

Russian Politics, Culture and the Decline of Respectful Dissent

By [John Freedman](#)

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Today we're talking Russian culture and politics. It's not a pretty topic, but it is one that is increasingly pushing its way into the public discourse. I assume the trend will only continue to grow as we come closer to next year's presidential elections.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin met with a group of people representing film, theater and museums on Friday in Penza. President Dmitry Medvedev stopped by the studios of television channel Dozhd a week or so ago, and that came just weeks after a meeting he hosted in Moscow with representatives of the film and theater world.

It always looks good for a leader to have his or her picture taken with a popular entertainer and, in Russia particularly, it's advantageous for people in the entertainment world to be seen as being part of the inner circles of power.

On rare occasions there may be limits to those advantages, however.

Not everyone has forgotten the scandalous meeting that Putin held with the so-called "creative intelligentsia" in St. Petersburg at the end of May last year. This was when rock musician Yury Shevchuk [confronted](#) the Prime Minister on losses of freedom of speech in recent years.

But one wonders, how willing are the majority of Russian artists to challenge the authorities with hard questions? Even at that famous St. Petersburg meeting, all the other participants held their tongues as Shevchuk sought to engage the Prime Minister in a meaningful discussion.

Moscow actress Lea Akhedzhakova later berated herself publicly for remaining silent that day and she has often spoken out on this and other topics since then, although, to my knowledge, she has never been invited back to such a high-profile meeting. Nor has Shevchuk, to my knowledge.

Now, actors, directors, musicians and museum directors are not going to chart the course of Russian politics over the next year or at any other time. But if you are interested in seeing where Russia is headed as a "democratic" and "open" society, it might be instructive to watch the way that artists respond to opportunities to engage the powers that be.

As I suggested early on, that may not paint an encouraging picture. It is the job of artists to take risks and demand the truth from themselves and their colleagues in their work. Watching them roll over to curry favor can be shocking and maddening.

Since that day in May 2010 when Shevchuk respectfully expressed his concern about basic freedoms in Russia, no major performer finding him or herself in the company of the country's leaders has considered it necessary, or possible, to do the same.

What we get are a timid stream of questions involving finances and organization. These range from the silly and selfish to the truly important. But in all cases, everyone looks precariously like the peasant approaching the Tsar with eyes down and hands held out.

You have to wonder what good organization and solid finances will do for artists if their autonomy, their right to speak the truth as they see it, erodes behind a facade of well-constructed bureaucratic language?

To be fair, the meeting in Penza last Friday was convened specifically to discuss the construction and renovation of cultural objects in Russia. As Putin told those in attendance, according to RBK Daily, it was not organized with "any political or budget event" in mind.

The popular actor Yevgeny Mironov, who is also the artistic director of the Theater of Nations, proposed the idea of a "theater neighborhood" in Moscow that would cost some 6 billion rubles with a completion date of 2016. Mark Gurvich, the managing director of the Yermolova Theater, asked Putin to speed up the implementation of a new conception for theatrical development by the year 2020. There were questions raised, accusations made, and excuses proffered for theaters that have been under reconstruction for years and have long passed their targeted completion date.

According to Gazeta.ru, Putin is willing to strike down several amendments to the law that deprive theaters of numerous advantages in their fiscal structures. Putin also promised to complete the reconstruction of the Saratov Youth Theater, which began — and this is a [quote](#) from Gazeta.ru — 30 years ago.

One imagines almost everyone going home happy, plump and proud.

That might be the case, anyway, were it not for other opinions cropping up in other sources of information on the internet such as Facebook and Live Journal.

I ran across derision, laughter and regret aimed at many of the participants of the meeting in Penza, just as I did following the meetings with Medvedev in recent weeks. Aside from the more or less official news sources, there is a whole other point of view.

Mikhail Ugarov, the founder of Teatr.doc, caustically posted on Facebook that he understood a young movie director who said his time was better spent on location with his film, rather than canceling a day to join a meeting with the Prime Minister.

Ksenia Larina, the respected commentator for Echo Moskvyy radio, posted this on Facebook in reference to the [account](#) in RBK Daily: "If everything happened as described here, then one feels shame. I'm afraid [the participants] won't enjoy reminiscing about this."

Occupying common ground between those commentators was Alexei Devotchenko, an outspoken actor from St. Petersburg who has established a political reputation with his pointed attacks on St. Petersburg mayor Valentina Matviyenko.

"I looked over the very few accounts of yesterday's meeting between Putin and cultural leaders," Devotchenko wrote on Facebook. "I'm ashamed. And it's painful. But I have no moral right to judge those who were there, those whom I love and respect. I am a freelancer. These people answer for entire theater collectives, for live people... Such is this cursed country, still living under Stalinist mechanisms and 'formats.'"

Devotchenko's point is important. It would be wrong and unfair to use these instances as rationale for pointing fingers at individuals, each of whom finds him or herself responding to a unique and complex set of responsibilities.

But the system that determines the discourse, and which everyone must share, is surely flawed.

As the sand-pit battle between Putin and Medvedev continues over the next year, I would expect to see plenty more such "shameful," "embarrassing" and "painful" moments arise. I suspect that such instances as Yury Shevchuk's respectful dissent will be few and far between.

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