The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

A Glimpse Into Russia's Star-Studded State Duma

By Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber

October 07, 2014

Soviet hockey player Vladislav Tretyak and Olympic figure skating champion Irina Rodnina lighting the Olympic flame during the 2014 Winter Olympics' opening ceremony in Sochi.

The constellations of famous faces dotting the State Duma light up the otherwise murky backdrop of Russian politics, giving the drab legislative body a similar appeal to that of a concert hall, a hockey rink or a movie set.

Former athletes, singers, actors and other celebrities — the vast majority of whom represent the ruling United Russia party — have spread like wildfire across the legislature in the past decade. The state uses the stars of the Duma to lend itself a sense of legitimacy and to bolster popular support for the regime, sociologists told The Moscow Times.

These famous lawmakers have also taken center stage in events of symbolic importance to the Kremlin, including the Sochi Olympic Games in February. Duma deputies such as former wrestler Alexander Karelin, legendary Soviet goaltender Vladislav Tretyak, figure skating

champion Irina Rodnina and first woman in space Valentina Tereshkova featured prominently at the opening ceremony. Former Duma deputy and two-time Olympic medalist in rhythmic gymnastics Alina Kabayeva — who served seven years in the state legislature before relinquishing her position last month to head a pro-Kremlin media holding — was there alongside them.

Sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya, who specializes in the study of Russia's governing elite, said the disproportionate number of stars in the Duma serves to spice up politics in the eyes of a constituency hungry for sitcoms.

"To see work horses that write legislation all the time would be boring for the public," Kryshtanovskaya told The Moscow Times. "These public figures are drawn into the political system to charm the electorate and spread support for the state among the general population."

Some Duma stars have denounced accusations that they are only there for show, that they have entered politics on the basis of their success in other fields. Among them is 34-year-old Dmitry Nosov of the LDPR party, an Olympic bronze medalist in judo who has dabbled in cinema and television.

While some could argue that Nosov's sharp jabs and combativeness were what earned him a spot on the Duma's Committee for Security and Anti-Corruption to "fight" lawlessness, the deputy denies that his athletic past and his current political career are intertwined.

Nosov, who studied at the Presidential Academy of Civil Service with the intention of serving the state after retiring from judo, told The Moscow Times via email that he used to be written off as a simple "judoka" without any meaningful political experience, but those sentiments have since tapered off.

"I didn't enter politics not because I am a judoka, but rather because I really want to change the world, to make sure Russians live well, that they are educated and healthy, and that they be proud of their country."

Tear-jerking aspirations aside, Nosov admits that his career path reflects the hackneyed star-turned-politician pattern.

"My choice to enter politics was not arbitrary. Everything went according to plan: first a career in sports, then in cinema and television, and finally, politics. Just like Arnold Schwarzenegger," Nosov wrote, polishing his sentence off with a smiley face.

Questionable Qualifications

The past vocations of some Duma stars offer little basis to question their aptitude to address serious policy matters, as is the case with cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova and world chess champion Anatoly Karpov.

Others like Yelena Drapeko, a Soviet actress who appeared in more than 60 films, put her fame aside to focus on a career in politics. Drapeko served in St. Petersburg City Hall's office for culture and tourism in the early 1990s, before becoming involved with the Communist

party and subsequently with opposition party A Just Russia.

"It's wrong to think that there are idiots in the State Duma," said Dmitry Gudkov, an independent lawmaker who helped lead anti-Kremlin street protests in 2011 and 2012. "Some deputies are more educated, some are less. But none of them are stupid. Some of them hang onto a Cold War mentality. This doesn't mean they are dumb. But the smarter ones do seem to be in hiding these days."

In other cases, the qualifications and motives of famous lawmakers have given the legislative body the appearance of an unsettling fraternity party, where mercurial jocks and bombshell cheerleaders are tasked with crafting the country's legal framework.

The enigmatic Marat Safin, a former pro-tennis bad boy notorious for smashing his rackets during on-court temper tantrums, gets to vote on legislation, as does sitcom actress Maria Kozhevnikova, whom Maxim magazine named Russia's "hottest" woman in 2011, just one month before she was elected to the Duma.

Kozhevnikova, who is probably better known among the general population for her Playboy spread than for her legislative initiatives, has embarked on a crusade to ban palm oil in the country. The initiative, albeit laudable in itself, seems to have gotten lost amid the country's recent bans on foreign food products.

Returning a Favor

A seat in the federal legislative body is a sinecure for many performers and athletes past their prime — a public position with little responsibility, a flexible schedule and sizable earnings.

Through special appearances and a little legislative work, crooner Iosif Kobzon earned more than 54 million rubles ($1.35 million) last year, according to the Duma's website. Tretyak, who also serves as president of the Russian Hockey Federation, made a humble 4.9 million rubles ($122,864).

Critics claim that the Duma's stars do not pull their weight in the legislative body. But sociologist insist that their main task is not to make laws. They earn their salary by accomplishing a crucial function in Russian politics: mobilizing popular support.

"The interests of the state and of these personalities meet in the middle," said Alexei Levinson, the director of social and cultural research for the independent Levada Center. "Some stars support the state for their own personal glory, while others take part in the system for the benefit of the organizations they support. But the relationship here remains symbiotic. The state benefits too."

Kryshtanovskaya distinguishes between three categories of Duma deputies: the propagandists, the lobbyists and the "average" legislation-writing lawmakers. The stars of the Duma generally fall into the first category.

Some famous faces in the Duma are compelled to endorse the regime and take part in politics because of the state support they received in the past, Kryshtanovskaya explained. It is their way of serving the state.

"Athletes and what I call 'bureaucratic stars' like theatre directors almost have no choice but to endorse the state, and most often the governing party," Kryshtanovskaya said. "A large portion of their past success depended on the state. Without the state's help, it is unlikely that these athletes would have represented the country on an international scale or that these directors would have put on great plays."

But this symbiotic relationship can sometimes be undermined by regional or federal deputies' other engagements — in sport or cinema, for example — that keep them away from their day job.

Absenteeism was one of the many complaints voiced about figure skating champion Yevgeny Plyushchenko when he served a deputy in the the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly from 2007 to 2010.

Plyushchenko had been more occupied with tweaking his quad for his gala performances than on issues important to the people of St. Petersburg. Some of his colleagues had advocated for his mandate to be rescinded.

The poster boy for Russian figure skating finally left regional politics on his own, saying that he had been unable to "combine political activity with serious sport." But he did not exclude the possibility of a return to "big politics" in the future.

A Russian Phenomenon?

Hollywood stars and professional athletes in the West are far from apolitical, often offering their favored candidates fundraising assistance or public support. But they tend to steer clear of the daily grind of holding political office. Actor-turned-president Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, the former governor of California better-known for his muscles and pledge "to be back" as the Terminator, are exceptions to the rule.

Like in Russia, the most recognizable faces of India — those seen by millions in Bollywood films — can also be found in the country's parliament. It's also not unusual to find celebrities among Egyptian and Filipino lawmakers.

"Russia's political conditions are such that the state sometimes tries to resort to totalitarian methods," Levinson said. "It is difficult to convince voters to support certain political programs, and famous people make this process easier."

The use by Soviet authorities of famous figures to bolster support for the regime — including current Duma deputy Valentina Tereshkova after her space flight — still weighs in the composition of the legislative body today, according to pundits.

"To some extent the State Duma today carries traces of our Soviet past," Kryshtanovskaya said. "The Central party made liberal use of artists, composers, military heroes, and other figures people admired to rally support. This contributed to the population's endorsement of the system. People now expect to see the same bright personalities in the Duma."

Contact the author at g.tetraultfarber@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/07/a-glimpse-into-russias-star-studded-state-duma-a40172