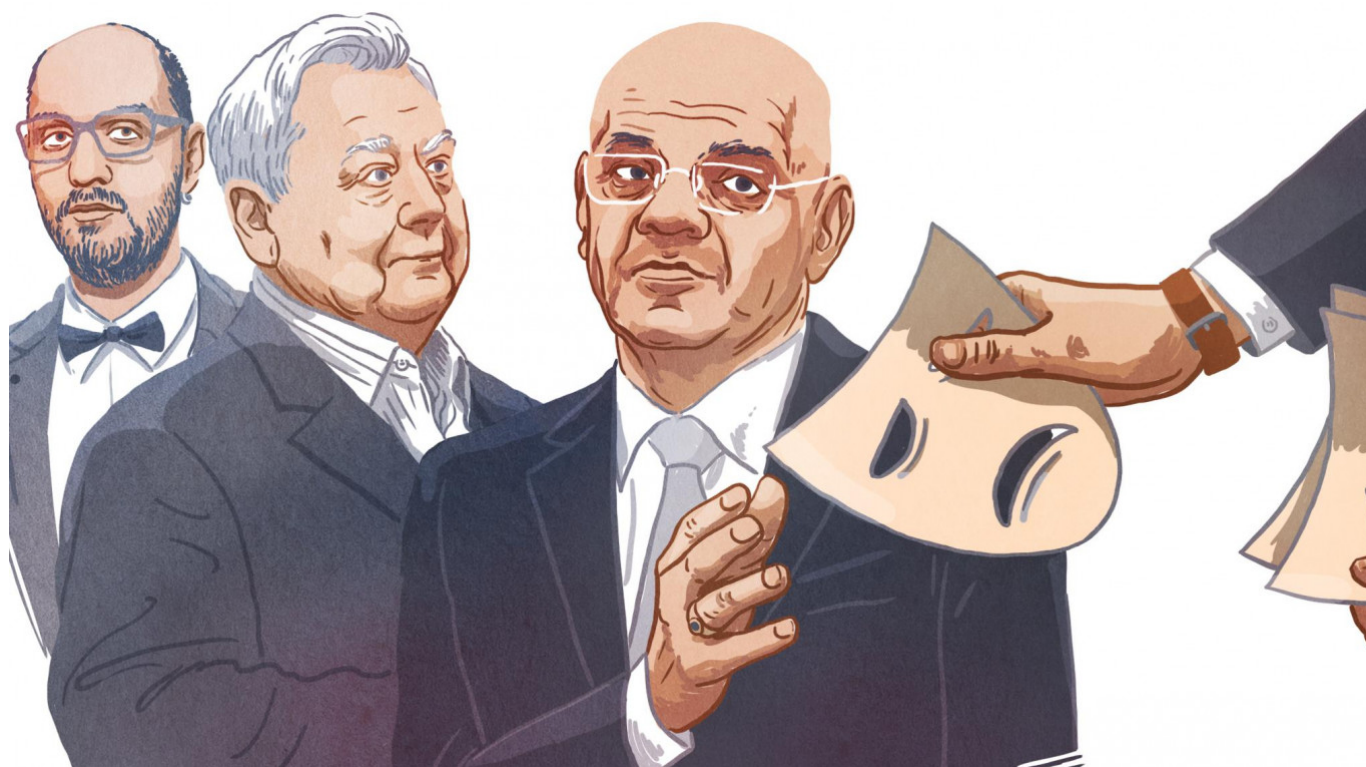


State and the Arts: Culture Leaders Stand Up to Censorship

An impassioned speech on censorship in the arts attracted unexpected support among Russia's cultural elite, and forced the Kremlin to rethink

By [Daria Litvinova](#)

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It was an open secret that Russian theater has been subject to ideological pressure. But no prominent cultural player dared to make a public complaint. That is, until Konstantin Raikin, one of Russia's most celebrated artists and the director of Satirikon Theater in Moscow, stood up to read a speech.

"Some people are clearly itching to make changes and turn back time," Raikin said. "They're not just interested in going back to Brezhnev and stagnation, but even further back, to Stalin."

His emotional speech, delivered at a professional gathering, publicly and fiercely accused the state of censorship. “They say we pay and you do what you need to do,” Raikin said, almost crying. “But what do they mean by that? Who are they to say what we need to do?”

Raikin’s principled stand gained support from leading artists like Oleg Tabakov and Yevgeny Mironov. The authorities were initially less keen. “There isn’t censorship,” said presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov. “You shouldn’t confuse censorship with the presence of state commissions.”

Loyalist attack dogs took the fight to the theater director. “They talk about freedom, but all these Raikins among us want to turn the country into a sewer flowing with muck,” said Alexander Zaldostanov, leader of the notorious pro-Kremlin biker group Night Wolves.

In an unanticipated U-turn, however, the Kremlin decided to turn its back on Zaldostanov, and offer words of comfort to the artist. “We have boundless respect for Raikin’s talent,” spokesman Peskov said. “I think the biker who insulted him was led astray by the devil.”

It seems likely that Raikin’s high-profile support swayed minds in the Kremlin. “The Kremlin realized that this conflict should be nipped in the bud,” suggests Andrei Arkhangelsky, culture editor at the Ogoniok magazine. “If this discussion were to continue, other big issues might pop up, like what country do we want to live in and what do we want in general.”

Under Pressure

On one level, Peskov’s comments regarding censorship are reasonable — there is none, in a Soviet sense of the word. But that isn’t to say there isn’t pressure on cultural actors. Usually, that pressure comes down to money: Russian art heavily — not to say almost absolutely — depends on state funding.

This funding is used as both a carrot and a stick, explains journalist and culture expert Yuri Saprykin*.

Russia’s Cinema Foundation, which funds filmmaking, might, for example, technically remain an independent entity Ñ “in reality it works according to the party line of producing more ‘patriotic films’.”

The vast majority of theaters depend on resources from the Culture Ministry, which is why officials constantly revert to “we give you money, you owe us” rhetoric.

The Culture Ministry currently doesn’t have institutional control over theaters — there are no bodies that could approve or prohibit plays and performances. That said, there are plans to create them, says Saprykin.

Theater directors and filmmakers are used to benefitting from the system, says Daniil Dondurei, editor in chief of the Art of Cinema magazine: “Two-thirds of theater funds are state funds. Two-thirds of filmmaking funds are state funds. It is an ocean of money that they don’t have to return.”

And Kremlin proxies are known to interfere in cultural life. Raikin himself fell under attack this February, when pro-Kremlin activists tried to disrupt his staging of the play “All Shades

of Blue,” devoted to Russia’s intolerance toward LGBT.

Zaldostanov singled out this play when responding to Peskov’s unexpected criticisms. “We don’t need faggots here — nobody can come and cut down our crosses,” he said.

Authorities generally do nothing stop these groups, says Saprykin. Indeed, they seem to operate with the state’s silent support. Together with the Ministry’s plans to start officially vetting plays, this has created a lot of tension within the theatrical community.

“A significant amount of well-known, respected people became so pissed off with the situation that now they are resorting to open confrontation,” Saprykin says.

Breaking the Rules

Such open confrontation has broken an unwritten contract within the cultural world — a consensus whereby directors of big institutions and influential artists kept silent in order to protect what they had. Big hitters in the cultural world were generally ready to cut a deal with the Culture Ministry, says Yuliya Bederova, an expert with the Golden Mask theater award. “They needed to protect the institutions and teams behind them,” she says.

Now, that consensus has broken down, and the Kremlin has taken a softer-than-expected position. Perhaps, plans to vet plays will be put on a back burner. Perhaps the progressive culture scene will even be thrown a bone.

But such small victories may turn out to be pyrrhic. If the debate sparked by Raikin’s speech demonstrated one thing it is who really holds the cards in cultural decision-making. Cultural institutions will now be in no doubt that they are answering to the Kremlin, not the Culture Ministry.

Most likely, the game of carrot and stick is yet to be fully played out in the Russian art scene.

** Yuri Saprykin is the editorial director of the Moscow Times publishing house, but he gave comments for this article in a personal capacity.*

Michele Berdy contributed to this report.

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