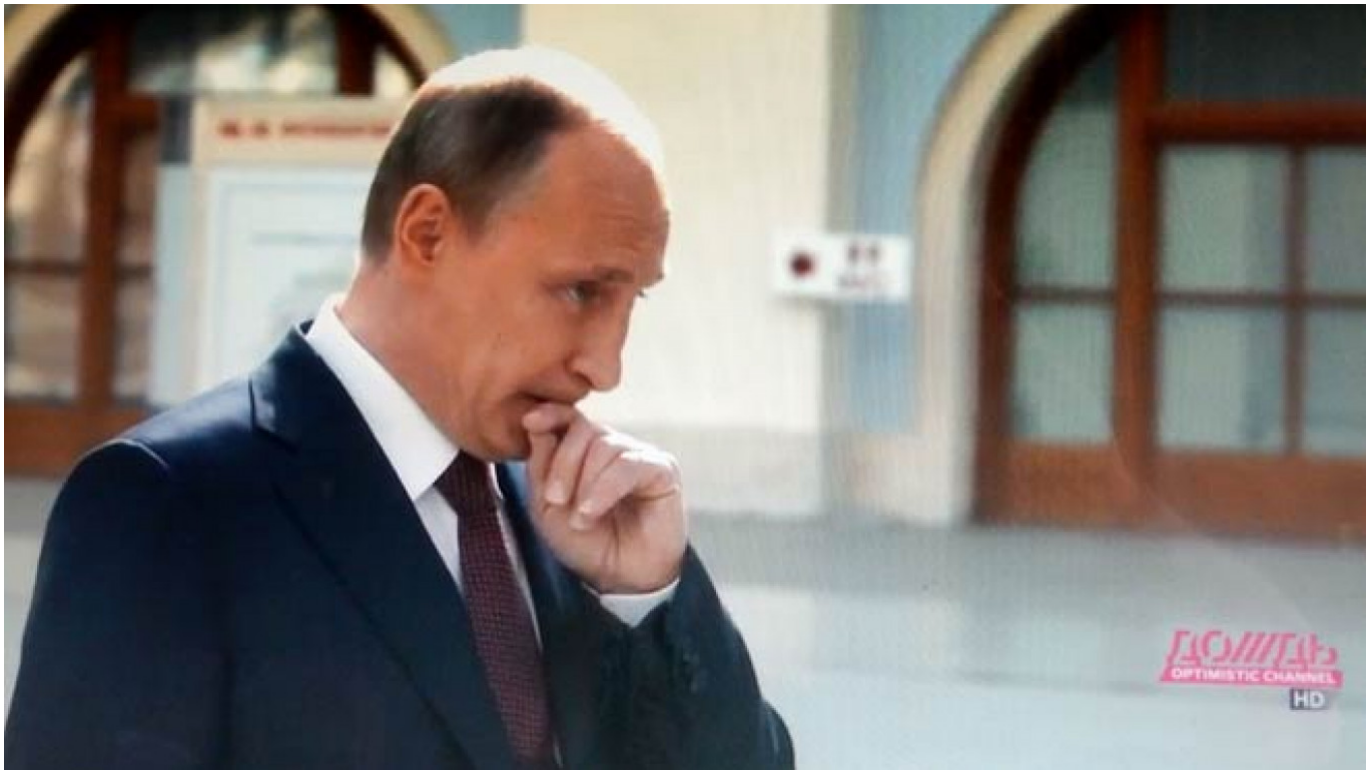
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Did Putin Declare a Mini Thaw in Culture?

By John Freedman

April 20, 2014



Russian president Vladimir Putin is shown listening to a reporter's question on Dozhd television on Thursday during an impromptu discussion of the beleaguered station's future.

Did this actually happen or am I imagining it? It's no big event or turning point, that is for sure. But it did feel for a moment last week that the temperature of the flames burning around us dipped just a little.

In recent times we have grown accustomed to newspapers, journalists, politicians and others ranting and raving at artists for being perverts, Godless, unpatriotic or all of the above. It was just a week or so ago that parliamentarian Yevgeny Fyodorov evoked guffaws by claiming that "Hollywood and the CIA" wrote songs for the great Russian rock musician Viktor Tsoi (he has since denied he said it, although there is a video of him making the claim). This came out at about the same time that the Kul'tura, or Culture, newspaper slammed contemporary theater artists for propagating "sleaze, obscenities, pornography, and worthless shamanism disguised as innovation." I wrote about that in "Russia's New Culture War" last week.

Then something happened. And you could feel it in the air.

Not surprisingly, the impulse for that sensation was Russian president Vladimir Putin's televised, four-hour "direct line" conversation on Thursday. I have read plenty of reports which indicated Putin was as belligerent and aggressive as ever. There were plenty such moments. Still, I'm more inclined to go with Masha Lipman, who wrote in The New Yorker that Putin sounded "rather benevolent and conciliatory."

"In his four-hour 'direct line,'" Lipman expounded, "Putin did not call anybody 'Fascist' and did not focus on the mayhem in Kiev (he referred to those events as 'the known unrest'). He even defended Ukraine against those whose questions sounded too hostile..."

The first thing to catch my ear was the president's response to a question from Irina Prokhorova, the leader of the Citizen's Platform party, and a highly respected cultural figure thanks to her position as a publisher, editor and the head of her brother's Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation. (Prokhorova's question and Putin's answer can be viewed in a video on YouTube.) Suggesting that Russian cultural figures are feeling the lashes of persecution, and that new laws are forcing artists into the position of "servants of ideology," she asked if such developments aren't a case of the great Russian culture being undermined.

Putin began to respond with a generic comment about how he has not sensed any particular increase in tensions in this sphere, but then abruptly interrupted himself to admit that just the opposite was true. "But nobody is stopping them from having their say," he said. "Nobody's grabbing them and throwing them in prison, sticking them in camps, as it happened in 1937."

Shrugging his shoulders as if to brush the whole thing off, he continued: "Everyone expressing his point of view is, thank God, alive and well, and busy working at his profession. But the fact that they are experiencing a pushback, hearing another point of view, positions that don't accept their position... Often in our country, people of the intelligentsia just aren't used to that. Some people think that what they say is the absolute truth and that it can be no other way. And when they see something in answer, and hear an answer, it causes a violent emotional response."

On the surface these comments could sound like a rather innocuous brush-off of Prokhorova's question. But in a culture where doublespeak and messages hidden between the lines are often more important than what is actually said, Putin's response can be interpreted in a new light.

Readers may recall that in Mikhail Bulgakov's cult novel "The Master and Margarita," Pontius Pilate essentially confirms the future execution of Yeshua Ha-Nozri by lamenting that he cannot save him. In the case of Putin's "direct line" appearance, one hears a similar dynamic at work, only with a different vector. By suggesting that no one is being thrown in prison and that, "thank God," people are alive and well, the president may well have been telling the more active zealots in the Russian government and in public spheres that extreme persecution of cultural figures will no longer be tolerated.

No less important was a short encounter that Putin had with a reporter from the besieged Dozhd (Rain) television station after the "direct line" had concluded. Caught by Dozhd

reporter Anton Zhelnov in the atrium of the Gostinny Dvor, where the broadcast originated, Putin agreed to and respond to a question about the difficulties the channel has faced since most Russian cable operators pulled it from the air. I remind you that in January Dozhd was essentially banned for daring to ask a controversial question about the Siege of Leningrad in one of its reports on that historical event.

Subsequently, Dozhd could be seen only through internet subscriptions and by subscribers of the Rinet provider of internet and digital television. Overnight it lost access to 80% of its audience and, thus, to advertising revenue.

Once again, in his response to Zhelnov's question, Putin chose to mix conciliation with pressure. Stating for the record that Dozhd had "insulted a large number" of citizens, and that it was right to have apologized for that, he stunned many by calling it a "rather interesting channel with a good, young team."

"From my side," he said, "I can say that if Dozhd is not reaching television screens because of some audits and excessive attention from all these controlling organs, then from my side I will do everything to relieve you of such excessive attention."

The phrase "no sooner said than done" was never more appropriate. The Dozhd website posted this interview in full at 4:10 p.m. on Thursday. Just 28 hours later it posted a report from ITAR-Tass declaring that Roskomnadzor, the agency responsible for overseeing matters of mass communication and technology, was prepared to help Dozhd once again "negotiate" with cable operators.

By Sunday, I counted at least six new advertisements appearing on the channel. Since it was effectively shut down in January, only Skit mayonnaise continued to purchase airtime for ads.

These two short comments by the president do not constitute an about-face in policy or atmosphere. No one has stopped unhinged parliamentarians from tabling draconian laws that make it legal for the government to persecute relatives of those convicted of wrongdoing, or would officially designate that any blogger read or seen by more than 3,000 individuals on the internet will have to abide by the laws of mass communications organizations. No one is rescinding the so-called anti-gay law, no one is doing much to ease tensions in Eastern Ukraine. No one — at least yet — is doing anything about the lawmaker Vladimir Zhirinovsky encouraging his retinue to "violently rape" a pregnant journalist who asked him a question he didn't like at a press conference.

There is plenty reason to keep up our guard. And yet ... On Thursday Vladimir Putin assured us that we are mistaken for seeing parallels between the present and 1937. He actively took steps to put an important, independent television back on air after three months of blockage.

I am happy to take note of this and pass it on.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/20/did-putin-declare-a-mini-thaw-in-culture-a34266