

Olivier Assayas' *The Wizard of the Kremlin*: Some bluntness, and a lot of evasion

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The Wizard of the Kremlin, starring Paul Dano and Jude Law, is a historical drama that traces the rise of Vladimir Putin out of the political and economic crisis that wracked Russia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The film, directed by Olivier Assayas and based on the book by Giuliano da Empoli, has certain strengths—namely, its blunt portrayal of the social forces that emerged out of the ruins of the USSR, their base economic and political interests. The portrait is, at times, crude, but then again, so were the people.

Ultimately, however, *Wizard of the Kremlin* does not go beyond, in either form or content, the anti-Russian, anti-Putin politics of the US and the EU. The result, which shows itself most clearly in the film's latter half, is a limited account of modern Russia, bordering at moments on the facile, that leaves unchallenged prevailing conceptions—or rather, those conceptions that Washington and Brussels want everyone to believe.

The story is as follows: A Yale university professor (Jeffrey Wright) who is conducting research on Yevgeny Zamyatin, a Russian Soviet writer prized in the West for his anti-Bolshevik dystopian novel *We*, is in Moscow doing research. He has just written a piece for *Foreign Affairs* about Vadim Baranov (Paul Dano), once a top advisor to Putin and an architect of his rise to power. Baranov's character is based on the real-life Vladislav Surkov.

Baranov invites the professor to his spacious home in Moscow's forested outskirts, and there he recounts his political history. Putin (Jude Law) appears as the central figure in his tale starting in the late 1990s, when then Russian President Boris Yeltsin gives up the presidency. He can no longer hold the office, and powerful oligarchs no longer want him to hold it, because he is half dead—physically face-planting on tables and politically without support. Russia has descended into violence. Oligarchs war in the streets.

The scenes of late Soviet and 1990s Russia are some of the more effective in the film. *The Wizard of the Kremlin* recounts, albeit briefly, the scheming and thieving of Communist Party (CP) elites as they dismantled the USSR. The central role played by the Komsomol, the CP youth organization, in the vast exercise in social theft is aptly rendered. Baranov himself emerges from this layer. Their debauchery and moral

bankruptcy are on full display.

One particularly grotesque event is shown. At a crazed, drunken party a screaming-singing woman rides on the back of a completely naked man chained to a leash. At the end of the “performance,” she leads him over to a dog bowl in which she pours vodka. He drinks.

The viewer simply wants to retch.

Notably, however, the director only ever shows us the man in a prostrate position, his rump and genitals visible, but his bent head can be seen only at an angle. Assayas chooses to never render the face. One gets the sense that this scene is not meant to be critical, but to excite the onlooker with the madness of the spectacle.

Indeed, the story unfolds with Baranov complimenting the woman for her performance and the two becoming lovers, ultimately marrying. Baranov, bear in mind, is the hero of the film, not just criticized but also admired. He constantly speaks in breathless undertones, with his barely moving lips intended to exude power and excite us. Indeed, da Empoli, the author of the book upon which the film is based, told a French publication that Vladislav Surkov, the real-life Baranov, “is so romantic that he freed me and pushed me to become a novelist.”

While *The Wizard of the Kremlin* captures something of the ugly, brutal and deceitful nature of the new Russian ruling class, notably absent from the film is anyone else. Apart from moments in which practically mute servants serve oligarchs and politicians tea, not a single ordinary person ever appears in the film. The Russian working class simply does not exist, not as a subject of history nor even as an object of the ruling layer's rapaciousness.

Thus, the vast wealth of the new oligarchy appears to come out of thin air, like a gift from the heavens—a reward for cunning and clever, albeit not always savory, people. By removing the Russian masses from the portrayal of the period, the film avoids having to deal with the central social and political question of the era—and no doubt one that is artistically challenging to depict. The riches of the bloated brutes in Russia did not come from their shrewdness, but rather from a savage attack on the Soviet Union's working class, the theft of everything they had ever built and achieved through decades of

struggle born out of the 1917 revolution.

The Russian masses are, in *Wizard of the Kremlin*, a nobody, their revolution a nothing. Thus, Zamyatin's anti-communist novel *We* appears in the film as something worthy of deep admiration, and the "Russian people" as, at best, a bunch of idiots. They only merit a mention when Baranov and others wax on about the fact that the country needs a new strongman to satisfy the masses' desire for stability. By the end of the film, some oligarchs and their prostitutes have even begun to wring their hands about democracy.

Evading the central political issues, *The Wizard of the Kremlin* becomes a sort of laundry list of the events of post-Soviet history and Putin's rise to power. With Yeltsin having let things get out of hand, Putin, the representative of the security services, is installed to get Russia's house in order. He renews the war in Chechnya and uses the bogeyman of Islamic fundamentalism to stoke up nationalist fervor. When oligarchs start to challenge his authority and the prerogatives of the state by instructing their media empires to broadcast criticisms of the Kremlin and by cutting deals with American oil firms, Putin destroys them. With the help of Baranov, the concepts of "sovereign democracy" and the "vertical of power" become official political ideology, the justification for the Kremlin's increasing authoritarianism. Everyone from the Communist Party to biker gangs to Eduard Limonov's National Bolsheviks to Russian Orthodox fundamentalists is welcomed into the Kremlin's antechamber, as Putin uses seemingly disparate political forces for his own ends. The Russian state takes on the threat posed by US and European-backed color revolutions in countries within its sphere of interest. Putin bristles over insults to his status at the hands of the imperialists. His power grows, and he is the new Tsar, referred to as such in the film.

Not everything in this historical account is wrong or poorly rendered. The filmmaker and the author haven't made it up out of whole cloth. Jude Law generally does well in capturing Putin's cold, calculating character, although the permanent frown he wears becomes grating and veers into caricature. But when Putin makes clear he will not accept oligarch Dmitri Sidorov's (a stand in for the real-life Mikhail Khodorkovsky) intention to make agreements with Exxon Mobil and hand control of critical Russian assets to an American firm, Assayas captures something real. There is frankness elsewhere in the film too. In the scene dealing with the anti-Russian "color revolutions" that erupted in the mid-2000s across Russia's sphere of influence, Baranov bluntly states that Ukraine's "democratic" Orange Revolution was actually a US and European-orchestrated anti-Russian coup. While the Yale professor disagrees with him, Baranov's points are delivered with seriousness.

But the major problem is that, while some events and people hew to the historical timeline, what we end up with is a political scientist's a, b, c, d and so forth of what happened in post-Soviet Russia, in which Putin emerges as the necessary and

natural product of something distinctly Russian, not the grotesque outcome of the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, which in the Russian case was a particular manifestation of a rotting, global social order. Thus, while Yeltsin's ugliness and buffoonery is on full display in the film, watching it one would not know that the US government was directly involved in crafting Yeltsin's economic policies, and supported his government.

Elsewhere the events on the list, while perhaps historically significant, are depicted in a trite manner, without any serious exploration. There is no insight to be gained, for instance, from Putin's dinner party with his oligarchs, at which Yevgeny Prigozhin, the future leader of a military uprising against his government, makes an appearance.

According to press accounts, apart from the closing scenes, Assayas' film is largely faithful to da Empoli's book. The latter is not just a writer of historical dramas and political fiction. He is a Swiss-Italian cultural figure and politician who served as Florence's Deputy Mayor for Culture and as a senior advisor to Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi from 2014-2016, during which time the Italian head of state reduced corporate taxes and rammed through major changes to Italian labor laws that gutted job security.

If da Empoli's book is able to put something of a spotlight on Russia's post-Soviet elite, it is likely because he has crossed paths with such layers. And if his book allows its Russian protagonists to make a blunt statement or two about the machinations of the CIA in Ukraine and elsewhere, it reflects the fact that the Italian elite, never too sure of its own position in relation to the greater imperialist powers, has a certain appreciation of the Russian perspective.

But in the end, this doesn't get very far. In interviews given after his book won the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française, da Empoli, whose work was written before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, explained that he "would have a harder time identifying with that type of character [Vadim Baranov/Vladislav Surkov] today. I was able to get inside a Russian's head at a time when the atrocious conclusions of the Putin regime were not yet fully visible and unfolding. I don't know if I would have been able, or wanted, to write this book after the war in Ukraine."

Actually, the vileness of today's Kremlin did not achieve its final form in 2022. Erected out of the ashes of the destruction of the Russian Revolution, it was vile from the start.



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