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No Political Harmony Among Cultural Elite

By Alexander Bratersky

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As Prime Minister Vladimir Putin enters the home stretch of his campaign to return to the Kremlin, he is relying on the support not only of the blue-collar electorate, but also members of the cultural elite, who are helping to market his bid for the presidency.

Putin's extended campaign team has about 500 participants, including famous musicians, actors and writers who appear in pro-Putin commercials and at rallies. But political analysts and experts said their participation has divided the cultural elite itself.

Several dozen prominent celebrities, among them world-famous piano player Denis Matsuyev, St. Petersburg Mariinsky conductor Valery Gergiev, jazz musician Igor Butman and opera star Anna Netrebko have thrown their lot in with Putin.

When contacted to explain the reasons behind their choice of candidate, most have declined to comment. The situation has even split families: in one case a well-known rock musician sided

with Putin, while his brother, also a rock star, is for the opposition.

Supporting Putin, who is seen by his opponents as an authoritarian leader, might damage a performer's reputation and can become a source of controversy. The liberal media has attacked prominent actress Chulpan Khamatova for appearing in a Putin commercial, in which she thanks the prime minister for supporting her charity that aids children with cancer. Although Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that Khamatova appeared in the commercial voluntarily, sources at the charity said she was forced into the recording.

The public response against the video was so negative that even liberal Novaya Gazeta had to defend Khamatova in one of its latest articles. Khamatova has declined to discuss her endorsement for Putin. "Let everyone stick to his own vision," she said, RIA-Novosti reported.

Iosif Prigozhin, a prominent music producer and show business insider has also defended the actress.

"Khamatova is an absolutely sincere person. But imagine that I had helped you. Would you do the same for me?" he told The Moscow Times.

Some of the artists who have campaigned for Putin have been able to use their connections to the prime minister to overcome bureaucratic barriers to help with the renovation or construction of theaters they manage.

Actor and theater director Yevgeny Mironov got Putin's support for the restoration of the Theater of Nations after becoming its artistic director in 2006. He said in an interview that only direct lobbying has helped him keep the theater alive.

But Prigozhin said genuine political motivations should also be taken into account. He said he and his wife Valeria, a well-known pop singer, have not taken part in pro-Putin commercials, but that they both would vote for Putin because they see "no alternative."

"With all my sympathy for Prokhorov, I don't see him as president and would never believe that he entered the race because he has ideas," Prigozhin said.

Classical pianist Mikhail Arkadyev, a member of the Solidarity opposition movement, has publicly attacked Mariinsky theater conductor Valery Gergiev and violinist Yury Bashmet for supporting Putin.

"I blame you, colleagues who have world recognized names but are part of a system where you cannot find the intellectual bravery to understand that Putinism is a lost cause," Arkadyev stated in an essay published by Novaya Gazeta in mid-February.

More evidence of strife is the rift between two prominent rock musicians, Vadim Samoilov and his brother Gleb, both members of the now-defunct band Agata Kristi.

Although both brothers are friends with Vladislav Surkov, the former deputy head of the presidential administration, they are in opposing political camps.

While Vadim, a member of the Public Chamber, joined Putin's campaign, his brother Gleb has

taken up the opposition's cause and played at a number of their events.

Vadim Samoilov declined to be interviewed, but a source familiar with the situation said the brothers "do not speak with each other because of politics."

Ideological differences are important for some celebrities who support Putin because of their anti-Communist views and fear of the radical left.

"How many people have they killed, how many monuments they have destroyed?" Igor Butman, a prominent jazz musician and member of Putin's team, said in reference to the Communists after the December elections.

Butman, who joined United Russia in 2008, said "party discipline" makes him support Putin, whom he sees as the best presidential candidate.

"I trust this man, and I don't see any other candidates among those offered. I don't like it that so many questions are decided by just one person, but I would like it if there were more people like Putin and Medvedev," Butman told The Moscow Times.

Butman is a friend of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, who has criticized him for his support of Putin. "I respect [Nemtsov]," said Butman, "but I wish he would have a bigger base of support than the Communists."

Although the majority of Putin's supporters are driven by "concern for their careers," some of them "do see a threat in an orange scenario," said Pavel Salin, an expert with the Center for Political Conjecture, a pro-Kremlin think tank. Salin named prominent film director Stanislav Govorukhin, the head of Putin's election campaign, as the informal leader of the celebrity contingent. "Putin is better than chaos" from Govorukhin's perspective, Salin said.

Some experts close to Putin's campaign also see television journalist Alexander Nevzorov, film director Nikita Mikhalkov and singer and United Russia party member Nikolai Rastorguyev as sharing Govorukhin's agenda. All of them are formally signed on as part of Putin's re-election machine.

Putin is not the only one bringing cultural figures into his campaign. A number of celebrities, including pop diva Alla Pugachyova, rock singer Andrei Makarevich and film director Pavel Lungin have rallied behind the campaign for Mikhail Prokhorov.

Gennady Zyuganov has support from prominent film director Vladimir Bortko, ice-skating champion Roman Kostomarov and popular satirist Mikhail Zadornov — who stated that he has thrown his support behind the Communist leader because of his anger toward Putin and the United Russia party.

"Certain members of the cultural elite are acting upon their beliefs, while some are just being bought up by one of the camps," said Yelena Pozdnyakova, a political expert with the Center for Political Technologies.

Pozdnyakova said this applies to the figures supporting Putin.

"Some really see no one else whom they could support. But others are acting upon their

pragmatic ideas. There were times when Russian stars took part in concerts organized even by mafia dons," she said.

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