

Nazarbayev Hits Movie Screens

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Child actor Elzhas Alpiyev appearing as a young Nursultan Nazarbayev in "The Sky of My Childhood" movie.

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Riding high on a crest of government-nurtured adulation, Kazakhstan's strongman leader has now become a star of the silver screen.

"The Sky of My Childhood," released earlier this month in Kazakhstan, is a polished account of the early life of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who recently won a presidential election with an astonishing 95 percent of the vote. International observers criticized the election for ballot-box stuffing and said authorities coerced many into voting.

Nazarbayev makes brief appearances at the beginning and end of the movie, while three actors play him at different stages of his childhood and adolescence.

Director Rustem Abdrashov's movie, made on a budget of about \$3 million, is a tender and often surprisingly subtle account of how Nazarbayev grew up in a shepherd's family living in the mountains of southern Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev is portrayed variously as a diligent student respectful of his elders, but also as a perennially smiling imp most happy when scrapping with friends and, later in life, wooing a girl at a local dance hall.

Government critics say such exercises form part of the authorities' attempts to build a cult of personality around Nazarbayev, who has ruled Kazakhstan since the 1980s, when it still formed part of the Soviet Union.

Praise of the president is ubiquitous on state media, and posters bearing his image and slogans are dotted all over the country. Last year, the one-party parliament voted to name Nazarbayev "leader of the nation" — a title that gives him the right to approve important policies after he retires and grants him lifetime immunity from prosecution for acts committed during his rule.

Although Nazarbayev genuinely enjoys enormous popularity for steering the country through a period of growing prosperity, international observers said the colossal turnout of voters in the April 3 election was ensured through coercion.

Abdrashov's previous film, "The Gift to Stalin," focused on the story of a Jewish child being forcibly relocated to Kazakhstan by Soviet authorities, a fate that befell many ethnic groups during the historical period also covered in "The Sky of My Childhood."

Abdrashov said that as somebody interested in examining Kazakhstan's totalitarian legacy, he is uncomfortable with the notion that his latest movie was aimed at building a cult of personality.

"There should be no talk of a personality cult. We don't have Stalinist torture chambers here, and people are not starving in prison camps," Abdrashov said.

Even so, some fanciful passages have drawn chuckles. In one scene, a young Nazarbayev builds a model city out of stones that crudely resembles the country's new capital, Astana.

The city, which was made capital in 1997, was built virtually from scratch at Nazarbayev's behest and has long been touted as the centerpiece of an increasingly modern Kazakhstan.

"The Sky of My Childhood" also dwells heavily on the theme of interethnic harmony, another message at the heart of Nazarbayev's credo.

Yermek Amanshayev, president of the Kazakhfilm production company, said Nazarbayev burst into tears while viewing the Astana premiere of the movie.

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