

Surreal Politics and Economic Soap Operas

By Konstantin Sonin



Here's the plot of the new Russian blockbuster "Countdown" (Lichny Nomer): An oligarch living abroad wants to stage a fake terrorist attack in Moscow so that he can rush in and pretend to save the day. Partly out of his own ignorance, he hires real live terrorists to do the job. A major in the FSB risks his life and prevents both the fake and the real terrorist attacks, and not only in Moscow, but also in Rome.

Without denying the film's merits as an action flick, critics have already accused director Yevgeny Lavrentyev of confusing reality with fantasy. They were completely off base, however. The director knew the difference between what was going on in the film and what happens in real life. He made a film about the way things should be, not the way they are. The film inspires pride in a country that can produce strong films and in a country that dreams of having strong security forces.

It seems that action movies are the only place in Russia today where reality is clearly separate from fantasy and where actors do not confuse themselves with the roles they are playing. Sure, we have already gotten used to announcers pretending to be journalists and guys in sweaters pretending to be analysts. Yet this autumn's events in Ukraine demonstrated that live television coverage is actually one of the performing arts.

This would not be a big deal, however, if there were a director behind the televised scenes who faithfully summarized events and wrote a plotline for the average television viewer. The horrible truth is that there seem to be no faithful summaries. Statements by Russian representatives during the course of the Ukrainian elections suggested that they were getting their information from the same television coverage they were supposedly running. The over-identification of actors with their roles made viewers feel completely cut off from reality.

The surreal trend continued with the recent Yuganskneftegaz auction. No one seems to know how Rosneft came up with the \$9 billion needed to buy Yugansk. How do we know whether Rosneft ever paid a cent? Only from the speeches of federal officials on television. Maybe they are simply reading from a prearranged script. Sberbank then reads its lines that certain guarantees have indeed been paid. That \$9 billion should show up in the federal budget somewhere. How will we know it appeared? From State Duma deputies? Half of them are merely cartoon characters. If someone draws them without mouths, they won't say a word. It is possible that Yugansk was bought for free, and we were shown an economic soap opera. With these surreal media dramas unfolding, the fantastic adventures of an FSB major are the least of our worries.

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