

'Intelligentsia' Has Become a Bad Word in Russia

By [Yevgeny Kiselyov](#)

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There is a famous story about a senior Soviet official charged with monitoring Soviet writers' loyalty to communism and the Soviet state. The official complained to his boss, Josef Stalin, saying: "Those writers are an impossible lot. All they do is drink, engage in debauchery and squabble among themselves." Stalin shot back: "I don't have any other writers to offer you. You'll just have to work with them."

I tell this story whenever someone asks me why famous Russian actors, directors, artists and musicians are so eager to publicly support Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. This display of loyalty has increased markedly during the past two months of his presidential campaign with the most conspicuous example being the dozens of celebrities who made individual videos under the common headline "Why I Am Voting for Putin."

Stalin's quote very much applies to Russia's creative intelligentsia — we don't have any other kind. They love attention from the authorities and consider themselves lucky to have

a "benevolent monarch" who acts as a personal censor, just as Alexander Pushkin had in his day.

For decades during the Soviet period, famous actors, singers, writers and other celebrities became accustomed to receiving government handouts, such as dachas, apartments, automobiles, trips to resorts, preferential distribution of their movies and books, etc. Even today, several of these privileges remain for Kremlin-loyal celebrities.

Moreover, the Soviet tradition of bestowing state titles like "the people's artist" hasn't lost its value. Can you imagine the U.S. government giving achievement awards to Meryl Streep or George Clooney instead of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences?

Russia's creative elite is afraid of incurring the authorities' wrath, as if they still live in the Soviet Union. Performers and artists who refuse to praise Putin are not put in prison, but they might find themselves on the Kremlin's blacklist.

Take, for example, legendary rock singer Yury Shevchuk of DDT who has been blacklisted from performing on television for the past 10 years.

This happened to me as well after I was removed as general director of NTV in April 2001 when the station was taken over by Gazprom Media. Because of my harsh criticism of the Putin regime, for almost 10 years, no major television station in Russia has allowed me to continue the kind of political talk shows or documentaries that I hosted for years on NTV and TV-6.

The performers who made clips for the "Why I Am Voting for Putin" series are highly dependent on the good graces of the authorities. If they step even a little out of line, their funding might be decreased, the rent on their studios or theaters might be raised to exorbitant levels, tax inspectors might show up at their door, the sanitary department could shut them down for alleged violations or other measures could be enforced to make their lives miserable.

Among those who decided to openly lobby for Putin's re-election campaign was Hermitage Museum director Mikhail Piotrovsky. As a respectable museum director with an international reputation, Piotrovsky could have said "no" to Putin, secure in the knowledge that any attempt to make trouble for him or the museum would embroil the authorities in a major scandal. But apparently Piotrovsky didn't want to take any chances.

Some might reproach me for denying prominent figures the right to offer their sincere and heartfelt support for Putin. After all, Soviet-era writers Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Bulgakov, Osip Mandelstam and Boris Pasternak made sincere attempts to reconcile themselves to Stalin and even to glorify him. One explanation is that these writers suffered a form of the Stockholm Syndrome in which the intelligentsia were forced by circumstances outside their control to not only accept an authoritarian system but to praise its leaders, as well.

I can image how the country's genuine intellectuals shudder at this public sycophancy toward Putin, particularly considering his seemingly deliberate attempt to appear non-intellectual. Take, for example, his tendency to use coarse, bawdy language and resort to primitive conspiracy theories about internal and external enemies that would insult the intelligence of anyone with a higher education.

To paraphrase a famous saying, "Tell me who runs your election headquarters, and I'll tell you what kind of man you are." Putin's campaign chief is Stanislav Govorukhin, an excellent film director but someone who lacks morality. Referring to the middle-class, educated protesters, Govorukhin recently quoted Vladimir Lenin, calling Russia's intelligentsia "the nation's crap."

In any Western country, Govoukhin's comment would have resulted in his immediate dismissal. But on the contrary, Putin, it would seem, deliberately plays to the emotions and tastes of the most uneducated and crude segments of society. These are people who consider "intelligentsia" to be a four-

letter word.

If you ask Russia's celebrities who kowtow to Putin in such a public fashion whether they still consider themselves part of the intelligentsia, they would clearly say "yes."

They may be correct, but only in the distorted Soviet sense of the term. After all, during the Soviet period, to be considered a member of the intelligentsia all it took was the ability to eat with a knife and fork.

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