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# Russian Roulette at the Kremlin

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# **Russian Roulette at the Kremlin**

**Jean-Pierre Martinez**

With the West suspecting that Russia is about to invade Poldavia, the President of France pays a visit to the Russian President in an attempt to broker a compromise... while hoping that such a diplomatic triumph might also give them the edge over their rivals in the race for re-election.

But this tense face-off between the representative of a more or less decadent democracy and the leader of a not exactly enlightened dictatorship soon takes an unexpected turn, with a highly uncertain outcome...

## **Characters**

The President of Russia: Boris or Katia

The President of France: Manuel or Marianne

*In this version, both the Russian and French Presidents are men, but the roles can just as easily be played by women simply by changing their first names, without making any changes to the dialogue.*

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*The Red Army Choir is heard. The lights slowly come up. A table can be seen, with a chair at each end. On the back wall, there is a Russian flag stage right and a French flag stage left. Boris sits motionless at the stage-right end of the table, his face expressionless. A large, old-fashioned red telephone sits on the table. The telephone rings. He answers.*

**Boris** – Da... Da... Da... *(He hangs up and remains thoughtful for a moment, then repeats more quickly.)* Da, da, da... *(A song by The Police is heard. Boris gets up and breaks into a few dance steps, humming along.)* De doo doo doo... De da da da... Is all I want to say to you...

*He suddenly becomes serious again and straightens his tie. He goes over to a cabinet and takes out a bottle of vodka and a glass. He fills the glass and downs it in one. He puts the bottle and glass away, sits back down and once again becomes as still as a statue.*

*The opening bars of La Marseillaise are heard through loud crackling static, then the music suddenly stops, as though the record were skipping.*

*Manuel enters with a strained smile on his face. He is carrying a small package.*

**Manuel** – Hello, Boris.

*Boris gets up to greet him.*

**Boris** – Hello, Manuel. Did you have a good journey?

**Manuel** – Excellent, thank you. How are you?

*Boris shakes his hand with an icy smile.*

**Boris** – Sit down, please.

**Manuel** – Thank you.

*Manuel sits down warily. Boris sits as well.*

**Boris** – I've made sure no one will disturb us. We won't need an interpreter either.

**Manuel** – Why would we need an interpreter? Your French is absolutely perfect. Come to think of it, you've never told me where you learnt to speak our language so well...

**Boris** – In Paris.

**Manuel** – You studied in Paris?

**Boris** – I worked for the embassy.

**Manuel** – So you were a diplomat...

**Boris** – More of an intelligence officer.

**Manuel** *(joking)* – In other words, a spy... *(The other man does not even smile, and Manuel becomes serious again.)* Right... No interpreter...

**Boris** – There will be no witnesses to our meeting. Nothing we say here will leave this room.

**Manuel** – Perfect. *(He glances around.)* And I assume this conversation won't be recorded either...

*Boris looks at the package Manuel is holding.*

**Boris** – Do you want to put that down somewhere?

**Manuel** – Oh yes, I almost forgot... It's a little present for you...

*He hands the package to Boris.*

**Boris** – What is it? A parcel bomb?

**Manuel** – Almost... It's the complete collection of films starring that French actor you're such a big fan of... I mean... who's such a big fan of yours.

**Boris** *(taking the package)* – Thank you.

*Manuel points to a card attached to it.*

**Manuel** – He's even written you a little dedication.

**Boris** *(reading the dedication on the card)* – To my friend Boris...

**Manuel** – Yes, that's exactly what I thought... Actors have such vivid imaginations...!

*Boris puts the package down on the table.*

**Boris** – Very well. Give Gérard my thanks. I'm not sure I'll have time to watch his films at the moment, but still...

**Manuel** – You can watch them in your cell, once the International Criminal Court has sentenced you to life for crimes against humanity... *(The other man gives him a murderous look.)* I'm joking...

**Boris** – Why don't you tell me the real reason you've come to Moscow?

*Manuel becomes serious and adopts a solemn tone.*

**Manuel** – As you know, Boris, Europe is very concerned about the current tensions on the border between Russia and Poldavia. I'm here to see whether we can find the basis for an agreement that might pave the way for de-escalation.

**Boris** – Really...?

**Manuel** – Russia has massed substantial forces along its border with Poldavia. We have every reason to be concerned...

**Boris** – They're merely military exercises that were planned long ago.

**Manuel** – Russia has long exerted influence over the eastern part of Poldavia. Is it really a coincidence that these exercises are taking place right on the doorstep of this Russian-speaking region, which is demanding independence — not to say incorporation into Russia?

**Boris** – If we intended to invade Poldavia, we would have done so long ago. But we do intend to make sure that Poldavia never becomes a threat to our country by turning into a bridgehead for the American military in Eastern Europe.

**Manuel** – A sovereign state has the right to choose its own alliances.

**Boris** – You should have said that to Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Didn't Castro have the right to choose his alliances too?

**Manuel** – That was a long time ago, and I wasn't even born.

**Boris** – Neither was I.

**Manuel** – The world has changed, Boris.

**Boris** – Are you sure, Manuel?

**Manuel** – The Soviet Union no longer exists... and European integration is under way.

**Boris** – Russia is eternal, and Europe is a giant with feet of clay. Britain chose to leave.

**Manuel** – But Poldavia wants to join.

**Boris** – I won't stand in its way. Provided it doesn't join NATO as well. Russia cannot tolerate American nuclear missiles right on its border. Five hundred kilometres from Moscow.

**Manuel** – I don't think the United States intends to station missiles on the Russian border.

**Boris** – You don't think so... but can you guarantee it?

**Manuel** – I can only speak on behalf of Europe, that's true.

**Boris** – Which is why I'll ask you again: what is the real reason you've come to the Kremlin?

*Manuel seems to hesitate.*

**Manuel** – All right, I admit it... Apart from trying to prevent a world war, I also came to Moscow to boost my standing as a world leader...

**Boris** – Yes, I suspected as much. I've already received the main candidates running against you in the presidential election.

**Manuel** – So, as you know, the election is coming up. And in France, it's not that easy to get elected, let alone re-elected.

**Boris** – I see...

**Manuel** – The thing is, in our country, for a start... there are several candidates.

**Boris** – That's the problem with democracy.

**Manuel** – The worst system except for all the others, as Churchill used to say.

**Boris** – And what exactly do you want from me?

**Manuel** – Well... a gesture of goodwill over the crisis with Poldavia, for example. A first step towards de-escalation that I could take the credit — and the glory — for, at least until the election is over.

**Boris** – I won't withdraw my troops until the Americans commit to demilitarising the area. I couldn't care less about Europe. So you can imagine how little I care about France...

**Manuel** – I'm not asking you to withdraw your troops, Boris! I'm talking about a symbolic gesture. I don't know... A joint press conference straight after our meeting, where you'd say you were still open to negotiations. That kind of bullshit... It doesn't commit you to anything.

**Boris** – And what do I get out of it?

**Manuel** – My eternal gratitude... at least until the end of my next term. (*The other man gives him an icy look.*) I'm kidding, but... I'll find a way to return the favour. Look, in my manifesto I promised the Greens I'd shut down a few old nuclear power stations. We could buy a bit more coal from you to make up for it.

**Boris** – We'll see...

*Manuel takes a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket and holds it out to Boris.*

**Manuel** – Look, I've brought you a draft agreement... It already amounts to a tidy sum.

*Boris does not take the paper and continues staring at Manuel.*

**Boris** – It's too early to talk business. I'll look at it later... Vodka?

**Manuel** – Vodka...? It's nine in the morning, Boris... I don't know whether it's too early to talk business, but for me it's far too early to be knocking back that stuff...

*The other man gives him a cold look.*

**Boris** – It's the best vodka you can find in Russia.

**Manuel** – OK, vodka...

*As Manuel puts the draft agreement back in his pocket, Boris takes out the bottle and two glasses and fills them. He hands one to Manuel. Boris raises his glass in a toast.*

**Boris** – Za VA-she zda-ROV-ye!

*Manuel raises his glass too.*

**Manuel** – To peace between Russia and Poldavia!

**Boris** – That's right... To Russia's victory!

*Boris downs his vodka in one. Manuel feels obliged to do the same. He grimaces.*

**Manuel** – Ah yes, that's... more of a man's drink.

**Boris** – It's a Russian drink... Another?

**Manuel** – Thanks, I think I'd better stop there... *(The other man gives him a dark look.)* OK, but this is definitely the last one.

*Boris refills the glasses, then raises his again.*

**Boris** – To Franco-Russian friendship!

*They down their drinks in one.*

**Manuel** – Well, at least it warms you up. Because I have to say, it's not exactly warm in your country. Not in here either, for that matter...

**Boris** – It'll be even colder back home once we've cut off your gas.

*Manuel is momentarily taken aback.*

**Manuel** – All right, Boris... Are you going to invade Poldavia or not?

**Boris** – Poldavia doesn't exist. What the Poldavians call Poldavia has always been a Russian province. How can I invade a country that doesn't exist? When the Russian army moves through Russian territory, you don't call it an invasion. You call it military exercises.

**Manuel** – That's one way of looking at it...

**Boris** – When the French Army conducts military exercises in Alsace-Lorraine, you don't call that an invasion, do you?

**Manuel** – No... we call that the First World War.

**Boris** – Because you quite rightly consider Alsace-Lorraine part of France. It's exactly the same for Russia and Poldavia.

**Manuel** – I'm not getting into that argument, Boris. Right now, the only issue is preventing this simmering conflict from turning into open war. Beijing also considers Taiwan a Chinese province. And yet China has never taken the risk of invading Taiwan.

**Boris** – Because the Chinese are first and foremost a nation of traders. They're prepared to sell off a piece of their territory simply to avoid a conflict that would be bad for business.

**Manuel** – Speaking of business... You do realise that if your army enters Poldavia, the international community will impose coordinated sanctions on Russia? Very severe sanctions...

**Boris** – I couldn't care less about your sanctions. I've got a few hundred billion stashed away in tax havens. Do you really think I'm worried about not being able to find caviar at the corner shop?

**Manuel** – Are you sure you want Russia to suffer the same fate as Iran, Boris? Their economy is in ruins...

**Boris** – The Iranians are starving, but Iran is still ruled by an Ayatollah. Your sanctions make the Russian people suffer. And the Russian people, like the Iranian people, the more they suffer, the more they see themselves as victims of the West. And the more they see themselves as victims of the West, the more blindly they rally behind their supreme leader.

*A pause.*

**Manuel** – You know what? In a way, I envy you, Boris. In France, all it takes is a ten-cent rise in the price of petrol and people take to the streets, set fire to tyres on roundabouts and demand the president's resignation.

**Boris** – Here, we can't afford to burn tyres. We can barely find enough to keep our cars on the road.

**Manuel** – There's a deadly epidemic, we pay them to stay at home doing fuck all, we find them a vaccine in less than a year, the vaccine is free... and they start screaming about a public-health dictatorship.

**Boris** – A public-health dictatorship...?

**Manuel** – A public-health dictatorship, yes... And at the next election, to punish the supposed dictator, they vote for a far-right candidate who wants to establish a police state.

**Boris** – Democracy is a system for spoiled children. Citizens are kids, and kids need authority.

**Manuel** – Even so, the election is coming up, and I'm not sure I'll be re-elected. And if I'm not, with all the scandals hanging over me, I could end up in jail for embezzling public funds.

**Boris** – You see, an independent judiciary isn't all it's cracked up to be...

**Manuel** – The thing is, I don't have hundreds of billions of dollars stashed away in a tax haven like you. At most, I've got a few hundred thousand euros sitting in a safe-deposit box in Switzerland...

**Boris** – Fine... And what exactly has all this got to do with me?

**Manuel** – You know what you've got, Boris. You don't know what you're going to get... Even if my successor claims to be more pro-Russian than I am, what good will that do you if he drives France into ruin and we no longer have any money to buy your oil and gas?

*Boris seems to think for a moment.*

**Boris** – *How many are running against you?*

**Manuel** – A good ten or so...

**Boris** – Why bother, Manuel? Just have them poisoned...

**Manuel** – All of them?

**Boris** – At least the two or three serious contenders. Keep the others to preserve the appearance of democracy.

**Manuel** – I can't do that...

**Boris** – Then have them arrested and throw them into a re-education camp!

**Manuel** – Unfortunately, things aren't that simple where we come from. Before you can send someone to prison, there has to be a trial.

**Boris** – Same here.

**Manuel** – No, I mean a real trial, with independent judges... In France, a president can't just have their main opponents thrown into prison by accusing them of high treason. (*Looking around.*) By the way, where exactly are we?

**Boris** – In the Kremlin...

**Manuel** – Yes... but that lift ride down here seemed endless. I felt as though I was descending into hell... (*He gets up and walks around the room.*) And there aren't any windows... Where are we? In a coal mine?

**Boris** – In my nuclear bunker.

**Manuel** – Sorry?

**Boris** – You can imagine the Kremlin has a nuclear bunker. Don't you have one at the Élysée?

**Manuel** – Of course, but... when you came to France, I received you at the Palace of Versailles. Why receive me in a place like this?

**Boris** – Because we're entering a crisis now, Manuel. A situation that calls for certain precautions...

**Manuel** – To the point of receiving a foreign head of state in a nuclear bunker?

*A pause.*

**Boris** – As we speak, Russian troops have just crossed the Poldavian border.

*Manuel is stunned for a moment. Boris picks up the bottle and shows it to Manuel.*

**Boris** – Another vodka?

**Manuel** – You've been playing me all along, haven't you?

**Boris** – We're only taking back what belongs to us.

**Manuel** – I came here to negotiate.

**Boris** – You came here to secure your re-election.

**Manuel** – Whatever the reason, Boris, this war isn't going to win you any new friends... You didn't have many to begin with, apart from me... And Gérard, of course...

**Boris** – I'm not in politics to make friends. I want to restore Russia to its former greatness.

**Manuel** – That won't get you anywhere, believe me. My predecessors include Charlemagne, Louis XIV and Napoleon. We had our glory days too. There was a time when France dominated Europe. When it wasn't invading Russia...

**Boris** – You had to retreat, if I remember correctly.

**Manuel** – Exactly. You have to know when you've gone too far, Boris.

**Boris** – Russia cannot turn its back on its history.

**Manuel** – Maybe not, but you have to know when it's time to turn the page. Face the facts, Boris. France isn't what it once was. Neither is Russia. It's time you accepted that too...

**Boris** – Russia is the largest country in the world.

**Manuel** – And one of the least densely populated.

**Boris** – Russia is a great power.

**Manuel** – But Russia has the GDP of Spain.

**Boris** – We have oil and gas that the whole world wants to buy.

**Manuel** – Until the day they can be replaced by renewable energy. Then Russia will be nothing but a desert. The biggest desert on the planet. And nature abhors a vacuum...

**Boris** – We have the second most powerful army in the world.

**Manuel** – Yet you can't even feed your population, barely larger than Japan's, even though Japan is fifty times smaller and has virtually no natural resources. And the Japanese don't lack for anything.

**Boris** – If we lack everything, it's because of the sanctions imposed on us by the United States.

**Manuel** – It's mainly because of the militaristic course you've imposed on your country for decades, Boris. You no longer have the means to match your ambitions, old friend...

**Boris** – We still have nuclear weapons.

*Silence.*

**Manuel** – We may be a small country, but France has nuclear weapons too, you know. So do other small countries, like Britain or Israel. And even if our nuclear deterrent is no match for yours, it would still be more than enough to wipe out Russia's major cities. Not to mention our allies, of course, including the United States, with whom we have a mutual defence agreement...

**Boris** – Fine, America has the most powerful army in the world, but that army is led by eunuchs. The Americans won't dare make a move, as usual. Neither will Europe. And do you know why?

**Manuel** – It doesn't matter, since you're going to tell me anyway.

**Boris** – Because you have too much to lose. The Russian people have nothing to lose except their pride, and that's what makes them strong. By trying to weaken us, all you've done is strengthen our resolve. By trying to humiliate us, you've awakened our national pride.

**Manuel** – Why did you agree to see me if you'd already decided to invade Poldavia?

**Boris** – I know this decision will be hard for the West to accept. Let's just say I needed to talk about it... with a friend.

**Manuel** – So you no longer have anyone in your own country you can talk to?

**Boris** – I suppose that's what they call the loneliness of power.

**Manuel** – And with absolute power comes absolute loneliness...

**Boris** – What can I say? I like France despite everything. Maybe because of what you were saying earlier. You too are nostalgic for lost greatness... And you find Uncle Sam's patronising grip hard to stomach.

**Manuel** – It's not too late for Russia to move closer to Europe. We could join forces to counterbalance American imperialism.

**Boris** – But Europe chose its side a long time ago.

**Manuel** – Our side is democracy. And that's not the side Russia has chosen.

**Boris** – Democracy is a luxury Russia cannot afford if it wants to survive in the face of America.

**Manuel** – Let's forget about America for a moment, Boris. On behalf of Europe, I formally ask you to abandon this plan and order your troops back.

**Boris** – I won't. You know that.

**Manuel** – Then I have no reason to stay here.

*Manuel makes a move to leave.*

**Boris** – *Wait... I've got a present for you too.*

*Boris takes a few photographs out of his pocket and hands them to Manuel, who looks at them.*

**Manuel** – What the hell is this?

**Boris** – As you can see, it's a photograph of your main opponent, stark naked in a hotel room in Kenya with two African Adonises who have barely come of age.

**Manuel** – Where did you get this?

**Boris** – Russian intelligence officers sometimes go on photo safaris in Kenya too...

**Manuel** – And... what exactly do you expect me to do with this?

**Boris** – That's up to you, old friend. But I think if this photograph were on the front page of every newspaper tomorrow, your re-election would be a mere formality.

*Manuel seems to hesitate.*

**Manuel** – Unfortunately, it's not that simple. I'd be accused of setting her up. People would cry conspiracy. And somehow I'd still end up being the bad guy...

**Boris** – In that case, just send the photographs to her. She'll get the message and withdraw from the race of her own accord.

**Manuel** – Even if I agreed to this kind of blackmail, that bitch's votes would immediately go to the third-best-placed candidate in the election... and he's even worse than she is.

**Boris** – Don't worry. I've thought of that too.

*Boris takes some more photographs out of his pocket and hands them to Manuel, who looks at them.*

**Manuel** (*horrified*) – What the hell is this?

**Boris** – The body of your third-placed candidate, who died rather stupidly in a car accident a few minutes ago.

**Manuel** – Tell me that isn't true! Tell me you had nothing to do with it!

**Boris** – Then I won't tell you.

*Manuel looks at the photograph again.*

**Manuel** – Tell me it's been doctored!

**Boris** – Everyone knew about his passion for high-performance cars and his tendency to push the limits. Especially the speed limit. He drove his Mercedes straight into a concrete pillar on the banks of the Seine. Don't worry, it wasn't in the Pont de l'Alma tunnel...

**Manuel** – You're completely insane, Boris.

**Boris** – You wanted to get re-elected, didn't you? And I'd much rather have a genuine friend of Russia running a major country like France. As you said, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush...

**Manuel** – But I didn't ask you to do any of this!

**Boris** – You just asked me to help you get re-elected!

**Manuel** – Not by murdering or disqualifying every other candidate in the presidential election!

**Boris** – You should be thanking me. I'm doing the dirty work for you and keeping your hands clean... If it makes you feel any better, you can even blame the Russian secret services. We're used to it by now...

**Manuel** – If you don't mind, I'd rather be going...

**Boris** – Come on... You're not going to leave without having breakfast with me! That would be a serious insult to Russian hospitality...

**Manuel** – I already had coffee on the plane... And you... if you don't mind me saying so, you look like death warmed up. You'd be better off calling your troops back and going to bed.

**Boris** – I didn't sleep at all last night, that's true.

**Manuel** – Because you were hesitating. And because you know now that you made the wrong decision.

**Boris** – I made my decision a long time ago. I didn't sleep because I spent the night directing the operation.

**Manuel** – Millions of people are going to suffer. Thousands are going to die. Soldiers. Civilians. Including people in your own country. Why?

**Boris** – For love of the motherland. For love of Russia.

**Manuel** – And above all to satisfy the monstrous ego of its *Líder Máximo*. Sorry, but I have to get back to the Élysée to deal with this crisis with our allies. Not to mention the suspicious death of one of my main rivals in the presidential election... Goodbye, Boris...

*He leaves. Boris remains seated, as impassive as ever. Manuel comes back in.*

**Manuel** – Could you have someone open the door for me? It's locked...

**Boris** – Sorry. You can't leave just yet.

**Manuel** – What?

**Boris** – I've just told you that our troops are crossing the Poldavian border. I want to preserve the element of surprise for a little longer.

**Manuel** – You're holding me hostage? You're holding the president of a NATO country hostage?

**Boris** – An hour at most. Let's make the most of it and have breakfast. Tea? Coffee?

*Manuel takes out his mobile phone.*

**Manuel** – This is a declaration of war, Boris... I'm calling my chief of staff.

*He presses a button, but nothing happens.*

**Boris** – You can't make calls either. This bunker is completely cut off from the outside world. To prevent cyberattacks. Our only link to the outside is this good old red telephone. And the only people we can reach on it are room service and the Chief of the General Staff.

**Manuel** – You can't be serious, Boris. Tell me this is some kind of bad joke.

**Boris** – A sense of humour isn't exactly what Russians are known for, as you know. And Russian leaders even less so.

**Manuel** – This is ridiculous. Even the Iranians have never dared do anything like this! You can't hold the president of a major democratic country prisoner in your bunker when they came here for the sole purpose of preventing a fratricidal war.

**Boris** – Apparently I can. Since that's exactly what I'm doing.

**Manuel** – What exactly are you hoping to achieve? Use me as a human shield in the event of a nuclear war?

**Boris** – That hadn't occurred to me, but why not?

**Manuel** – Besides, you're giving me far too much importance. Do you really think that if Russia decided to launch a nuclear strike against the West, my being here would stop the United States from retaliating?

**Boris** – Let me remind you that you were the one who requested this meeting.

**Manuel** – If you already knew you were going to invade Poldavia, you could have refused.

**Boris** – Let's just say... things moved a little faster than expected.

*Manuel sits back down.*

**Manuel** – *Fine. Then I consider myself your prisoner.*

**Boris** – You'll allow me to consider you my guest.

**Manuel** – Is that what you call Russian hospitality? In France, when we have a guest, we don't lock the door behind them.

*A pause.*

**Boris** – You really don't want me to have some breakfast brought in for you? There'll even be caviar.

**Manuel** – Thanks, I'm not hungry.

**Boris** – To tell you the truth, neither am I.

**Manuel** – You certainly don't lack an appetite when it comes to swallowing up neighbouring countries. You already annexed Soldavia last year. But this time your eyes are bigger than your stomach, Boris. Poldavia is a large country that aspires to democracy and wants to move closer to Europe. And that's what you really can't stand, isn't it? What bothers you isn't Poldavia joining NATO. It's Poldavia choosing the side of democracy.

**Boris** – Judging by the results of the latest elections in Europe, nobody over there wants democracy any more. Without my help, you won't be re-elected, and a populist from the right or the left will end up in the Élysée.

**Manuel** – People have short memories, that's true. But at least we don't invade neighbouring countries to impose our point of view on them.

**Boris** – Poldavia is Russia. We'll be welcomed as liberators.

**Manuel** – There's no one left around you to contradict you, Boris. You're starting to believe your own lies.

**Boris** – So far, everyone in Russia agrees with me.

**Manuel** – If everyone agrees with you, it's because they're all afraid of you. In France or America, a president can start mistaking their own fantasies for reality too. But sooner or later, there's always someone to bring them back down to earth. That's one of the few advantages of democracy.

**Boris** – Maybe. But in your democracies, you’re so afraid of upsetting anyone that you end up making no decisions at all.

**Manuel** – If that stops us making bad ones... the kind that would only bring misery to everyone.

**Boris** – True, and I stand by that. The pursuit of happiness isn’t the only purpose of a great nation.

**Manuel** – “For us”, you say? Do you really think you speak for all Russians?

**Boris** – The Russians are the ones who put me where I am today. All right, I didn’t have any real opposition. But I still won overwhelming support. Like your General de Gaulle, once upon a time...

**Manuel** – De Gaulle resigned when he felt he’d lost the people’s support. Would you be capable of doing the same?

**Boris** – For now, I have the support of the people.

**Manuel** – The people... I have to admit, I’m not quite sure what that means. Voters, yes. But “the people”... Whether we’re talking about the French people or the Russian people, for that matter...

**Boris** – The people are always right.

**Manuel** – Because you can make them say whatever you want... “The people” don’t exist. They’re a fiction invented by populists to get themselves elected by people whose interests are fundamentally at odds. It’s the government’s job to uphold the common good against the sum of all those selfish interests, in an attempt to maintain some degree of social cohesion.

**Boris** – In the end, you’re not so far from agreeing with me. It’s much simpler when one person makes the decisions for everyone.

*The red telephone rings. Boris answers.*

**Boris** – Da... Da... Da...

*He hangs up.*

**Manuel** (*ironically*) – Good news?

**Boris** – Excellent... Our army is advancing without encountering any significant resistance.

**Manuel** – That’s what Napoleon said when he invaded Russia. And what Brezhnev said when he invaded Afghanistan. You shouldn’t forget the lessons of history, Boris.

**Boris** – History... some people read it, others write it. (*The red telephone rings again. Boris answers.*) Da... Da... Da...

*He hangs up.*

**Manuel** – Room service? Wondering whether we’ll be checking out before noon?

**Boris** – The Chief of the General Staff. Russia's military intervention in Poldavia is now public knowledge. And NATO is threatening to intervene directly unless I withdraw my troops immediately.

**Manuel** – I warned you. That was a red line you shouldn't have crossed.

**Boris** – They're bluffing.

**Manuel** – Either way, I can leave now. You were keeping me here so I couldn't warn our allies about your secret plan. Now that everyone knows about it...

*He gets up to leave.*

**Boris** – Just a moment longer, if you don't mind...

**Manuel** – What now?

**Boris** – You could stay here and play the negotiator, like you wanted to in the first place.

**Manuel** – Let me remind you that since then, you've declared war on the free world.

**Boris** – You wanted to negotiate a de-escalation. You could negotiate an armistice.

**Manuel** – Like Pétain?

**Boris** – Some people have won the Nobel Peace Prize for less.

*Manuel seems to hesitate.*

**Manuel** – The Nobel Peace Prize... usually that's more like a first-class funeral for a political career. In the meantime, I could lose my soul.

**Boris** – If you manage to prevent a world war... you'll become a hero in your own country. And you'll secure your re-election. Especially now that you don't have any opponents left.

**Manuel** – Two opponents gone in a single day... people are going to suspect I had them eliminated.

**Boris** – Not if you come home as the saviour of the free world, as you call it.

**Manuel** – Either way, there'll be an investigation.

**Boris** – The Russian secret services never leave any trace behind. Stay here, and if all goes well, you'll be re-elected in the first round. That's what you wanted, isn't it?

*Manuel hesitates.*

**Manuel** – *Are you really giving me a choice?*

**Boris** – No.

**Manuel** – In that case, let's negotiate... (*He sits back down.*) Are you planning to ignore the threat of direct intervention by the Atlantic Alliance as well?

**Boris** – They won't dare. Poldavia isn't a member of NATO.

**Manuel** – Then what exactly do you expect from me?

**Boris** – I want you to suggest that Europe stay out of my conflict with the United States.

**Manuel** – Europe is part of NATO. If our allies get involved, we'll get involved too.

**Boris** – If NATO intervenes, it will be responsible for starting a world war. A total war. A nuclear war.

**Manuel** – Do you really want to risk wiping out all life on Earth just so Russia can take back Poldavia? This isn't a game of poker, Boris. You're gambling with the fate of the world.

*Boris takes a revolver out of a drawer.*

**Boris** – Do you know this game, Manuel? It's called Russian roulette. So naturally, it was invented by the Russians.

**Manuel** – Tell me that revolver isn't loaded...

**Boris** – There's only one bullet in the cylinder.

*He spins the cylinder.*

**Manuel** – I can assure you, I don't find this funny at all.

**Boris** – Oh, but it is. You'll see... Let me explain. In American roulette, if you bet on the right number, you win thirty-six times your stake. In Russian roulette, if you get the wrong number, you blow your brains out. One chance in six of dying. Which means five chances in six of surviving. When you've got nothing, all you have left to gamble is your life... (*Boris spins the cylinder and holds the gun out to him.*) Want to play? If you prefer, I'll go first...

**Manuel** – You wouldn't dare...

*Boris presses the barrel of the revolver against his temple. A moment of extreme tension. He pulls the trigger. No shot.*

**Boris** – There. I've earned the right to stay alive. Now it's your turn...

*Boris holds the revolver out to Manuel.*

**Manuel** – It's a fucking stupid game. And I never said I wanted to play.

**Boris** – I put my life on the line, Manuel. Now you don't have a choice. It's a matter of honour...

*After a moment's hesitation, Manuel takes the gun. He hesitates again, then suddenly points it at Boris.*

**Manuel** – One chance in six, you said...?

**Boris** – Actually, one chance in five, since I've already pulled the trigger once. But we're in the Kremlin. Even if you got lucky, I'm not sure you'd make it out of here alive after killing the Russian president...

*Manuel puts the revolver down on the table.*

**Manuel** – I'm not a murderer...

**Boris** – You’ve never killed a man?

**Manuel** – No.

**Boris** – But your decisions, like mine, have indirectly caused someone’s death. By sending an intervention force into a foreign country, for example.

**Manuel** – It was always to restore peace. Never to expand my power by force. What about you?

**Boris** – Me?

**Manuel** – Have you ever killed a man? I mean... with your own hands.

**Boris** – Before I became president, I spent many years in the intelligence services...

*A pause.*

**Manuel** – I’m sure that gun wasn’t loaded. You’re bluffing...

**Boris** – If you’re so sure, why not play?

**Manuel** – Let’s say... it’s a bit like Pascal’s wager. I don’t believe God exists, and I don’t believe that gun is loaded. But why take an unnecessary risk just to prove it? I call that reason...

*Boris takes the revolver and puts it back in the drawer.*

**Boris** – I call it cowardice. The cowardice of this decadent Western world, which we counter with the courage that defines the Russian soul.

**Manuel** – I call it recklessness. And above all, it’s other people’s lives you’re gambling with... That gun wasn’t loaded...

*He reaches for the revolver to check, but Boris stops him.*

**Boris** – No, Manuel, that’s not how it works... It’s like poker. Once one player has folded, the other doesn’t have to show his hand.

**Manuel** – Have it your way... So what do we do now?

**Boris** – War is like chess. Once you’ve made your move, you have to wait for your opponent’s response.

**Manuel** – I thought war was like poker... Because in chess, let me remind you, you can’t bluff. The stronger player wins. Or at least the smarter one...

*The red telephone rings. Boris answers.*

**Boris** – Da... Da... Da... Niet... Niet... Niet... *(He hangs up.)* NATO has just imposed a no-fly zone over Poldavia.

**Manuel** – I warned you... What are you going to do?

**Boris** – I’m going to assume they’re bluffing.

**Manuel** – Meaning?

**Boris** – I’m going to ignore it. They won’t dare shoot down a Russian aircraft.

**Manuel** – Even in poker, you should never bank too heavily on your opponent being weak.

**Boris** – I'll take the risk.

**Manuel** – And if one of your planes is shot down?

**Boris** – Then Russia would be at war with the United States.

**Manuel** – The Russian army wouldn't last three days against the American military in a conventional war. You know that perfectly well.

**Boris** – Which is why we would be forced to use every weapon at our disposal.

**Manuel** – Including nuclear weapons?

**Boris** – If we were forced to...

**Manuel** – That's a war no one would win. Even if Russia struck first, it would be annihilated immediately afterwards.

**Boris** – Which is precisely why the United States will never dare shoot down a Russian aircraft over Poldavia.

*An oppressive silence.*

**Manuel** – And yet you have children too. Would you really be prepared to sacrifice them in the insane hope of satisfying your megalomania?

**Boris** – Megalomania is only madness if you fail to achieve your goals. Some megalomaniacs succeed. Julius Caesar, Napoleon...

**Manuel** – Hitler... But things didn't end too well for him. Do you really want to go down in history as the one who started the first — and probably the last — nuclear world war?

*The red telephone rings. Boris answers.*

**Boris** – Da... Ah, hello Gérard, how are you? No... No, not at all... Listen, I'll have to explain all this to you, and I'm sure you'll understand, but right now I really don't have time... All right, I'll call you back. *(He hangs up.)* That was Gérard...

**Manuel** – Gérard?

**Boris** – That actor whose complete collection of films you just gave me.

**Manuel** – And?

**Boris** – He doesn't approve of this military intervention in Poldavia.

**Manuel** – Well, there you go... even idiots sometimes change their minds...

*The telephone rings again. Boris answers.*

**Boris** – Da... Da... Da... *(A pause.)* Da...

*He hangs up, looking grim.*

**Manuel** – Gérard again?

**Boris** – The Chief of the General Staff.

**Manuel** – Bad news?

**Boris** – The Poldavian army has just sunk one of our aircraft carriers off the Poldavian coast.

**Manuel** – I thought you were going to be welcomed as liberators...

**Boris** – Unfortunately... some slaves refuse to be liberated.

**Manuel** – The Poldavian army is a long way from being the second most powerful army in the world. If they've managed to send your flagship to the bottom, that's not going to do much for the morale of your troops, is it?

**Boris** – Which is why we won't let them boast about this victory. We'll say the ship went down because of a technical failure.

**Manuel** – A nuclear-powered aircraft carrier sinking all by itself without anyone even having to fire a missile or two at it... I'm not sure that makes your army look much more credible.

**Boris** – Will you excuse me for a moment?

*Boris leaves. Manuel remains perplexed for a moment. He walks around the room as though looking for a way out. Then he returns to the table, opens the drawer, takes out the revolver and opens the cylinder to check whether there really is a bullet inside. But the red telephone starts ringing. He jumps and hurriedly puts the revolver back in the drawer. The telephone keeps ringing. He hesitates, then picks up the receiver.*

**Manuel** – Da...? (*A pause.*) Da, da... Da. (*He hangs up, looking pleased with himself.*) I didn't understand a word, but I've always wanted to do that...

*He sits back down, not knowing what to do. He yawns, visibly exhausted. He closes his eyes and dozes off for a moment.*

*Sting's song Russians is heard.*

*Boris returns. Manuel wakes with a start. Boris looks worried.*

**Manuel** – Can you tell me what's going on?

**Boris** – One of our aircraft has just been shot down by an American missile.

**Manuel** – And?

*A pause.*

**Boris** – Apparently, I've just authorised a nuclear strike on Hawaii.

**Manuel** – Apparently?

**Boris** – The Chief of the General Staff assures me that I gave the order over this telephone.

**Manuel** (*aghast*) – No...?

**Boris** – Well, now that it's done, it's too late to turn back. I might as well take responsibility for it.

**Manuel** – A nuclear strike on Hawaii?

**Boris** – You're right, we could have chosen Minneapolis or Cincinnati. But I'd rather it be seen as a warning. Nobody really takes Hawaii seriously... At worst, if it no longer exists, the Americans can go on holiday to Cuba or Puerto Rico.

**Manuel** – But there's still time to change your mind...

**Boris** – I'm afraid not. Once a nuclear missile has been launched, nothing can stop it. Besides, it's a hypersonic missile, travelling at more than six thousand kilometres an hour. It was launched from one of our submarines patrolling the Black Sea. It must have reached its target by now...

**Manuel** – And what do you think the United States is going to do?

*The red telephone rings. Boris answers.*

**Boris** – Da... Da... Da... (*Silence.*) Da... (*He hangs up.*) The United States has just destroyed Novosibirsk. I've just ordered a strike on Chicago.

**Manuel** – Tell me that isn't true...

**Boris** – If I ever get my hands on the idiot who launched that first missile at Hawaii... I don't understand... I was told the order was given by telephone from this room... (*He gives Manuel a suspicious look.*) You don't speak Russian, do you?

**Manuel** – I came here to secure a de-escalation on the border between Russia and Poldavia... Why would I imitate your voice and give the order to start a nuclear war?

*Silence. The red telephone rings. Boris answers.*

**Boris** – Da... Da... Da... (*Silence.*) Da... (*He hangs up.*) The process is now irreversible. Moscow has just been hit. We're striking New York and Washington in retaliation.

**Manuel** – Moscow? But... we didn't hear anything.

**Boris** – This bunker is buried several hundred metres underground.

**Manuel** – This is a nightmare. I'm going to wake up...

**Boris** – I'm afraid no one can stop this chain reaction now.

**Manuel** – So this is the end of the world...

**Boris** – The end of a world, at least... The one we knew. I think I need a glass of vodka... (*Manuel is completely stunned. Boris pours two glasses of vodka and holds one out to him.*) Mr President?

*Manuel takes the glass mechanically.*

**Manuel** – I'm afraid that by now, neither of us is president of anything any more. (*In a daze, he downs his vodka in one. A long silence follows.*) How did we ever get to this?

**Boris** – I don't know... I think this game of poker got a little out of hand.

**Manuel** – All this just to annex one more territory, when Russia is already the largest country in the world. Or was, anyway... whatever's left of it.

**Boris** – In any case, I'm not keeping you here any more. If you want to leave...

**Manuel** – Leave? Where? How? Moscow has just been hit by a nuclear bomb.

**Boris** – You're right. Then it looks as though we're condemned to spend the rest of our lives together in this bunker.

**Manuel** – I wonder if hell wouldn't be more bearable.

*A long silence.*

**Boris** – What if everything I've told you was a lie?

**Manuel** – You mean about the nuclear war?

**Boris** – What if I haven't even ordered my troops to cross the Poldavian border yet?

**Manuel** – Is that true?

**Boris** – I didn't say it was. I said: what if...?

**Manuel** – If this is a joke, it's in very bad taste...

**Boris** – Let's call it Russian humour.

**Manuel** – And what about all those phone calls?

**Boris** – All you heard me say was da or niet. Maybe they were just keeping me informed about Russia's day-to-day affairs. Or asking what time I wanted lunch and whether I wanted my eggs fried or soft-boiled.

**Manuel** – And those photographs of my opponents in the presidential election?

**Boris** – You said it yourself. They could have been doctored...

**Manuel** – Fine. So what am I supposed to do?

**Boris** – I told you. You're free to leave. Once you get outside, you'll find out whether the world still exists.

*Manuel hesitates for a moment.*

**Manuel** – Goodbye, Boris... Whatever happens, I don't think we'll see each other again.

**Boris** – Never say never, Manuel... If there's a nuclear winter outside, you can always come back. I've got enough food here to last for centuries. I've got vodka. And we've got Gérard's complete film collection.

*Manuel leaves. The red telephone rings. Boris answers.*

**Boris** – Da...? Da...

*He hangs up, thinks for a moment, then takes the revolver out of the drawer and presses the barrel against his temple. He pulls the trigger once. Then a second time. And a third...*

*Blackout.*

*Manuel stands in front of a bank of microphones from various media outlets. He looks punch-drunk.*

*Voice off* – Mr President, how did your meeting with the Russian president go, and did your counterpart make any commitments regarding military de-escalation on the border between Russia and Poldavia?

*Manuel looks shattered, but mechanically forces himself to answer in the usual diplomatic doublespeak.*

**Manuel** – Well... I had a frank but cordial discussion with the Russian president. We addressed every issue openly, with no subject off limits. I made France's position clear, which is also Europe's position, and my counterpart set out their own view of the situation just as frankly. Our discussion was intense but constructive. We have not yet managed to reconcile our positions, but the Russian president assured me that they remain open to dialogue. Thank you...

*To the sound of the Red Army Choir, Manuel staggers off, dazed like a boxer on the verge of losing consciousness.*

*Blackout.*

**End.**

## *About the author*

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

<https://jeanpierremartinez.net/>

<https://comediatheque.net/>

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the French Society of Authors (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the [contact form on his websites](#).

## Other plays by the same author translated in English

### Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation  
EuroStar  
Heads and Tails  
Him and Her  
Is there a pilot in the audience?  
Last chance encounter  
New Year's Eve at the Morgue  
Not even dead  
Pentimento  
Preliminaries  
Running on empty  
The Costa Mucho Castaways  
The Joker  
The Rope  
The Window across the courtyard

### Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity  
A simple business dinner  
An innocent little murder  
Cards on the table  
Cheaters  
Crash Zone  
Fragile, Handle with care  
Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>  
Horizons  
Ménage à trois  
One small step for a woman,  
one giant leap backward for  
Mankind  
The Way of Chance

### Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest  
A hell of a night  
A Skeleton in the Closet  
Back to stage  
Bed and Breakfast  
Casket for two  
Crisis and Punishment  
Déjà vu  
Family Portrait  
Family Tree  
Four stars  
Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>  
Gay friendly  
How to get rid of your best  
friends  
Is there a critic in the audience?  
Is there an author in the  
audience?  
Just a moment before the end  
of the world  
Lovestruck at Swindlemore  
Hall  
One marriage out of two  
Perfect In-laws  
Quarantine  
Requiem for a Stradivarius  
Strip Poker  
Surviving Mankind  
The Deal  
The Fishbowl  
The Perfect Son-in-Law  
The Pyramids  
The Smell of Money  
The Tourists

### Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly  
Christmas Eve at the Police  
Station  
Crisis and Punishment  
Critical but Stable  
In lieu of flowers...  
King of Fools  
Once upon a time on the web  
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

### Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter  
Backstage Comedy  
Blue Flamingos  
Check to the Kings  
Christmas Eve at the Police  
Station  
False exit  
In flagrante delirium  
Just like a Christmas movie  
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana  
Abbey  
Music does not always soothe  
the savage beasts  
Neighbours'Day  
Nicotine  
Of Vegetables and Books  
Offside  
Open Hearts  
Reality Show  
Save our Savings  
Special Dedication  
Stories and Prehistories  
Such a Lovely Village  
The House of Our Dreams  
The Jackpot  
The Performance is not  
cancelled  
The Worst Village in England  
Welcome aboard!  
White Coats, Dark Humour

### Collection of sketches

Apocalypse  
Backstage Bits  
Don't panic !  
Enough is Enough  
Ethan and Eve  
For real and for fun  
Him and Her  
Killer Sketches  
Lockdown Shorts  
Lost time Chronicles  
No Sense off Limits  
Of Animals and Men  
Open Hearts  
Park Bench Shorts  
Sidewalk Chronicles  
Stage Briefs  
Stories to die for

### Monologues

Happy Dogs  
Like a fish in the air

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