

# First Gagarin film turns Soviet idol into new Russian hero

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Strapped in an orange suit in his spaceship, Yuri Gagarin smiles as the rockets roar and chirpily tells mission control: "Let's go!"

A new Russian film—"Gagarin. First Man in Space"—is the first full biopic on the pioneering cosmonaut ever to be released in Russia or the Soviet Union.

Until now, Gagarin's 108-minute orbit of the Earth in 1961 appeared almost too hallowed a subject to be tackled in drama. But the state-subsidised film has been made amid a new drive for patriotic cinema as post-Soviet Russia looks for heroes.

It recreates Gagarin's pioneering [space voyage](#) in detail and also tries to reveal something of the man who became a Soviet legend: his childhood, family life in the cosmonaut training centre at Star City and his rivals for the number one role.

But critics have complained the film failed to portray a rounded flesh-and-blood figure, instead portraying a person so perfect that Gagarin loses all traces of [human character](#).

"Any humanity is carefully hidden from us. We stop believing at all in the existence of the person named Gagarin," wrote Ogonyok weekly magazine.

The cosmonaut is shown as a virtually flawless figure: he thoughtfully

buys his wife flowers, he carefully swaddles his baby daughter and he flashes a white-toothed smile after being tested with G-forces at Star City.

The director Pavel Parkhomenko "made a deadly retro film as if he was turning a feature from (Soviet mouthpiece daily) Pravda into a film", said one reviewer on the TV channel Rain.

The film received state funding as part of a drive for patriotic cinema and has been supported by Gagarin's family—his widow and two daughters, Yelena and Galina.

The family has previously vetoed a Gagarin musical and legally forced the makers of a fictional film drama to cut all references to Gagarin, even changing its title which had included his name.

"At first the Gagarin family were suspicious because before there were attempts to make films and it somehow didn't work out. For them this is a delicate topic and there have always been a lot of unnecessary rumours and sensation around it," producer Oleg Kapanets said at a Moscow presentation.

"They had even stopped believing that it was possible to make honest cinema. But time passed and they were OK with it all."

He said he asked Gagarin's daughters to check with their mother Valentina—who is still alive but rarely seen in public—on details such as what flowers Gagarin used to give her (in the film it is chrysanthemums).

The film ends as Gagarin parachutes back to Earth, without touching on his later years of hobnobbing with Soviet pop stars and world leaders such as Queen Elizabeth II.

Neither does it refer to his death at 34 in a plane crash, an incident whose circumstances have never been fully explained.

Archive footage shown at the end of the film of the real Gagarin depicts a man with a swagger and cheeky grin who seems very different from his portrayal in the film.

"Flashing past in a second, he absolutely repudiates the acting performance of Yaroslav Zhalnin" who plays Gagarin, wrote critic Mikhail Trofimenkov in Kommersant business daily.

## **From untouchable God to metaphor for modern life**

The film's strength is its careful recreation of Gagarin's training and flight showing the bizarre endurance tests—such as reading out poetry in a steam room—and the cramped and basic spacecraft.

Despite its critical drubbing, the film won praise from Russian Space Agency officials who watched it in Moscow.

"It got through to me, I'll be honest, it was great. We still know how to make films—not just rockets," said head of manned flight programmes at Roscosmos, Alexei Krasnov.

The film is the first biopic of Gagarin ever made, although several post-Soviet films have shown him as a symbolic figure.

"Soviet film treated Gagarin as a god whom it was a sin to depict, while in post-Soviet film he is a kind of metaphor for all of Soviet life," wrote Ogonyok.

The film came out as the Kremlin aims to boost patriotism among the young with the help of locally grown heroes—preferably Soviet ones.

A film about hockey star Valery Kharlamov and his Soviet teammates beating Canada in 1972, called "Legend Number 17", has made 920 million rubles (\$28.5 million, 21.5 million euros) after significant state funding.

It was hailed as the highest grossing Russian feature film in five years.

Another recent success was a portrayal of Vladimir Vysotsky, a cult singer and actor of the 1970s, that also had state funding.

But other films have struggled to replicate the formula and as "Gagarin" launched, many expressed doubts it would recoup its budget of around \$10 million. In its first weekend it made 15.75 million rubles (\$497,606).

Last month President Vladimir Putin dressed down a group of top film directors including Oscar-winner Nikita Mikhalkov for failing to persuade people to watch local cinema.

This year, the Kremlin will finance films to the tune of 6.61 billion rubles (\$204.4 million). However Russian [films](#) only account for 15 percent of cinema tickets, Putin complained.

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