

A Playwright for Putin

By [John Freedman](#)

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It surely has been one of the strangest developments since the popular movement protesting the alleged falsification of elections took hold in Russia in early December.

Over the New Year holidays Nikolai Kolyada, one of the nation's most respected playwrights, directors and theatrical visionaries, joined Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's presidential campaign in Yekaterinburg. It brought forth a flurry of cries, accusations, counter-accusations and even a bit of petty vandalism that has horrified Russia's theater community over the last two weeks.

Along with other Yekaterinburg luminaries, including Alexander Pantykin, a rock musician, and Anatoly Marchevsky, the director of the city's circus, Kolyada agreed to be a member of Putin's so-called "People's Headquarters."

"I joined Putin's election campaign because I believe we cannot find a better leader. I will vote for him; that is my opinion and my right. All others on offer seem absolutely unworthy to assume such a position," Kolyada said, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

Reactions came swiftly. So virulent were the attacks on Kolyada on his LiveJournal page that he temporarily closed it down.

On the morning of Jan. 13 Kolyada found that his theater had been plastered with photographs of Putin with lipstick traces all over his forehead. Expressing fears for his own safety and that of his company, Kolyada called on the police and city prosecutor to find the culprits and ward off further attacks.

Four days later the vandals came forward themselves. Vyacheslav Bashkov, a member of "Movement Against Violence" [explained](#) why his organization carried out the midnight raid.

"Unlike other members of Putin's support group, Kolyada, until the very last moment before he joined them, had been an authority figure for this city, for the Oblast and the country," Bashkov said. "No one expected him to do something like this. Society is extremely disappointed; that is one of the reasons."

More fallout came when Pavel Rudnev, a longtime colleague and collaborator of Kolyada's in many projects—not the least of which was the playwright's prestigious Eurasia play competition—openly broke ranks with him.

This occurred on Wednesday after Kolyada posted a television news clip on his LiveJournal page showing Russian opposition politicians visiting the American embassy in Moscow for a meeting with new ambassador Michael McFaul. The event was seized on by many in the blogosphere as proof, or, at least, a suggestion, that the Russian opposition is taking orders from the U.S. government.

"Nikolai Kolyada posted the already well-known news report of opposition leaders arriving at the American embassy," Rudnev [wrote](#) on LiveJournal. "The propagandists from NTV claim the opposition leaders went there to receive instructions, but there is not the slightest proof of that fact in the news report. Kolyada's comment was, 'What horror and shamelessness.'"

"I commented, 'I also go the American embassy. Is that horror and shamelessness, too?'"

"Nikolai Kolyada, without saying a word, erased my commentary and blocked me."

"Considering the history of our relationship and taking into account the political events of recent days, I am compelled to declare that I am resigning from the jury of the Eurasia play contest, where I have worked for many, many years."

"Nikolai Kolyada now has other friends," Rudnev concluded.

It is worth noting that the copious comments on Rudnev's post almost invariably express regret, rather than anger, over what has transpired.

Many have expressed support for the playwright. The company of the New Art Theater in Chelyabinsk publically [declared](#) on Wednesday that they stand firmly behind Kolyada. Their statement said, "We are deeply upset by exhibits of political and human intolerance that have arisen around your position."

During a live radio appearance on Komsomolskaya Pravda radio in Yekaterinburg the same day, the station's program director Konstantin Von Stein posted the news on his Facebook page that "almost all listeners are supporting Kolyada."

Appearing on a television talk show (see the video posted above) a visibly exasperated Kolyada explained why he chose to support Putin's candidacy.

"I don't want to wake up March 5 in another country," he said.

When asked why he had soured on presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov, Kolyada admitted he had supported him six months ago but declared he had "fallen out of love" with him.

"My current life suits me," Kolyada said.

But a series of quotes posted Jan. 12 on a [blog](#) on website Grani.ru clearly imply that Kolyada's support for Putin may have come about because he received a government grant last year to move his theater into a new home.

Kolyada is quoted as saying, "Russia needs a firm hand, a firm hand like that of Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin]... Under the circumstances I don't think we need renewal. Putin — watch the television — travels and gets around and talks. He delves into everything, he sticks it to everyone, he behaves like a boss, he slams the table with his fist..

"You know, we won that tender [a 5 million ruble grant from the governor of Sverdlovsk region — note by Grani.ru editor] entirely honestly. But I thought, 'Kolyada, they're giving you five million, the government is giving you a building for your theater, they do something else for you, and you're going to be in the opposition?'"

Kolyada attempted to put the controversy behind him with a [video blog](#) published Wednesday, in which he speaks at length about all the new shows and rehearsals going on at his theater. But one senses this event will not be brushed aside so easily.

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