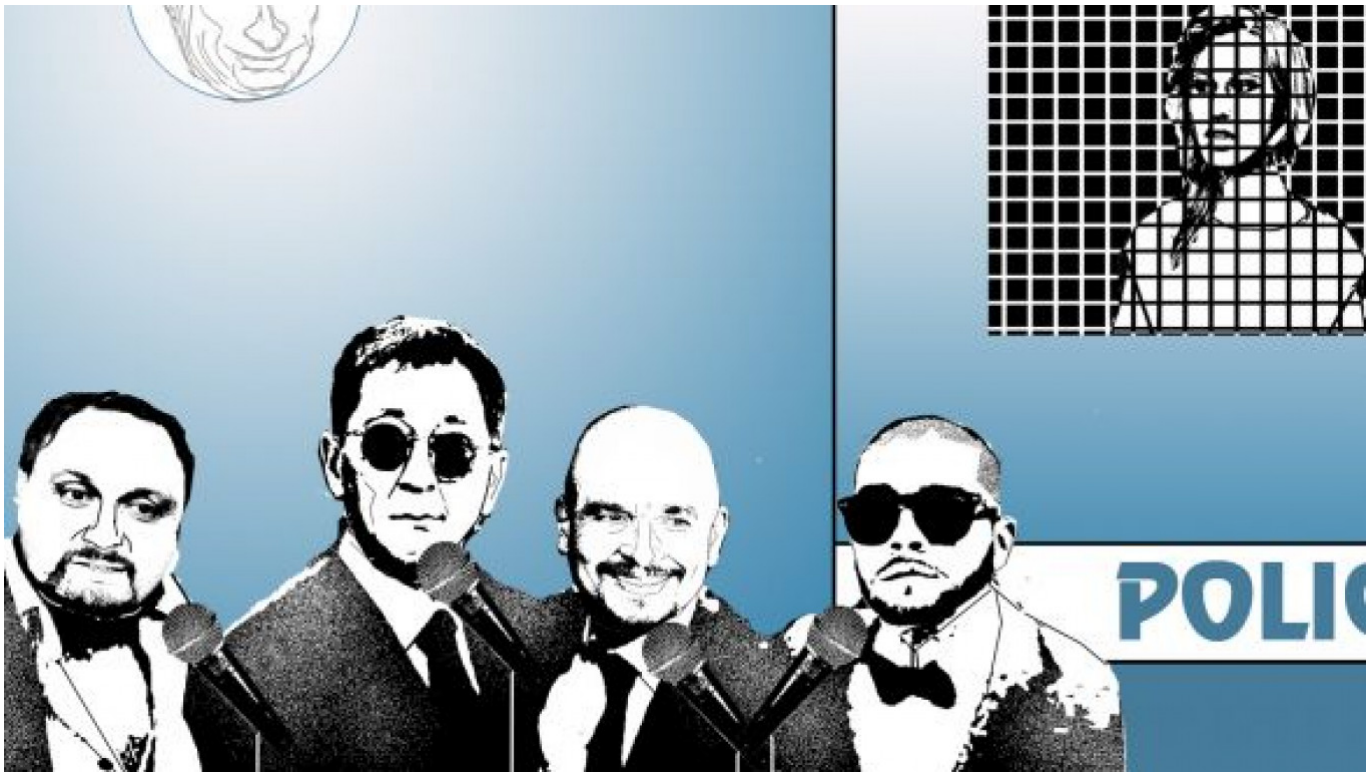
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Inthe Spotlight

By Anna Malpas

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This week, Vladimir Putin invited rapper Timati and lion-taming brothers Edgard and Askold Zapashny to his big day. On the other side of the barricades, it girl and media personality Ksenia Sobchak won the activist's badge of pride by finally getting arrested.

Putin's inauguration was a bit of a disappointment for star spotters. Arnold Schwarzenegger didn't come, despite a rumor in the often well-informed paper Tvoi Den. And the more colorful guests were hard to spot in a sea of officials.

Just as Putin said he considered serving the fatherland his duty, the camera paused on two ponytailed men, one with bleached blond hair: the Zapashny brothers, Edgard and Askold. They've made it big on reality shows, but their main job is circus artistes, doing acts with lions and tigers. They're staunch Putin loyalists and People's Artists of the Russian Federation. And they were among the 55 who signed an open letter last year defending the second trial of jailed oil boss Mikhail Khodorkovsky. And both were also picked for Putin's mysterious team of "representatives" in his presidential campaign. Admittedly, seemingly most of Russia was on the list of about 500 of Putin's current best friends.

The best picture came later when rapper Timati posted a terrible greenish shot on Twitter showing him in a ruffled shirt and bow tie with pop singers Stas Mikhailov and Grigory Leps in the Kremlin. "Brothers at the inauguration," he wrote. Again no surprises, Leps performed at the Putin snow-blown rally at Luzhniki and Mikhailov was one of Putin's "representatives."

Even at the inauguration, Mikhailov wore his shirt unbuttoned to reveal his hairy chest and gold chain with a cross. Although the dress code was a dark suit. Analysts might suggest Putin's musical tastes are changing, or that he has cannily noted that Mikhailov is now Russia's most popular singer.

Timati was one of the celebrities who did a promotional video ad explaining that "I am voting for Putin because ..." In his case, it was because of the Middle East. He said he wanted peace in Russia and didn't want "people hanging from the lampposts."

In a ludicrous photo taken at the party for selected supporters after the election victory, Putin tried to do rapper hand gestures with Timati, who wore a T-shirt to show off his extensive tattoos.

Many other usual suspects were there: Zurab Tsereteli, so expect more giant statues; Eurovision winner Dima Bilan and Olympic medal-winning figure skater Yevgeny Plushenko, although I think the danger of them doing Eurovision again has passed. And the biker Khirurg, or surgeon, who leads the Russian Orthodox Night Wolves outfit. Kommersant reported that he insists his followers have badges only with Russian lettering on their leather jackets. Be very afraid.

Meanwhile Sobchak confirmed her status as an opposition activist — one of the few celebrities still visibly supporting the cause — by getting arrested Tuesday evening as the opposition held unregistered "walking" protests. She wasn't holding a placard or shouting slogans. She was later released, but as Alexei Navalny pointed out on Twitter, only after making her first-ever trip to Vostochnoye Degunino. "The country is just one big police van," she wrote on Twitter.

Things really have changed for Sobchak: until recently she would have been manning the campfire at Dom-2. And not dissuaded, she has continued going to the low-key but still simmering protests, turning up at Chistiye Prudy on Wednesday evening and even rallying support for the next evening get-together in her slightly head-girl manner.

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