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Memorial, Others Criticize History Falsification Commission

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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President Dmitry Medvedev's commission to block "the falsification of history at the expense of the interests of Russia" will either be harmful to Medvedev's reputation and Russia's prospects for reform or prove useless as an operational body, in the opinion of a member of historical organization Memorial.

"The struggle against the falsifications of history," Memorial's Arseny Roginsky argued in an article last week, "is not an affair of the state," and consequently, "the activity of the new commission will be useless or harmful" because "we all know very well how the [Russian] state struggles with falsifications."

"Truth," he continues, "is achieved not by the resolution of a state commission, even the highest created by decree of the president, but is defined in free discussion among professionals or simply among people; among societies and peoples in various countries, if the definition of one and the same event is under question."

Few observers seem to expect this new body to produce that kind of truth. The titles of some articles about Medvedev's action &mdash "A New Fascism," "A State Built on Lies," "A Commission against History" &mdash make that entirely clear.

And while the very outrageousness of the idea of the commission has attracted the most attention &mdash one can only imagine how Moscow's defenders would react if any other government were to create a similar body &mdash less attention has been paid to three more mundane aspects of this example of bureaucratic authoritarianism, elements that in the end may prove more important.

First, it is important to be clear about what this commission is mandated to do. It is not supposed to be a continuously operating body; instead, it is called upon to meet only twice a year. And it is not asked to define truth but rather to point to falsifications of it and not even to all of those but only to the ones that "harm" Russia's image.

Second, its 28 members, led by Presidential Administration head Sergey Naryshkin, include few scholars but a large number of political figures with backgrounds in intelligence or the force structures and with reputations of committed nationalists, often of the most extreme kind, an indication that they will not be the ones making the decisions about "falsifications."

And third, the practical consequences of the commission, at least as currently established, seem likely to be small and perhaps even counterproductive.

In any case, the power of the Internet means that whatever the commission says, other points of view are likely to be available to those who are interested. Yet, and this is likely to be far more important, any comments by the commission about "falsifiers" is likely to attract more attention to their works than they might otherwise gain. That is what happened in Soviet times when the Communist party ideologists attacked "bourgeois falsifiers," and this commission may do the same for a new generation.

But in addition to these observations, which reflect a narrow reading of what the commission is about, the new body, or, more precisely, the order calling it into existence, provides instructive guidance as to the general direction in which Russia unfortunately appears to be moving at present.

As commentator Yuliya Latynina wrote in "Yezhednevny zhurnal" last week, prior to the announcement of the commission's founding, "it would have been difficult to imagine" that "Our Liberal Hope, Mr. Medvedev, would sign a paper about the establishment of [what she calls] the establishment of an [Orwellian] Ministry of Truth."

Moreover, this announcement has a long prehistory, not only from Soviet times but also from the presidency of Vladimir Putin, who, as Aleksandr Karyev pointed out in a piece on APN-SPB.ru, has long been obsessed with defining a particular approach to history that serves his needs if not those of the country.

That view, Karyev continues, reflects "the pseudo-ideological vector" along which Russia has

been moving in recent times, one "directed not toward the future but toward the past," an effective acknowledgement of the intellectual and political bankruptcy of the current Russian regime.

Given the uncertainties over whether this commission will "really function" or simply prove to be one more ideological flash in the pan, it is probably premature to conclude that the decree creating it is "an act bearing an openly totalitarian character," as human rights activist Lev Ponomaryev put it.

But it is certainly fair to conclude, as Latynina does, that Medvedev's action represents "a new variety of fascism," of a set of ideas that propagandizes "the exclusiveness of one's own nation" and of its right to dominate others, however they may be defined from one moment to the next.

And she is certainly right that commissions like the one Medvedev has just created reflect a habit of mind and "an ideology of hatred to an open society, an ideology of struggle with 'internal enemies,'" like that described by Orwell in "1984." That is something that in today's Russia is "becoming ever more horrifying."

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