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Russian Movie Night: 7 Great Features

Let the binge-watching begin!

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Optimists **Valery Todorovsky Production Company**

It's a holiday! Finally! In the absence of friends and relatives, what better way to finally relax than to get cozy in front of the TV for some serious binge-watching? Here are seven fictional series or feature films about Russia and their neighbors that got the thumbs up from a highly opinionated, extremely demanding, multi-generational, mixed Russian and American audience.

"The Optimists" (2017)

Billed as "The Russian Madmen," "The Optimists" combines the thriller-like aspects of a Cold War spy drama with the more mundane internecine spats of the workplace drama. The one-season series follows the fortunes of a cadre of employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow at the dawn of the 1960s. As senior management grapples with the changing geopolitical realities, the rookies — the "optimists" of the title — find themselves

in the midst of several iconic cultural moments of Soviet history, including the fate of Laika, the first space explorer, and the publication of the 1959 edition of "The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food." Stylized it may be, but "The Optimists" delivers a compelling group of characters you'll end up rooting for! Available on Amazon here.

"Dovlatov" (2018)

Set in 1971 over six days in the midst of the "stagnation era," "Dovlatov" offers glimpses into the life of Sergei Dovlatov, a brilliant writer who had not found favor with the authorities and therefore could not be published. Sergei wanders the streets of Leningrad, popping in and out of offices and apartments of fellow artists and writers in this evocative portrayal of the challenges of living a creative life in the late Soviet Union. Milan Maric gives an excellent performance in the lead role of Sergei Dovlatov, but for many the true star of this quiet and thoughtful drama, is grey and subdued Leningrad. Available on Netflix here.

"The Death of Stalin" (2018)

This highly acclaimed portrayal of the immediate aftermath of the death of Josef Stalin is a farcical portrayal of real-life events, as Stalin's inner circle seeks to harness power for themselves. With a genius script by writer/director Armando Iannucci, this film is packed with stellar performances by Simon Russell Beale as Beria, Steve Buscemi as Khrushchev, and Jason Isaacs as Marshal Zhukov. The pace is brisk and the humor spot on! A must-watch! Available on Netflix here.

"To the Lake" (2020)

If the plot line of a terrifying and fast-spreading epidemic doesn't turn you off, this prescient 2019 Russian series based on a novel by Yana Vagner offers a fast-paced if chilling medical thriller interwoven with a tight family drama. When a deadly epidemic causes Moscow to descend into chaos and lawlessness and the city is placed under strict quarantine, a small family group attempt a daring escape to a deserted island in Karelia. Filmed on location in Moscow and on Lake Onega, "To the Lake" (original title "Epidemic") features newcomer Viktoriya Agalakova, Kirill Käro, and Aleksander Robak. Available on Netflix here.

"Servant of the People, Season 1" (2015)

Life imitated art when comedian Volodymyr Zelensky shot to political prominence in an unlikely run for president of Ukraine. This was a familiar plot line for Zelensky, who created and starred in a popular Ukrainian sitcom about a high-school teacher whose X-rated rants about government corruption unwittingly go viral and unexpectedly win him the presidency. In each of these ten well-crafted episodes, Zelensky's fictional president — Vasyl Petrovich Holoborodko — battles the wealthy and corrupt oligarchs and crooked officials. The aspirational integrity of the fictional Holoborodko turned Zelensky into a viable and successful candidate in Ukraine's 2019 Presidential election. Available on Netflix here.

"Occupied" (2015)

This addictive three-season Scandinavian political thriller imagines a scenario in the near future in which Norway, led by Green Party liberal Jesper Berg, discovers a game-changing

source of renewable energy. But Norway's neighbor, Russia, opposes Berg's plans to close the country's oil and gas installations, and no sooner does Berg conclude his historic announcement than the Russians execute a "soft" or "hybrid" occupation of Norway. This pits the hapless Berg against the formidable Russian ambassadress, played to perfection by Ingeborga Dapkūnaitė. The genius of "Occupied" is its nuanced multiple points of view, which follow several compelling characters with different motivations as they attempt to grapple with the new reality in Norway. Available on Netflix here.

"Zuleikha" (2020)

If you speak enough Russian to manage without subtitles, be sure to treat yourself to this beautiful eight-part series, based on the novel "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Guzel Yakhina. The plot centers on the exile of a Tatar woman — Zuleikha — after she witnesses the murder of her husband in a "dekulakization" campaign. In the remote Siberian wilderness, the prisoners are forced to eke out a precarious existence, and Zuleikha gradually comes into her own. Chulpan Khamatova delivers a masterful performance in the title, supported by a cast of some of Russia's strongest actors, including Evgeniy Morozov and Sergei Makovetsky. Available on YouTube here.

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