

Nov 04, 2016 by **Neal Rosendorf**

Vlad the Producer: Putin Scorns Soft Power; Uses Russian Film Industry for Domestic Propaganda ^[1]

Vladimir Putin is obsessed with cinema's potential to sway hearts and minds. Over the past several years, Russia's paramount leader has been tightening the screws on his country's film industry. What is most remarkable about Putin's move is not his power grab per se, Radio Free Europe's anxiety-laden reportage in late December notwithstanding. As an instinctive autocrat in a country with a notorious history of state control of cinema, the logic of his strategy is straightforward. Rather, what is noteworthy and disquieting is the goal of his strategy. Putin's program evinces little evident interest in burnishing Russia's overseas reputation. Internal propaganda, rather than international soft power, is Putin's cinematic preoccupation.

The culmination of Premier Putin's efforts (so far) has been the establishment in mid-December 2008 of the Government Council for the Development of Russian Film Industry. Putin announced that he will "personally supervise" the activities of the Council. The new body is intended to harness the "potential of cinema to be a major educational tool and valuable point of reference for society," as Putin put it in a speech at the October 2008 conference of Russian film producers which led to the Council's formation.

Putin's move has discomfited many, both in Russia's motion picture community and in Hollywood as well. In mid-January 2009, a long-time observer of the Russian film industry sent a memorandum to US movie industry executives analyzing Prime Minister Putin's decree creating the Council. The memo conveyed the apprehensions of liberal Russian film makers, to whom "these declarations are very difficult to reconcile with the concept of [a] free market economy and civil society which Putin as president and prime-minister has pledged to support." Still, the analyst noted, "They hope....that most of these declarations will remain on paper at least for the foreseeable future." The US media industry newspaper *Variety*, however, quoted a rather more pessimistic Russian film industry figure, who anonymously groaned, "As usual, nothing good will come of it."

The movies that have resulted from Putin's ever-increasing pressure on filmmakers have ranged from fairly subtle to utterly embarrassing in their messaging. The former is typified by a remake of *12 Angry Men*, in which the Henry Fonda character is now an ex-KGB agent (the Russian premier's old job) who adopts the young suspect he helped clear, who in the Russian retelling is a Chechen. "Call me Uncle Nikolai," he tells his new ward, a presumably grateful stand-in for the region Putin brutally pacified earlier this decade.

As for the latter, one need go no further than *This Kiss is Off the Record*, a risibly idealized fictionalization of Putin's courtship of his wife and rise to political power. The film was blasted

at home and abroad on its release as hagiographic folderol—as Russian journalist Yuri Zarakhovich inimitably put it in the pages of *Time*, “a big, sloppy, and cloying smooch” to the then-Russian president. Proving that the Russian public has not completely lost its critical faculties, *This Kiss is Off the Record* was released straight to DVD last year, not exactly a vote of commercial confidence by its producer.

Putin’s gratuitous squandering of potential cultural diplomatic opportunity is not surprising. From the start, he hasn’t attempted in any meaningful way to cultivate soft power either in terms of his personal presentation or Russia’s overall international posture. Combativeness, not co-optation, has been Russia’s *modus operandi* under Putin, recently typified by his military adventurism in Georgia, threats to target Poland with nuclear weapons, and gas pressure, as it were, on Eastern and Central Europe. Putin’s attention-getting bellicosity earned him *Time* Magazine’s 2007 Person of the Year designation. But in public diplomacy terms, Vlad might as well be the Impaler for the damage he has blithely inflicted on Russia’s global image.

Putin could arguably disregard the imperatives of soft power while George W. Bush served as Europe’s and the world’s über-bogeyman. But now the United States has ensconced in the White House *Time*’s 2008 Person of the Year, Barack Obama, arguably the most popular, and certainly the best-known, human on earth. Obama, in sharp contrast to Putin, has the capacity to effortlessly score public diplomacy points with virtually his every public utterance—witness his typically deft interview with *Al-Arabiya* on January 26.

If Putin is finding it hard to trim his sails to the new international political winds, the former Soviet spy cannot have been helped by his doubtlessly thorough communist indoctrination over many years. In formulating his inwardly focused film production policy, Putin clearly looks to the example set by his predecessors V.I. Lenin and Josef Stalin.

Lenin once famously told Anatoly Lunacharsky, his People’s Commissar of Enlightenment (minister of culture), to “remember that of all the arts for us the most important is the cinema.”¹ It was widely noted that Putin referred to Lenin’s quote, although without attribution, in his opening remarks to the October 2008 conference of Russian film producers.

Stalin was similarly beguiled by film’s potential as a tool of domestic indoctrination, going so far as to personally commission movie projects and to offer copious notes to terrified producers and directors after previewing their latest efforts.

But there were two critical differences between Lenin and Stalin when it came to film that Putin would do well to keep in mind as he moves forward. First, Lenin was basically contemptuous of popular culture: as he put it to Commissar Lunacharsky, “If you have a good newsreel, serious and educational pictures, then it doesn’t matter if, to attract the public, you have some kind of useless picture of the more or less usual type.”² The “useless,” “usual” type of film Lenin had in mind was of course entertainment. By contrast, Stalin loved movies, those produced in Hollywood most of all.

The second key difference is that while Stalin had faith in Soviet cinema as a domestic propaganda tool, he knew beyond doubt that American cinema, predicated on a search for profits, completely overwhelmed anything Russia could produce in the global sphere. Stalin averred, rather less famously than Lenin but just as tellingly, “If I could control the medium of the American motion picture, I would need nothing else to convert the entire world to

communism.”³ He recognized, as only a film lover could, the grave international threat that American movies posed to the USSR and the communist cause. Stalin may have been a fan of Westerns and of John Wayne in particular, but that didn’t stop him from ordering the Duke’s assassination over his well-publicized anti-communism (the order was rescinded after Stalin’s death).

Stalin never had the option of welcoming American film production in Russia, both because of his mania for control and because the Hollywood studios never would have taken the opportunity. (The first of very few US-Soviet co-productions was the 1976 curiosity *The Blue Bird*, directed by the renowned albeit aging George Cukor and shot in the USSR during the brief flowering of Nixon/Ford/Kissinger-era superpower détente.)

Putin conversely has at hand a Hollywood which would welcome a congenial co-production environment in Russia, especially in the midst of the current economic downturn. With Putin’s focus turned parochially inward, Russia is missing out on the unique image-enhancing potential of significant Hollywood production in that country. Russian movies have made some international inroads, most notably with the *Nightwatch* sci-fi horror series and the epic *Mongol*. Ironically, the Russian film industry has enhanced its attractiveness to Hollywood as a production partner just as Putin is taking the industry over the cliff of overt control.

Of course, even if Putin ultimately decides that reaching out to the world via cinema is in Russia’s interest, he won’t be able to look to either the Russian film industry or Hollywood to provide a magic bullet. Considering how to aim Russian film and its image-building potential abroad, as well as at home, would constitute a start toward a more constructive diplomatic policy approach—but only a start.

If Vladimir Putin persists in disregarding international opinion for the sake of *Machtpolitik* and scoring political points at home, he will thrust Russia into a lonely and vulnerable place, likely far worse than anything the US suffered during the past eight years. Hollywood could not stop the erosion of America’s overseas image in the wake of former president Bush’s confrontational foreign policy. As Bush painfully learned, even the most formidable soft power resources cannot whitewash repellent hard power practices. Putin will learn the same lesson when and if he finally comes around to the idea of trying to harness cinema as a tool of international good will.

For now, Putin may be able to use a cowed Russian film industry to fill his countrymen with visions of indispensable dictators and Russia’s past and future glory. But as long as he persists in pursuing motion picture policies based purely on stoking hyper-nationalism and building a cult of personality, he sends forth Russian filmmakers, and possibly the Russian people, on a fool’s errand.

¹ Quoted in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (Routledge, 1994), p. 57.

² Taylor and Christie, p. 57.

³ Quoted in Anthony Smith, *In the Shadow of the Cave: The Broadcaster, His Audience, and the State* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 187.
