

Nikita Mikhalkov, Russia's Political Mentor

By Ulrich Schmid, St. Gallen

Abstract

In his political manifesto on “enlightened conservatism” film director Nikita Mikhalkov calls on Russians to submit themselves to a strong leader. Although some claim that Mikhalkov is singing Vladimir Putin’s praises, in fact, he is putting himself forward as the best guide for Russia.

Enlightened Conservatism

On 26 October 2010, Russian film director Nikita Mikhalkov presented his manifesto on “enlightened conservatism” to the Russian government. In this 63-page document, entitled “Justice and Truth”, Mikhalkov laid out his vision for the political future of Russia. Mikhalkov stresses the core values of political stability and economic growth. Only a strong national leader can achieve this agenda: “Law and order must be not only a possibility, but a reality in Russia. Therefore, they must be strengthened by the political determination of the country’s leader. This leader must be capable of taking responsibility, and of acting quickly, precisely, and decisively wherever necessary for national security or saving the lives of Russians.” Conversely, as a complement to a strong leader, Mikhalkov demands that the citizens of Russia should demonstrate “loyalty to power” and “the ability to subordinate themselves with dignity to authority”, since “personified rule” and “personal responsibility” are preferable to “collective irresponsibility”. Therefore, he asserts, “maintaining honor, acknowledging duty, and venerating rank” are typical Russian virtues.

Since Russia is not Honduras, modernization should not be equated with Westernization, Mikhalkov writes; rather, he states emphatically that “Russia-Eurasia is the geopolitical and sacred center of the world.” Therefore, Russia is not a “nation-state”, but a “continental empire”. Due to the tragedy of its history, however, Russia does not hold the rank in the global order that it really deserves. Mikhalkov’s political program is prefaced by a short lesson in history that is patterned exactly on the officially approved wording in Russia. In line with Dmitry Medvedev’s seminal video-blogged remarks of 20 October 2009, the Stalinist terror is mentioned, but is outweighed by acknowledgement of Russia’s achievements during the Soviet era: “[The nation] endured the tribulations of collectivization and industrialization. It suffered the horror and pain of the gulag. Illiteracy, child homelessness, and banditry were liquidated. Poverty, disease, and hunger were conquered. In a heroic national feat, victory was won in World War II. Then, our country was the first to take possession of the cosmos, having once again made a huge effort to overcome economic devastation.”

In a Hegelian volte-face, Mikhalkov professes his faith in the legitimate omnipotence of the state. His definitions of the state are cast in hymnic phrasing. “The state is culture made to serve the purposes of the fatherland. The state, as state apparatus, is a form of volition that can and must regulate the activities of citizens and NGOs.” Mikhalkov propagates the exact opposite of a liberal night watchman state: “The authority of the state is a personal sacrifice brought to the altar of the fatherland.” Led by the president and the vertical of power, “we must once more grow united and strong, and Russia great.”

Of course, Mikhalkov’s political agenda is also supported by the tenets of Russian Orthodoxy. Time and again, he praises the “symphony” of temporal and spiritual power. Unsurprisingly, his manifesto ends with the words: “So help us God!”

Reaction to the Text

Mikhalkov himself was surprised by the response generated by his pamphlet. However, the response was quite ambiguous, being about evenly divided between rapturous acclaim and radical rejection. Nationalist author Aleksandr Prokhanov asserted that the Almighty himself had guided Mikhalkov’s pen, while political technologist Gleb Pavlovsky decried the lack of appreciation for democracy in the text, which he claimed was clearly aimed against Medvedev.

Mikhalkov as Moral Authority

Mikhalkov’s contribution should be seen in its larger context. Since the success of his movie “Burnt By The Sun” (1994), Mikhalkov has tried again and again in his cinematographic work, but more recently also in political statements, to reshape Russia in line with his own views. Interestingly, he does so by following a recurrent pattern. Mikhalkov himself appears as a moral authority or father-figure who mentors a young, energetic man who has lots of talent, but requires spiritual guidance. In “Burnt By The Sun”, Mikhalkov plays Division Commander Kotov, who looks after his protégé Mitja, a young NKVD officer.

The same relationship is repeated in “The Barber of Siberia” (1998). Here, Mikhalkov plays the author-

itarian Czar Alexander III (Vladimir Putin's favorite emperor) who is celebrated by his officer cadets. In both films, however, the mentor role leads to disaster. Because the youthful protagonists do not follow the directives of their elder, they become tragic heroes and end up in complete isolation.

The same structure can be found even in Mikhalkov's documentary on his famous father (2003). In a bold plot device, he reverses the parent-child relationship. He himself is not the son, but the mentor of his own father, who is presented as an "eternal child". Sergei Mikhalkov (1913–2009) wrote the lyrics for the Soviet and Russian national anthem and gained fame as the author of children's poems. This film is especially notable for its sympathetic vision of the Soviet era, which is cast as a tragic low point in Russia's salvation history.

The mentor-mentee structure once again becomes the governing narrative element in the courtroom drama "12" (2007). Here, Mikhalkov is the foreman of a jury in the trial of a young Chechen accused of having murdered his Russian stepfather. The foreman is an artist, but hints that he is a former intelligence officer. In the end, justice triumphs, the young defendant is acquitted, and the foreman of the jury takes the Chechen boy into his home.

Mikhalkov the Politician

In his films, Mikhalkov obviously blurs the lines between autobiographical self-portrait and fiction. While he always plays a person with moral authority, his own real-life personality is always looming behind the fictional protagonist. The patriarchic stance of his alter ego is transparent: He chooses the roles of generals, czars, head jurors – all positions held by men who decide between good and evil, right and wrong.

In 1995 and 1999, Mikhalkov even publicly considered running as a candidate in the Russian presidential elections. He seemed in no doubt as to his own qualifications for the office. In an interview with *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* on 20 October 1997, he described the president as the "director of a nation": "What is a president? The task of a president is to create an atmosphere in a country and to direct the atmosphere of the country." Putin immediately won Mikhalkov's unrestricted support. On 16 October 2007, Mikhalkov, together with other artists loyal to the government, published an appeal in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* for Putin to change the constitution and to stay for a third term in office: "Russia needs your statesmanship, your political wisdom."

Mikhalkov and Putin

In the same year, Mikhalkov had also produced a 20-minute video on the occasion of Putin's 55th birth-

day that praised the president's energy and sincerity in effusive words. Characteristically, on this occasion, too, Mikhalkov refers to "atmosphere": "Compare the atmosphere in the country with the way it was ten, fifteen years ago! There have been enormous and highly significant changes. And although it is probably unnecessary to emphasize it – all of these changes are linked in one way or another to the president's name. That is the way it is, whether we like it or not. They are linked in time and space to his name and his forceful, daring, creative élan. These are personal traits."

However, the often-heard charge that Mikhalkov made this video to ingratiate himself with Putin is wrong. The opposite is true: Mikhalkov sees himself as the spiritual mentor of the nation, incorporating the indivisible nexus of Russian culture, Russian Orthodoxy, and the Russian state. He is the representative of a social elite that was part both of the Soviet nomenklatura and the czarist aristocracy. Putin, on the other hand, is the scion of a Leningrad proletarian family. Mikhalkov regards him as a successful self-made man, but one who is not rooted in Russian culture.

The DVD of Mikhalkov's documentary double portrait of his parents is supplemented with a family tree that radically foreshortens and extrapolates familiar bonds to include more distant famous relatives such as Aleksandr Pushkin, Lev Tolstoy, Vladimir Odoevsky, Vasili Surikov, and Sergei Yesenin. Distance is not an issue; the main point is the proud presentation of famous ancestors who are acknowledged exponents of Russia's national culture.

The symbolic gesture inherent in the publication of this impressive pedigree is obvious: Nikita Mikhalkov himself is the incarnation of sacred Russian culture. His ancestry not only authorizes him, but even obliges him to comment on the course of Russia's history. This he has done on numerous occasions, maybe most prominently in his eight-part documentary series "Russians Without Russia" (2003). Here, Mikhalkov portrays mostly White Russian generals and emphasizes their selfless, heroic efforts on behalf of the motherland. He cites belligerent statements by Lavr Kornilov and Aleksandr Kolchak, from which he derives his own metaphysics of war. The US, he claims, wages false wars aimed at establishing democracies. However, a war is only justified in defense of a nation. Mikhalkov goes so far as to elevate such wars to the status of divine ordeal (*pravosudie*): In his view, all military confrontations gravitate towards the affirmation of nationhood.

Mikhalkov's latest manifesto is therefore no sudden revelation, but the sum of his national-conservative, religiously elevated views. Already on 21 December 2006, in the NTV talkshow "To the Barricade" (*K bar'ere*),

he had coined the phrase “national immunity”. Russia’s entrenchment in its own culture and religion, he claimed, serves as an antidote to the looming “McDonaldization” of the country. His pan-Russian chauvinism was only scantily concealed by concessions to political correctness: “Everything associated with Russian culture and history, everything – from beginning to end – is linked to Orthodoxy and all of the other religions that have taken root in this immensely huge country. Nevertheless, its titular nation has always professed the Orthodox faith.”

Mikhalkov’s views on the ideal state order with its strong roots in a religiously and culturally defined Russianness is indeed very close to the views of Vladimir Putin. However, the prime minister maintains a careful distance from the controversial film producer. Occasionally, Putin’s behavior creates the impression that he wants to avoid acclaim from the wrong side in order to secure the trust of the less nationalistically-minded intelligentsia as well.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

About the Author:

Ulrich Schmid is Professor of Russian Culture and History at the University of St Gallen, Switzerland.

Further Reading:

- Nikita Mikhalkov: *Pravo i Pravda. Manifest Prosveshchennogo Konservatizma*. Moskva, 2010. (<http://polit.ru/exchange/manifest.pdf>)
- Beumers, Birgit: *Nikita Mikhalkov. Between nostalgia and nationalism*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.