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Tigran Keosayan: *Seven Days of Petr Semenovich* (*Sem' dnei Petra Semenycha* 2025)

reviewed by Lars Kristensen © 2026

In September 2025, it was announced that filmmaker Tigran Keosayan had passed away after being in a coma for several months. This came just one month after the premiere of *Seven Days of Petr Semenovich*, which was directed by Keosayan. Keosayan co-wrote the film with his wife, Margarita Simonyan, who is also the editor-in-chief of the Kremlin-aligned propaganda outlet RT (Russia Today). The couple has become widely associated with the oppressive regime of Vladimir Putin.

Before taking up the role of shamelessly promoting the actions of the Russian president, Keosayan was known primarily as a filmmaker with strong references to the aesthetics of Soviet comedy. *Rabbit Over the Void* (2006) is a clear example of Keosayan's comedic approach. In the film, Brezhnev lands in Moldova on his way back to Moscow after falling in love with Queen Elizabeth II. Described as a poor imitation of an Emir Kusturica film (Felperin 2006), *Rabbit Over the Void* relies on broad stereotypes to portray the Soviet "house" as a single, unified nation. In the current era of resurgent Russian imperialism, this portrayal inevitably carries an unpleasant aftertaste.

Keosayan's cinematic reputation and credibility appear to have declined alongside the rise of authoritarianism in Russia, as he increasingly assumed the role of a mouthpiece for the regime—mocking liberalism and Western democracy while glorifying Soviet "brotherhood" and Russian imperial ambitions. The fact that both Keosayan and Simonyan are of Armenian descent has not prevented them from endorsing Russian nationalism as a force supposedly liberating smaller nations. To conceptualize the thinking behind such positions, it is useful to return to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008), in which he examines the cognitive processes of the postcolonial subject. Fanon argues that postcolonial subjects living in the imperial center tend to appropriate the colonizer's language and culture.

Seven Days of Petr Semenovich is the second film made by Tigran Keosayan and Margarita Simonyan. Their first collaboration, *The Crimean Bridge: Made with Love!* (*Krymskii most. Sdelano s liuboviu!* 2018), was neither a critical nor a commercial success. Instead, the film has come to exemplify a cinematic extension of the propaganda machinery that Gosfilm has added to its repertoire of state-supported productions. Whereas *The Crimean Bridge* represented their initial foray into propaganda filmmaking and was written entirely by Simonyan, *Seven Days of Petr Semenovich* was co-written by both filmmakers.

The film premiered in August 2025, while Keosayan was still hospitalized. Judging by the muted reception of both *The Crimean Bridge* and *Seven Days of Petr Semenovich*, it appears that producing popular propaganda films is considerably more difficult than instructional manuals might suggest. Comedy, in particular, may be especially resistant to instrumentalization, as humor is highly context-dependent and what is perceived as funny can shift significantly across social and historical settings.

Seven Days of Petr Semenovich is a comedy about a grumpy old man who complains about everything that is no longer the way it used to be. Compounding this disposition, Petr Semenovich is faced with a possible cancer diagnosis, which further intensifies his predicament. The "seven days" refer to the period during which the local doctor remains uncertain about the scan results and awaits specialist expertise from Moscow to assess the CT scan. During these seven days, Petr Semenovich must confront the possibility of being terminally ill and dying sooner than expected. At the same time, he is forced to cope with a series of social and personal disruptions: his local fishing pond has been bought up and turned into a pay-to-enter park; the beach where he sells dried fish to tourists has been privatized; the local mafia boss has returned to the streets; and his estranged daughter suddenly reappears after 24 years abroad.

As an elderly misanthrope (and elegantly played by Fedor Dobronravov), Petr Semenovich would seem ideal material for a comedy that takes stock of lived experience, reflects on social change, and perhaps critiques the pace of modernity, as has been done many times before. However, the film fails to be funny not because of weak performances or poor comic timing, but because it seeks to normalize existing conditions rather than challenge them or expose cracks in the system.

Who, then, is to blame for Petr Semenovich's predicament, his fall from being a respected local man, a man of faith and a model Soviet fishmonger, who has served nine years in labor camp? It cannot be the local mafiosi, who are conveniently arrested by the

police at the party of their release from prison. Nor can it be the local politician who has privatized the beach where Semenovich sells his dried fish and beverage. The oligarchs, too, are absolved of responsibility. Having been sanctioned and pushed out of Europe, they have returned to the Black Sea ports, where they are a nuisance to Petr Semenovich, buying the local park and restricting access to his favorite carp-filled fishing pond. When Semenovich confronts the oligarch Misha Vrubin (played by Vladimir Il'in), whose yachts Semenovich protests against at the harbor with a picket bearing the word "shame" (*pozor*), the two instead arrive at a mutual understanding of how the park might once again become a tropical paradise, populated by carp, lotuses, and hummingbirds living in peaceful harmony. If anyone is ultimately held responsible, it is perhaps the estranged daughter (played by Keosayan's niece Laura Keosayan), though using departure aboard in pursuit of happiness as a target of mockery is a tired trope.

However, the film contains situations that suggest the emergence of a new normal regarding the war in Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea. In the first scene of the film, which is set at a doctor's office, the general practitioner speaks on a phone call with a prospective buyer interested in land on the Black Sea coast near Sochi. When the buyer complains that the land is too expensive, he is casually advised to "go to Crimea" instead, as if the film were advertising the occupied peninsula as a destination for bargain-hunting Russians. At another point in the film, Crimea is again referenced as a place worse off than Sochi, implying that those dissatisfied with local conditions can simply move to disputed territories, where the risks of drones, bombs, or other spillovers of war are implicitly understood. In this way, the film treats the militarization of society as an established and unquestioned reality, without ever explicitly depicting battlefields, conscripts, or grieving mothers.

While I appreciate the premise of the misanthrope as a way to question human flaws and fallibility, there is no self-reflection on the part of Semenovich. He is presented as a pinnacle of human virtue, a model citizen, who helps others achieve their goals in life (the GP, the police, his neighbors). He even gives away his burial plot at the local cemetery to his enemy—the town's mayor—when the allocated spot has been sold twice to two grieving families. However, despite this altruistic behavior, he remains passive in the face of the changing system around him.

At one point, Semenovich goes to the cemetery, where his late wife is buried, to pour out his heart about his predicaments, while, in the bushes behind him, are two fully camouflaged soldiers lying in disguise guarding (presumably) a nearby airport. It is of course meant to be funny that they are there, listening to the old man's account of his illness and their response, once they have revealed themselves, saying that they have a doctor in the regiment that can perform miracles. Here, however, Semenovich meekly backs down from the situation, rather than giving them a dose of his usual loathing of human beings.

In short, Petr Semenovich's seven days of uncertainty are wasted as a narrative condition in which life hovers between an open-ended postponement and the possibility of sudden death. Despite a potential diagnosis of lung sarcoma, he continues to smoke and drink as if there were no tomorrow, which is an attitude that may be read as emblematic of a broader death cult in contemporary Russia. In the image of Petr Semenovich, it is full throttle toward the abyss.

Seven Days of Petr Semenovich is unlikely to be remembered for its artistic qualities, as the film offers few merits beyond illustrating how the propaganda machine operates in contemporary Russia. Instead, Keosayan's film may be best understood as a warning of what is to come under high-Putinism: more happy comedies, possibly jolly musicals as well, and more productions that seek to preserve the ideological status quo through glamorous throwbacks to the height of the Soviet Union.

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Works Cited

Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.

Felperin, Leslie. 2006. "Rabbit Over the Void," *Variety*, 9 March.

Seven Days of Petr Semenovich, Russia, 2025
Colour, 88 minutes
Director: Tigran Keosayan
Screenwriters: Margarita Simonyan, Tigran Keosayan
DoP: Ivan Gudkov
Music: Sergei Terekhov
Production design: Valerii Arkhipov
Cast: Fedor Dobronravov, Olesya Zhelezniak, Lev Malishava, Laura Keosayan, Vladimir Il'in, Ivan Dobronravov, Aleksandr Metelkin, Dzhanik Faiziev,
Producers: Ruben Kesoyan, Natal'ia Bobkova
Production: Studio 8 Riadov

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