

Depardieu Steps Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fire

By [John Freedman](#)

January 09, 2013

The  Moscow Times

You can only assume that Gerard Depardieu didn't know what he was getting into.

For the dozen or so of you out there who don't know what that means, let me quote from a news brief [published](#) on the website of The Moscow Times: "French actor Gerard Depardieu has met with President Vladimir Putin and received his Russian passport, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Sunday."

That's right, the great French actor — frankly, my pick for the greatest actor alive today — is now the proud possessor of a Russian passport.

The story is all over the web if you're interested. But the gist is this: Depardieu was (understandably) ticked off to learn that he may pay a tax rate as high as 75 percent under a new law being put forth by French president Francois Hollande.

Like some other wealthy French citizens, Depardieu took up residence in Belgium and badmouthed Hollande's tax policy. For his efforts he was publicly labeled "pathetic" and "unpatriotic" by French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault.

That's when the proverbial industrial waste hit the rotor blades. And that's just when President Putin stepped in to make Depardieu's day, week, month and New Year.

You see, while making a recent movie about the controversial Russian priest Rasputin, Depardieu and Putin apparently became friendly. In any case, Depardieu can be seen happily clapping in [videos](#) while Putin warbles "Blueberry Hill" at a big international party in St. Petersburg two years ago.

What could bring together an angry, expat French cinematic genius and a Russian president facing increasing discontent among his electorate at home?

Well, consider this for Depardieu: According to Worldwide-tax.com, Russia's flat tax rate of 13 percent (15 percent for non-residents) beats the heck out of Hollande's 75 percent. As for Putin, well, he could use just about any PR move at the moment that would make him look semi-humane. After all, there is trouble brewing among his political opponents following his signing of the so-called "Anti-Magnitsky" act, which outlaws adoptions of Russian orphans by American citizens.

But what was probably conceived as a little game of scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours has blown up into a folkloric scandal of hilarious consequences.

The Russian blogosphere and social media are verily alight with glee over the turn of events.

Esteemed Russian writer Lev Rubinshtein on Monday summed up the scorn that has been heaped on Depardieu by suggesting a new Russian word on his Facebook page – "depardyo," which would mean something like, well, that stuff that proverbially hits fans when the going gets tough. Rubinshtein puts it like this: "New insult: 'Man, what a depardyo you are!' or 'I've had enough of this depardyo!'"

Screenwriter Ivan Ugarov posted the following comment on Facebook on Sunday, referring in part to the fact that Depardieu is apparently now officially a resident of Mordovskaya oblast.

"I imagine a scene like this: Depardieu wakes up in Belgium after a month-long drinking binge, seriously hung over. Remembering nothing, struggling not to take another drink, he makes some horrifying discoveries: the ID of a resident of Mordovskaya oblast, fur winter boots, a balalaika, a bear skin ... Frightened to death he runs out on the street, his shaking hand fiddling with his Russian passport in his pocket. 'Mama, what the hell happened!?'"

Playwright Yelena Gremina responded to this post with wisdom and understanding – of a sort.

"Basically," she wrote, "Depardieu is still a fantastic actor))) The twentieth century!!! Under the sun of Satan! Plain bad luck!"

More often than wisdom and understanding, people are responding with humor, that great

last bastion of Russian political savvy.

St. Petersburg director Alexei Yankovsky, known on Facebook as Count Monte Cristo, put up a new avatar on his page over the weekend. It is a photo of Depardieu running nude on a beach with a thin red line "censoring" the crack in the actor's ample buttocks.

A photo meme reposted by many shows Depardieu sharing a beer and a heart-to-heart talk with someone who might be a working class Russian. Depardieu looks on quizzically as the man says knowingly, "I told you it was cooler here, but all you could think of was America!"

NashaCanada.com, an expat Russian online newspaper, posted a series of humorous, if not to say ridiculing, photos of Depardieu, including one of him dressed as a Russian clown.

Even the mainstream Western press has jumped on the band wagon, with the well-known cartoonist Danziger depicting [Putin-as-Santa-Claus](#) chastising a group of bedraggled children: "You orphans should be ashamed of yourselves. The great Depardieu wants to move here and you, you ungrateful brats, want to leave?"

One rather doubts that this tempest in a teapot will calm down any time soon. It was given a new blast of life when Brigitte Bardot suggested that she might join Depardieu in Russia unless French authorities step in to save two elephants in a French zoo.

Bardot, revealing a ghastly lack of grasp of facts, declared Putin a friend of animals.

This brought forth a long and grimly spirited [response](#) on the site of Echo Moskvy radio from Yulia Latynina, the Russian journalist and Moscow Times columnist. In her point-by-point diatribe, Latynina ticks off all the reasons why animals in Russia have every reason to fear Putin. She concludes by appealing directly to Bardot, "You said about Putin that every time you have 'asked him to do something he has agreed.' I willingly believe that. The problem is that 110 million Russian voters cannot ask anything of Putin. That right is reserved only for his small number of friends."

In short, a few great and eccentric French actors have amused Russians well over the holidays. But we're still a long way off from determining who will laugh last.

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