

An Actress at the Center of a Political Firestorm

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A schism has been brewing in the ranks of Russia's cultural elite ever since contested Duma elections on Dec. 4. In the first flush of protests that took place the following day, Dec. 10 and Dec. 24, actors, composers, directors and writers were prominent among the growing crowds.

And yet anyone who thought that the entertainment world was going to speak with a single, unified voice was sorely mistaken. We were reminded of that when maverick Yekaterinburg playwright, director, educator and theater manager Nikolai Kolyada announced in mid-January that he had joined Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's election campaign committee.

Last week a barrage of [videos](#) made by Putin's campaign showed that the presidential candidate has the muscle to bring star power to his side. The list of celebrities stumping for Putin is impressive — they include actors Oleg Tabakov, Yevgeny Mironov, Alisa Freindlikh and Armen Dzhigarkhanyan, film director and actor Fyodor Bondarchuk, pop

singers Nikolai Baskov and Dima Bilan, and classical musicians Yury Bashmet, Vladimir Spivakov and Valery Gergiev.

But is there something wrong with this picture?

Forget Baskov's hand on his heart as he gushes about how he trusts the man. Forget Gergiyev and Mironov, whose theaters — the Mariinsky in St. Petersburg and the Theater of Nations in Moscow, respectively — have been rebuilt and financed by Putin's administration. Even forget Bashmet, who bizarrely goes so far as to compare Putin to the Stradivari family, the great makers of fine violins in the 17th and 18th centuries.

No, what has shaken the cultural world to its core was the appearance two days ago of a video made by the beloved actress Chulpan Khamatova. In it she expresses gratitude to Putin for never once failing to honor his promises to help her Gift of Life foundation for cancer-stricken children. "Therefore," she concludes in a dour voice in the 31-second video, "I will vote for him."

For many in Russia this was like Goldilocks joining forces with the wolf. Toto going over to the monkeys. Chewbacca shooting Harrison Ford's Han Solo in the back.

The blogosphere virtually exploded on Wednesday with accusations, defenses and laments. Suffice it to say that as I write these lines at midday on Thursday, approximately 300 to 800 people each had watched the videos of the other stars I mention above. The Khamatova clip, which can be watched by clicking on the picture above, had received a staggering 67,500 hits. The vast majority of comments left beneath the video expressed sympathy with the actress, leaving no doubt that people believed she was forced to support Putin in order to save funding for her children's foundation.

This opinion was bolstered by a photo distributed by RIA-Novosti Wednesday evening showing Putin ushering Khamatova into a hospital room earlier in the day. Putin looks confused and uncomfortable as he stretches his arm behind the actress, who wears a stony expression and appears to shrink from the Prime Minister. (The BBC runs the photo in a Russian-language [article](#) about the event.) Many commenting on the photo on Facebook and LiveJournal suggest that Khamatova had been crying.

A question arises: Is Putin's campaign forcing people to support him in exchange for financial support for their projects? The notion is understood in Russia, if not exactly respected, that heads of theaters, orchestras and other organizations will throw their support behind the government in return for significant funding of their activities.

In the case of Khamatova, however, we are talking about a foundation that cares for sick children whose families could not otherwise pay for treatments. Would Putin pull the plug on Khamatova's foundation if she did not join his political team?

Clearly, the vast majority of Russian Internet commenters believe so. Here are just a few of the comments following her pro-Putin video:

"A hostage mouths the demands of terrorists."

"Now I feel truly sad for her. It is obvious this person was forced to say this."

"Chulpan Khamatova! I bow down before you! May God bless you!"

Not everyone has been so understanding. As [reported](#) in Publicpost.ru, Alfred Kokh, the businessman and former deputy prime minister under Boris Yeltsin, insisted that Khamatova knows well the game she has played to win Putin's support for her foundation.

"The Don asked for a small favor," Kokh wrote on Facebook in reference to Putin. "You wouldn't refuse an old friend? No, I'm ready. I know how I am indebted to the Don. Where are the SSers in this? The hostages? If you don't want to be beholden, don't go begging. It's very simple!"

Svetlana Reiter [wrote](#) on OpenSpace.ru that she recently overheard conversations of people who knew that Khamatova had no choice but to make the video. Reiter described the talk she heard at a birthday party that took place before the Feb. 4 demonstration on Bolotnaya Ploshchad: "'Her arms were twisted,' a low, conspiratorial voice said in one corner. 'They promised to deprive her foundation of all financial aid and to destroy its reputation,' were the whispers in another corner. 'She wept at the filming of the video,' others insisted."

Just last week film director Alexander Sokurov [warned](#) in the Moskovsky Komsomolets daily that Putin's campaign committee was playing with fire by mixing film actors and directors up in politics.

"When I recently was urged to join Putin's campaign," Sokurov said in the interview, "I kept telling them one thing: Quit pulling the creative community, all these weak souls and weak-nerved people, into your processes. Don't ask people, because the day will come (a difficult day!) when you will have no one left to appeal to."

One wonders if that difficult day might come sooner than later. Judging by the response the Khamatova video triggered, the Putin campaign may have metaphorically held a gun to Khamatova's head, but it shot itself in the foot. Far from this being a coup for the candidate, it has turned into a debacle in which the actress emerged more or less unscathed while Putin looks downright beastly.

These things have a way of going down in history under simple, mythologized headings: "The Actress Who Would Save Children; the Politician Who Would Steal Their Medicine to Gain the Actress's Support." I wonder whose side most people will come down on?

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