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Karma: Russian Patriotic Space Film Bullies Competition, Flops Opening Weekend

The First Time, a movie about the Soviet space program, didn't even make half its opening weekend forecast.

By Matthew Bodner

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Still from the movie "The First Time"

A patriotic Russian film about the glory of the Soviet space program flopped on its opening-day weekend, despite efforts by its producers to use political and industry connections to bully Hollywood blockbuster "The Fast and The Furious 8" out of theaters this weekend.

The film, marketed as "The First Time" in English, depicts the exploits of cosmonaut Alexei Leonov — the first man to walk in space. The producers of the movie wanted it to be released on April 6, the weekend before Russia's annual April 12 Cosmonaut Day holiday.

"The First Time" was financed by the Culture Ministry, and expected to rake in 280 million rubles ($5 million) opening weekend, the Vedomosti newspaper reported April 10. But it didn't even make half that amount. The movie must make at least 500 million rubles ($8.7 million) to break even.

In a bid to ensure that Russians vote with their wallets for "The First Time" over the Western juggernaut "The Fast and The Furious," the producers of the Russian film lobbied the Culture Ministry to delay the release of its Hollywood competitor back to April 20.

The heads of several large Russian movie theater operators, when they caught wind of the producers' plot, were quick to launch a counter-lobby action. In a letter to the Culture Ministry, they argued "The First Time" won't make profits and that delaying Fast and Furious would lose money.

"There are simply no other blockbuster premieres in April," the letter, written last month, was reported by Vedomosti as saying. "The First Time will hardly bring in more than a few hundred million rubles."

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In the end, movie theaters won.

"The First Time" was forced to compete with Fast and Furious, which will be released on April 13. The movie theaters may have been right, too: "The First Time" made just 138.7 million ($2.4 million) in opening weekend sales.

That is not to say that "The First Time" did not receive the special treatment its producers demanded. Its dismal opening weekend stands in sharp contrast with the fact that it is receiving more screen time than any other Russian movie in history. This was part of the deal with movie theaters.

In order to preserve the April 13 release date for "The Fast and the Furious 8," the Russian film was guaranteed a four-week runtime in Russian cinemas. From April 6 to April 20, it is receiving around 35% of the total running time at those theaters.

In the third and fourth week of its release, theaters have agreed to give it 20 and then 15% of their screen time. It is the first time a Russian film has ever been given a guaranteed four-week run, Vedomosti reported. Take that, Hollywood.

"The First Time's" struggle for recognition began well before "The Fast and The Furious 8" emerged as a threat to Russians realizing their latent movie-going patriotism. In fact, the Culture Ministry funded two movies about the Soviet space program, and both wanted April releases.

The domestic competitor to "The First Time" is called "Salyut-7," depicting a harrowing near-death mission of the same name. Descriptions paint "Salyut-7" out to be a Russian answer to Ron Howard's blockbuster "Apollo 13" film. "The First Time" had better connections, and won out.

''Salyut-7'' will be released sometime later this year.

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