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Getting France to Recognize Russia's Superiority

By Nina Khrushcheva

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President Vladimir Putin has finally done it. Russia has been vying for the West's esteem for centuries, and approval by the French — a sought-after prize since the time of Peter the Great — has been coveted the most. But despite the defeat of Napoleon and the World War I alliance, Russia could never get any respect from France. Indeed, the Marquis de Custine's "Letters from Russia" suggested that Russian civilization amounted to little more than the mimicry of monkeys.

But now, the French seal of approval has seemingly been bestowed. And what a gargantuan seal it is, coming in the corpulent form of actor Gerard Depardieu, who sought — and has now received — Russian citizenship. Along with a passport comes an offer of a free apartment in the Mordovia region, which is still a gulag site, and even a job as the local culture minister. Two centuries after French troops were run out of Moscow in 1812, Putin has succeeded in making a French popular idol want to be Russian.

In Russia and elsewhere, the French are often perceived to feel and act superior. And who

could blame them? French artistic beauty is second to none. The French are the arbiters of European culture and have long been among the shrewdest observers of other countries' manners and mores. Indeed, in the 1830s, two Frenchmen, Alexis de Tocqueville and Custine, went to the outskirts of civilization to describe the future superpower rivals: the U.S. and Russia.

Until 1861, Russia was a backward serfdom in which royals and aristocrats envied the latest French fashions. From Alexander Pushkin's poems to Leo Tolstoy's novels, French influence pervades the commanding heights of Russian culture. Russia's most famous museum, the Hermitage, is second only to the Louvre in its collection of French art. Peter the Great, in his 18th-century effort to westernize Russia, invited Jean-Baptiste Le Blond to become the chief architect of his new capital, St. Petersburg.

But forget Peter the Great. Now "Vova the Little" — or "Lilli-Putin," as Georgia's sharp-tongued president, Mikheil Saakashvili, once dubbed Russia's president — may have pulled off an even greater coup. When Depardieu was planning to cross the border into dull, little Belgium to avoid French taxes, the Russians made him an offer he could not refuse: not just a flat 13 percent income-tax rate but a chance to poke French President Francois Hollande in the eye.

The ever-vain Depardieu will be a god in Russia. We love the French in general, but we adore him in particular. After all, he starred in the 2011 film about the life of the mad monk Grigory Rasputin. He played the portly Porthos in Alexander Dumas' classic "The Three Musketeers" and played the lead in the film version of Edmond Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac," which is almost as popular with Russians as Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin."

Like all Russian leaders, Putin affects a deep love of culture. In the absence of fair elections, Kremlin occupants traditionally seek legitimacy by attracting artists to their side. If a beloved actor, writer, sculptor or musician loves Putin, how could anyone feel otherwise?

I myself once witnessed Putin courting culture. It was New Year's Eve 2003, during a concert at Moscow's newly opened House of Music. Directly across the aisle from me, there was Putin, sitting between the onetime dissident cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich and his equally famous wife, opera diva Galina Vishnevskaya. Russia's leader was like a kid in a candy store, thrilled to be surrounded by these cultural icons and former exiles no less. And the icons were obviously flattered by Putin's adoration and by their proximity to power.

Putin has finally proved that he is capable of exploits that no tsar could accomplish. All that tough anti-Western rhetoric on behalf of the nation has paid off. The aloof French have at long last recognized Russian superiority and are sending one of their greatest representatives to partake of it.

Indeed, not long after Depardieu's change of allegiance, a French icon of an even older vintage, Brigitte Bardot, suggested that she, too, might embrace Russia. In her own words, she "decided to seek Russian nationality to flee this country, which is nothing but an animal cemetery," because it has "the cowardice and impudence" to consider euthanizing two elephants in the Lyon zoo.

Putin does share Bardot's love of animals, not only his own pet Koni, but also the co-stars

of his mostly animal-centered publicity stunts. It is with less obedient people that he has problems. These include former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, imprisoned for more than 10 years after backing Putin's political opponents; Anna Politkovskaya, murdered in 2006 for her investigative reporting on his regime's misdeeds in Chechnya; and Sergei Magnitsky, a whistle-blowing lawyer who died in pretrial detention in 2009 after being refused medical treatment. Putin's most vocal current foe, Alexei Navalny, who is also another anti-corruption whistle-blower and lawyer, has been investigated three times for supposedly stealing millions of dollars.

But one has to appreciate the historical absurdity. Putin, after more than a decade in power, has lost the support of his own, usually quiescent citizens, who have had rather limited experience with democracy. And it is the French, the avatars of Enlightenment and the rights of man, who have stepped in to provide a patina of legitimacy to his political twilight.

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