



Ivan Vyrypaev's  
*Dreamworks*,  
Moscow Art Theater,  
2016. Photo:  
Ekaterina Tsvetkova

IVAN VYRYPAEV

*Translated and introduced by Susanna Weygandt*

## THE POLITICS OF CULTURE

*For What Purpose?*

*Although the Russian Federation's Constitution forbids the enforcement of official censorship, in Russia there has been recent top-down pressure from the government that is intimidating artists into censoring themselves. Such pressure manifested in June 2015, when the minister of culture Vladimir Medinsky published an article in the leading pro-Kremlin daily newspaper, Izvestiia, which described in vague, ideological language how the Russian government envisions working with, or rather organizing, arts establishments. He listed six conservative principles, also vaguely defined, that artists should uphold when creating art. Many artists, including theater artists, feel that they cannot orient themselves to these rules because they are unclear. Without knowing exactly what content in their art is deemed "acceptable" and "unacceptable," many artists are in a dangerous and uncomfortable position, as the New Yorker's April 2015 issue explains:*

*In some ways, an even greater danger than violence or jail is the internal mute button known as self-censorship. Once it's activated, governments and armed groups don't have to bother with threats. Here self-censorship is on the rise out of people's fear of being pilloried on social media. In Russia, Vladimir Putin has been masterful at creating an atmosphere in which there are no clear rules, so that intellectuals and artists stifle themselves in order not to run afoul of vague laws and vaguer social pressure.<sup>1</sup>*

*Within a few days of the release of Medinsky's threatening article, playwright Ivan Vyrypaev, who is arguably Russia's most popular and controversial living playwright (as well as a theater and film director), wrote an acerbic open editorial titled "The Politics of Culture—*

*For What Purpose?*” published also in *Izvestiia*.<sup>2</sup> In his editorial, Vyrypaev scrutinizes Medinsky’s article, finding it unfounded, hypocritical, and obscure.

*A few days after the publication of Medinsky’s and Vyrypaev’s articles, one privately owned theater, Teatr.doc, was surveilled by Moscow police for the third time in one year. Vyrypaev was affiliated with Teatr.doc in the early 2000s, and he refers to the theater twice in his editorial. It is Russia’s flagship documentary theater, existing independently of government support—nearly the only such established theater in Russia. As it is not beholden to patronage, the theater has no qualms with voicing dissent against the militant and anti-immigrant policies of Vladimir Putin’s administration and its underperforming systems of welfare. Accordingly, dramatic material for these plays, as stated in Teatr.doc’s manifesto, includes “acute conflicts within contemporary society.”<sup>3</sup> During one radio interview in 2012, Mikhail Ugarov explained that the Russian government might cancel such a program if it aired it on television, but it would not bother to shut down a studio in a small basement.<sup>4</sup> He underestimated Putin’s third-term government. In early 2015 Moscow’s city council, in response to orders from the minister of culture, denied Teatr.doc the renewal of its lease on Trekhprudnii Alley (a twenty-minute walk from Red Square) under a contentious dispute about there being too few fire escapes in the building. After the police raided Teatr.doc’s basement studio in February 2015, the theater relocated in March to a theater on Razguliae Square outside Moscow’s center. Over the next few months Teatr.doc members, with the help of volunteers, converted a dilapidated basement into a theater with their own hands. Once it was finished, the artists were evicted from that space, too, in June, coincidentally around the same time as the publication of Medinsky’s article. Since then, Teatr.doc has been a moving target in the eyes of Moscow police.*

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I’m not a political writer, nor am I a journalist, historian, or by any means a “great thinker.” I’m a Russian playwright. But I cannot remain quiet after reading the article by Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky. The topic of debate is cultural politics, and although I work in a modest part of Russian culture, I still feel a sense of responsibility for what is happening today in our area.

The article written by the minister of culture unquestionably deserves our attention. This is perhaps the first time that Medinsky has so firmly and demonstratively expressed his position toward cultural politics; thus it is also the first time the government’s position on this issue has been revealed. The article makes clear the government’s position regarding how to regulate and control culture.

In short, the government is speaking from the position of an investor who is investing his finances and his strength in the cultural developments of his country. That means that the government has the right to interfere with, control, direct, regulate, oversee, and finally, to develop the cultural process. It means that the government takes on the role of the spiritual and enlightened shepherd of our people. And this means, in turn, that the government, in its role of the shepherd, knows exactly where

it's leading its flock and knows the means and methods of this flock herding.

So now to the crux of the minister's argument. Indeed, every financial investor or spiritual leader always has a clear mission that leads from point A to point B. For instance, when a private film company invests its resources in creating a film, its management either draws from its financial profits, appeals to its private investors, or applies for a governmental grant. In pursuit of the goal the expenses are justified. As a result, the directors, actors, and script come together. By the end of the whole process the goal is either attained or it is not. If the government steps in as a link in the chain of events leading to the goal, then this situation means, by default, that the government understands the goal very well and has clearly conjured for itself a desired end product. In Islamic countries like Iran, for instance, this end goal is known as Allah. All of the cultural politics in that country are directed to creating the type of artistic production that leads to, or at least does not hinder, the movement of the soul of the Muslim in being united with the Supreme Being.

In Byzantine that goal was Christ, and with this goal there began a process of creating a following of Christian tenets and a whole study of eschatology. During the communist era the goal of the USSR was clearly outlined—communism. Decisions were made based on this goal. Such-and-such film was forbidden (because it would not lead people to communism), while another film would be allowed. The opponents could object, saying “all these goals are formalistic and hypocritical.” Such comments don't enter into the discussion today. In countries with strict ideologies there are goals. No matter what, no one can do away with the postulate “the end justifies the means.” Recently in our country a document was released titled “The Politics of Culture in Russia,” and it appears that the authors and shepherds of this movement have a clear understanding of their goal. Let us examine the main principles stated here, that is, the means of advancing these politics.



Ivan Vyrapaev at Liubimovka New Drama Festival, hosted by Teatr.doc, Moscow, 2013. Photo: Vladimir Lupovskoi

The minister lists them as the following:

- The value of a creative work;
- The development of an artistic personality as a promise of society's prosperity;
- Service to the Fatherland;
- Unity and continuity of Russia's millennia of history;
- Historical integration of the destinies of people of Russia and Russia's neighbors, many of whom were previous members of the Russian Empire and USSR;
- Family values and the values of a humane society, according to which all are treated equally under the Orthodox sect and under all traditions of Russia's religions—beginning with respect to the older generations and ending with principles of development and upbringing of children.

Now let's look at each principle in order.

The value of a creative work. This statement begs the question: what is meant by the word *creation*? There's no clear answer given by the author of this doctrine. Could it mean the creation of a mass parade on Red Square for Victory Day celebrations or the Olympics in Sochi? Or could it be the performances that are staged in the majority of state-sponsored theaters in this country? Or, for instance, why not count "creation" as Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* as staged in Novosibirsk? What does creation mean? To create for what? In the name of what? In *Ushakov's Unabridged Etymological Dictionary*, *creation* is defined as "an action that takes a verb and is used to create art. Also, the creation of new forms of life."<sup>5</sup> But this meaning can be applied to any form of creativity, including even the extreme far right.

Creation is the act of making something. But could it be that Medinsky's principles are not meant for creating simple things but rather for the creation of a specific movement? Which movement? The one for the benefit of society and the government? For the benefit of people? But what is beneficence? Sir Ahmad Salman Rushdie, who was sentenced to death row by an Islamic government, without doubt considered himself a creator. But according to radical Islam, he obstructed a Muslim who was on his path to the union with the Supreme Being, and therefore was banned from this ultimate union. There is probably some logic to it, although it is doubtful. But who is going to be the one in Russia who is going to define what constitutes creation and what doesn't? Why is it that the Maly Theater, having shed the spotlight on Ostrovsky as Russia's main playwright and having used him to define itself as a theater of modern drama (only to categorically fail at this mission), nevertheless is associated with the institution of "creation?" Meanwhile Teatr.doc, taking up its own distinctive mission,<sup>6</sup> is considered to fall outside the category of creation defined in the minister of culture's article. Perhaps the minister has an answer to this question. But this answer does not appear in the document. I couldn't find it anywhere in Medinsky's article. So the ques-

tion remains: What counts as creation? And who is going to be the one who deems it an act of creation or not? In order to answer these questions, one must answer this other question: For what purpose? “The Politics of Culture” offers totally vague commentary about how we are purportedly building a civil cultural society. And here the question arises: What is meant by society?

Let us move forward to the next principle of “The Politics of Culture”: the development of an artistic personality as a promise of society’s prosperity. What does the development of an artistic personality mean? Development is based on analysis. Development means the widening of boundaries of one’s understanding, so this means that it’s necessary to observe oneself or the object of study from as many angles as possible. The growth of a fish in an aquarium is completed only when the fish can be measured in terms of its environment, the habitat of the aquarium. Socrates, Copernicus, Solzhenitsyn, and others revealed to people the ability to study humanity from different positions, which was also, by the way, regarded by their authorities as a punishable sin. So what kind of development of a personality can this article assume when any critique of Orthodox religion and its power is either punishable or forbidden? Perhaps the creators of “The Politics of Culture” would take objection to a type of development that would offend the religious or moral values of others. Certainly Socrates’s contemporaries were offended, just as the representatives of the Holy Catholic Church were offended by Copernicus. So once again for the record: the logic behind the reason of Socrates’s death is clear—he obstructed the movement of the people to the goal by making profane statements about the gods. Copernicus was suspicious of the Church and Solzhenitsyn tarnished communist ideals. But whom did the performance of *Tannhäuser* offend? Did it offend the believers? All of them? Which ones? And what about Pussy Riot? There are priests who weren’t offended by that protest. Yes, and I, for instance, consider myself a member of the Orthodox Church, and I wouldn’t say that I was offended by the protest. Did they disturb administrative order? Yes. And for that there is a light sentence, but not two years in jail. Thus, the same questions return: Who determines what is offensive? The believers? But aren’t they all different people? There are those who were offended, and those who weren’t. And in the situation of *Tannhäuser* there was the outcome of the one court trial, in which no criminal sentence was made. Who is going to make these decisions of final outcome?

Service to the Fatherland. Here it’s enough to simply name all of the authors whose works have been censored: Tolstoy, Pushkin, Chaadaev, Griboedov, Gogol, Dostoevsky. Their main goal was to serve their homeland, the Russian fatherland, and, ironically, their goal was answered by the fatherland’s censoring of their work.

Unity and continuity of Russia’s millennia of history. Let’s just start with the word *unity*, for instance, in which there is nothing self-evident at all. The author did not take any pains to explain this word. The unity of what? Of whom with whom else? In today’s environment of liberally attuned artists, there can be felt a powerful unity

together among these artists and between them and their audience. This unity is very strong among that part of society that attends Teatr.doc's theater. There's your continuity of thousands of years of Russia's unique history. But a talented contemporary artist, according to the ancient Russian tradition of "continuity," is forbidden to hold power. Not all that many people out there have great talent. If the lieutenants in Russia's military headquarters say that those people whom I list are not as talented as their predecessors, then the same question arises once more: Who decides? What are the criteria? What exactly are we handing down to one another from generation to generation over the course of Russia's millennia? Can one deny that revolutions have been the main defining features of Russia's great culture? How about the Taganka Theater and the Sovremennik Theater during the Soviet Union?<sup>7</sup> On this topic, by the way, couldn't you say that our current cultural political situation is, perhaps, preventing censored artists from the creation of great works of art? Could it be that the patriarchal founders of this political situation are secret mystics who are carrying out some kind of hidden-from-plain-view spiritual experiment, creating a censor in order to trigger a new cultural movement that will grow out of a protest?

According to the family values and values of a humane society, all are treated equally as citizens and equally as religious believers of all sects of religion in Russia's tradition. This sentence contains a fundamental mistake in its definition of "family values," for it is clearly known to all that Russian Orthodoxy has no tolerance for polygamy, while this practice is acceptable in traditional Islam. So there you have it. But what is most worthy of our attention here is the fact that this principle is designating certain institutions as in charge of naming that which is to be censored and regulated. What I have been asking the whole time is: What are these institutions, and who are the people in them who are defining what is good for people and what is not? The answer—Russia's religious traditions. Should the Orthodox Church, then, decide what is going to appear on the theatrical stage? Or should Islam decide?

It doesn't take a genius to see that the principles of the new "Politics of Culture" are not undergirded by any realistic or logical basis. How can a doctrine of political culture be formed in a country where there is no unifying national idea, nor unifying philosophy? Medinsky is using a seductive imperial idea about a certain "existing unifying government" in which the people and the power should unite over one love for their homeland. It's nothing more than an enchanting utopia. The government cannot take on the role of a spiritual leader or teacher. You can't teach how to love one's homeland, just like you can't teach anyone how to love. It isn't possible for any government to enforce a law for the creation of "a country's strong unity based on brotherly love and respect to one another." Because each one of these terms—*powerful*, *unity*, *brotherly love*, and *respect*—is arbitrarily understood; and there is no general, unifying definition of these concepts. There is no consensus on the meaning of these terms to be

found anywhere on Earth. In today's world the government cannot play the role of the cultural shepherd and cannot manufacture standard moral tenets for all to follow; it can only protect and establish conditions for the development of cultural and spiritual institutions that are responsible for teaching those who voluntarily, by their own will and not by the party's command, go to those institutions. The government can only monitor a society's development within the guidelines of a strictly delineated legislation.

## NOTES

1. George Packer, "Mute Button," *New Yorker*, April 27, 2015, 20.
2. Ivan Vyrypaev, "Kul'turnaia Politika—Kakova Tsel'?" ("The Politics of Culture—For What Purpose?"), *Izvestiia* (newspaper), June 18, 2015, [izvestia.ru/news/587876#ixzz40IJvJl2r](http://izvestia.ru/news/587876#ixzz40IJvJl2r).
3. Ilmira Bolotyán, "On Drama in Contemporary Theater: Verbatim." *Voprosy Literatury* (*Questions of Literature*), no. 5 (2004): 3, [magazines.russ.ru/voplit/2004/5/bolo2.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/voplit/2004/5/bolo2.html).
4. Mikhail Ugarov and Sasha Denisova, interview by Ksenia Larina, "Culture Shock," *Radio Echo Moscow*, February 18, 2012, [www.echo.msk.ru/sounds/859515.html](http://www.echo.msk.ru/sounds/859515.html).
5. *Ushakov's Unabridged Dictionary* (1935–1940), s.v. "creation."
6. The mission led by Teatr.doc to which Vyrypaev is referring is stated in Teatr.doc's manifestos (posted on its website, [Teatrdoc.ru](http://Teatrdoc.ru)). These manifestos explain Teatr.doc's priority to staging plays that are based on actual social problems in contemporary Russia. These plays are written in the style of Theater-of-the-Real and with the Verbatim method.
7. The Taganka Theater, under the direction of Yuri Liubimov in the 1960s, was the first theater in Russia to perform Bertolt Brecht's plays using his techniques and devises, such as *Gestus*, that revealed a contradiction on stage that in turn alerted the audience to a contradiction in society. The Sovremennik Theater (literally translated as the Contemporary Theater), founded in 1956, staged several dissident plays in the Soviet Union.