media wallowed in puff pieces about his

abs, delts and pecs.

Putin has fed this macho stuff to the press for years. In his first year on office, he flew a Russian jet fighter to Chechnya. (The timing of his first vacation photos, however, was a bit off. On Aug. 12, 2002, the Russian press showed him jet-skiing across the waves of the Black Sea. Unfortunately, it was also the day the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk sank in the Arctic Sea. Drawing international attention, the incident was not a metaphor of Russia's might but of its weakness.)

A black belt in Judo, Putin has also produced and released his own video and book, "**Judo with Vladimir Putin.**" And last year, he shot a Siberian tiger with **a tranquilizer gun.**

The marketing of Putin's turbo-masculinity is not for us. If it were, there would have been images this August of Putin standing on the furthest edge of Russian land along the Bering Straits and staring toward Alaska. Putin has given Russia the new 21st Century edition of a centuries-old Russian tradition of the personality cults of its leaders. The Putin edition is a political sleight of hand packaged to make the Russian public believe that a macho leader has restored Russia's loss of respect in the world.

It's also an image specifically designed to appeal to Putin's hardcore supporters — his base known in Russia as the "siloviki," which loosely translates as "tough guys" or "strongmen." The term derives from the Russian phrase "silovye struktury," or "force structures," and refers to the FSB (the successor to the KGB), military and police.

Putin's media image is the fantasy of every "siloviki" that their guys give Russia the strong hand she needs, that they know how to handle the liberal wimps who, from Gorbachev to Yeltsin, betrayed the nation, and that they're not a bad looking bunch.

Rumors of divorce

One curious detail — Putin as a ladies' man — completes his image. In 2008, rumors spread from the Russian to the Western press that Putin was about to divorce his wife of 25 years and marry Alina Kabayeva, an Olympic rhythmic gymnast who is barely older than Putin's two daughters. At a press conference on April 18, 2008, Putin denied that there was any truth to the rumor. Any fondness he might have displayed toward the gymnast or any other women had a simple explanation: "I like all Russian women," **Putin said.**

It was a phrase worthy of his host and co-participant in the press conference — Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, whose presence at Putin's side did little to bolster his credibility.

Putin's public admission of his feelings for "all Russian women" served as the cue for Russian journalists to feed the media with stories of Russian women gushing over the prime minister,

culminating with reports this month of praise for his "vigorous torso." I suspect, by the way, his scene last week of posing with the two blondes in the sports bar happened because a few Western commentators snickered that the Siberian photos came off as more "Brokeback Mountain" than "Rambo."

What is the point behind the politics of Putin's torso? The farce has its serious side. Ask anyone in Georgia today, a year after the Russian invasion, or anyone in Ukraine who advocates joining NATO. The cheap masculinity of Putin's image is the public face of a regime of petty "siloviki" looking for an excuse to bully a neighbor or shut-up a critic.

Or ask yourself: What does it say about a national leader that he feels obliged to flex his abs in public for the camera?

And one more thing. Pray that Putin has not started a trend.

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