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Oliver Stone Has Launched Putin's Re-Election Campaign

Putin is leveraging Western disciples like Oliver Stone to boost his changes of another term in office.

By Alexey Kovalev

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Oliver Stone **Andrew Medichini / AP**

In a preview of Oliver Stone's documentary "The Putin Interviews," Russian President Vladimir Putin drops a bombshell. Asked by Stone if he has grandchildren, Putin smiles and answers "yes."

Questions about Putin's personal affairs are Russian media's most explicit no-go area. The makeup of the country's first family remains a mystery. State media are under strict instructions to never mention Putin's daughters or ex-wife, unless commanded to do so. News outlets that find the courage to investigate, for example, Putin's daughter or her

miraculously wealthy husband, paint a target on their own backs.

Barred from asking the question themselves, Russian journalists were obliged to wait until Putin opened up to a complete stranger — a foreigner — to report that he was a happy and loving grandfather.

In the same interview, Putin tells Stone that the Kremlin does not control Russia's media.

The irony will be lost on few Russians. After all, it is the same Vladimir Putin who, in late 2013, signed an executive order to gut the country's leading news agency and appoint a hyper-loyalist TV host as its director. It is the same Vladimir Putin whose aides publicly say journalists working for state-owned outlets are expected to toe the government line.

Stone never challenges Putin on the obvious implausibility of his claim.

"*Oliver Stone is arguably Putin's biggest catch*"

Stone has admitted that in the course of his 8-hour-long interview he rarely — if ever — challenged Putin. This revelation has prompted Russian commentators to ask: if you are actually interviewing someone, you are supposed to ask tough, uncompromising questions.

"You Mr. Stone are in fact a royal biographer, not an interviewer," Dmitry Kolezev, a reporter for the independent news website Znak said in a video review of "The Putin Interviews."

Stone's refusal to challenge Putin places the director in the company of other B-list Western celebrities who have tied their sails to the Kremlin mast. Stone has joined their chorus by willingly defending Putin as someone "insulted" and "abused," by the Western media.

But Stone is arguably Putin's biggest catch: a Western celebrity blinded by Putin's charisma and his own anti-Western contrarianism. The footage that has been released so far shows him repeating many of Putin's talking points, even though they are already powered by the president's $2bn a year propaganda machine.

Naturally, those same government news channels are treating "The Putin Interviews" for what it is: a grand endorsement.

Every trifling bit of yet-unaired interview, every tired, fact-less banality Putin says is recycled and catapulted to top national news by hundreds of loyal outlets. Russia's biggest state-owned network has already purchased licensing rights.

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"The Putin Interviews" release coincides with Putin's annual live "phone-in," a marathon question and answer session broadcast live on television. Like Stone's interviews, it is

carefully choreographed for Putin to shine as an all-knowing, caring leader. It also coincides with the anticipated launch of Putin's 2018 presidential campaign, which may come during the phone-in.

Vasily Gatov, a media analyst and a visiting fellow at USC Annenberg Center for Communication Leadership, likens "The Putin Interviews" to "The Small Land" propaganda memoir, ghostwritten for Leonid Brezhnev to sanctify the Soviet leader.

In our postmodern times, Gatov told The Moscow Times, Oliver Stone's film is being presented in the Russian media as a film for "ordinary Americans" so they finally recognize Putin's superiority over other world leaders.

But Putin can't keep a straight face as he's telling Stone that Russia doesn't interfere in other countries' domestic affairs.

In truth, it does not even have to. Putin, after all, has his own Western disciples like Oliver Stone in his quest to elect himself as Russia's president.

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