

Putin, Depersonalized: What Does Oliver Stone's Film Reveal About Russia's Leader?

In "Putin Interview", the ordinary and casual moments are the most compelling

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Showtime

American filmmaker Oliver Stone has faced intense criticism since the release of his 4-hour "Putin Interviews" earlier this month. Critics have assailed Stone for giving a platform to the Russian president and asking softball questions. But the controversial film, currently being broadcast on Russian state television, has its intriguing moments.

The most interesting parts of the Stone's interviews do not come when Putin shares his views on the United States, the Syrian civil war, gay rights in Russia or even Stalin. With Putin in

power for over 16 years, we know all these answers — and often by heart.

Rather, the ordinary and casual outtakes are the most compelling. In a film reportedly cut down from 18 hours of footage, these scenes can be counted on one hand. For example, Putin moving from one room of the Kremlin to another, or just walking down the Kremlin hall. “Don’t you feel lonely roaming here at nights?” Stone asks. Putin fudges.

Or Putin is feeding a stallion in a barn. Or chattering about women’s “bad days” and “natural cycles.” (From that scene, it’s obvious that Putin is not intending to send a message, but just saying the first thing that came to his mind — which is more insightful.)

In one scene, Putin says he is going to have a family meal with his daughters right after the interview. Of course, we never see this family reunion, not even from a distance. He then admits he is now a grandfather, but says he sees his grandchildren very rarely.

After the revelation about his grandkids made news, Putin took the point further during his annual phone-in, broadcast live on all major national television channels. “I have grandchildren and they live a normal life,” he said. “One of them is already in kindergarten.” Then Putin added: “My second grandson was born recently.”

Putin explained that he was not going into any detail — age, names — to avoid jeopardizing his grandkids’ normal lives and “their ordinary interactions with other children.” But with so little information available, we wouldn’t know if Putin was stretching the truth. In fact, we probably learned more from Putin about NBC anchor Megyn Kelly’s children during their recent interaction in St. Petersburg than we did about his own family during the last two decades.

It is hardly news that Putin has been extremely reticent to discuss his private and family affairs. What’s interesting, though, is that his rare and concise revelations about his own family stylistically fall into the same category as his judgments on any other private or non-political “ordinary” matter. The more the Russian leader is specific about, say, the events of February 2014 in Ukraine, the more he is vague about his personal interests. It’s as if he actually does not have much to share.

During the last 16 years, Putin has given us no more information about his family as about other parts of his personal life. Now we know as much about Putin’s grandchildren as we know about his favorite books or movies. And he appears equally unemotional about it all. Does he have friends? Does he ever spend time with other people outside of his presidential duties?

What does Putin enjoy? Drinking tea or playing badminton with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who succeeded Putin as president from 2008 to 2012, always have the air of an orchestrated political PR stunt. Hockey — one of the president’s favorite sports — would seem to qualify as a true interest or hobby. This is apparently why this Putin’s personal

pursuit turned into a highly publicized national event known as the Night Hockey League.

Other than that, we've seen Vladimir Putin playing with a dog, feeding a horse, curing a tiger, flying with a stork, etc. But during all Putin's time in power, hardly a single image of him having fun with other people comes to mind. We have never seen him enjoying something or sharing a mundane emotion with any other human being. It's almost as difficult to imagine Putin having a family dinner — or playing around with his grandson — as it is to call him a pro-Western liberal.

Oliver Stone follows Russia's president in his natural habitat: Red Square; the offices and halls of the Kremlin; Putin's vast mansions in Sochi and outside Moscow; the cabin of his jet, decorated with Russia's national emblem; his car with a flashing blue light on the roof; his gym; his pool. Even the empty hockey stadium appears an immense private amphitheater when Putin is being interviewed.

But all these presidential spaces are free of any trace of Putin's own personality. If he were to leave office, he probably would not have to pack. And his speech consists of pompous bureaucratic clichés weirdly mixed with colloquial observations, jokes and interjections. But there is nothing in between, nothing that would reveal the individual behind a statesman.

It has not always been this way. Stone's film begins with Putin recalling how he became president. In the summer of 1999, when Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, suggested Putin run for president, he hesitated. That path would mean giving up his "normal, ordinary life," Putin says, so he had to make a choice. Stone included in the film some archival footage from the early 2000s. It shows a human being rather than a powerful strongman.

But over the years, Putin's persona has expanded — or shrunk, depending on your perspective — into that of a depersonalized Russian pharaoh. Nearly seventeen years after Putin made his choice, there is no way back.

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