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Russia's New Propaganda Minister

By Michael Bohm

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With Monday's announcement that historian Vladimir Medinsky was appointed the culture minister, critics quickly labeled him the country's new propaganda minister. Considering his checkered past, this may not be far from the truth.

At the top of Medinsky's patriotic agenda is his battle against what he believes to be widespread Russophobia — both from foreigners and Russians. He is the author of a series of books on the most common "myths" about Russia — above all, a belief that Russians are historically inclined toward alcoholism, laziness, corruption and strong leaders. In the preface to each book, he explains that the series was not written for foreigners, most of whom will probably always cling to these deeply ingrained stereotypes, but for Russians who have read and heard so much malicious anti-Russian propaganda that they have actually started to believe some of it.

The other aspect of Medinsky's patriotic agenda has been to battle historians, journalists and authors who purportedly distort and besmirch Russian history. From 2010 to 2012, he served as a member of the presidential commission against the falsification of history.

Yet it seems that Medinsky has his own record of history falsification. For example, in a recent interview with Dozhd TV, he said the commonly accepted notion that there was systemic anti-Semitism in tsarist and Soviet Russia is "greatly exaggerated." The country's history of anti-Semitism, Medinsky claimed, was largely limited to the Black Hundreds and a few pogroms more than a century ago.

In reality, of course, state-sponsored anti-Semitism — including strict quotas on Jews in prominent university departments and professions — from the Stalin period to the end of the Soviet Union was universally condemned in the West. In particular, the United States passed the Jackson-Vanik amendment in 1974 as a sanction against the Soviet practice of limiting the rights of Jews to emigrate.

But Medinsky's favorite history-falsification topic is World War II. For example, he claims that Soviet troops never really invaded or occupied Poland or the Baltic states, but only "incorporated" them. This is the standard spurious explanation taken from Soviet history textbooks — the same textbooks that explained how for 40 years Eastern Europeans willingly elected Communists to power in free and fair elections in Warsaw Pact countries.

Another Medinsky assertion: When Soviet prisoners of war were returned to the Soviet Union, only 10 percent of them were sent to gulag prisons, while the remaining 90 percent were either sent back into the army or freed from service. Or that the famous photo showing Soviet-German troops celebrating the joint victory over Poland in Brest-Litovsk on Sept. 22, 1939, was "photoshopped."

Finally, all the talk of Josef Stalin and his generals using millions of Soviet soldiers as cannon fodder in World War II is a lie, Medinsky says. Citing Russian government statistics, he claims Soviet soldier deaths, at roughly 11.4 million, were only 30 percent higher than those of Nazi Germany and its allies, at some 8.7 million.

Those who disagree with him on these points, Medinsky says, often have their own Russia--hating agenda: to smear Russia's reputation and falsely present it as a backward, tyrannical and savage country.

The other area of Medinsky's falsification has less to do with Russian history and more to do with his own academic record. From 2004 to 2011, while serving as a State Duma deputy and a public relations professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Medinsky worked on his doctorate in history and defended his dissertation in June 2011, at age 40.

This might seem like an amazing feat considering the heavy workload of a deputy and professor who also wrote 16 books during this period. But the secret as to how he pulled it off may have something to do with the fact that more than a dozen paragraphs of his doctoral thesis look startling similar to information in previously published academic papers. Medinsky has denied plagiarism, saying the paragraphs in question only relate to the dissertation's abstract, not the dissertation itself.

Medinsky's academic ethics and historical distortions may raise serious questions, but for the Kremlin, he has three important attributes that take precedence over everything else: He is a model United Russia leader, a firm Putin loyalist and a skilled sophist. Medinsky has served in the party from the very beginning of its formation, rising to become a member of its

general council. In February, he was chosen as a member of Vladimir Putin's small group of reliable, loyal public figures allowed to speak publicly on Putin's behalf during his presidential campaign.

Medinsky's appointment is a clear illustration of how loyalty to the Kremlin and its ruling party has become the most important job qualification when top government positions are handed out — just like during the Soviet period. In a similar fashion, Igor Kholmanskikh, a worker in Russia's largest tank factory, was nominated as presidential envoy to the Urals Federal District last week. Kholmanskikh's foray into politics was a phone call he made to Putin's call-in show in December in which he, along with fellow tank workers, offered to help Putin clear out Moscow protesters. Incidentally, Putin also gave Kholmanskikh permission to speak publicly on his behalf during the presidential campaign.

The question now is whether Medinsky will use his ministerial post to push his patriotic agenda by propagandizing an airbrushed, revisionist version of Russian history, while labeling those who speak the truth about Russia's uglier past as "Russophobes."

One way Medinsky could carry out this agenda would be through the government's support of films. Medinsky is a strong admirer of film director Nikita Mikhalkov — an ardent Putin loyalist whose conservative brand of patriotism was best formulated in his 2010 manifest "Right and Truth," in which he urges Russians to be "loyal, obey authoritative power and respect rank." In the manifest, Mikhalkov, much like Medinsky, states that Russia should "distribute virtual myths that will provide an identity for the nation, individual and state."

After the 2010 release of Mikhalkov's film "Burnt by the Sun 2," Medinsky wrote on his Ekho Moskvy blog: "Every high school senior and soldier should see this film. ... The government should help finance this film so it can be distributed abroad."

Critics, however, denounced the film for its historical revisionism and for advancing the Kremlin's approved version of World War II. Notably, audiences stayed away, and the film was a record-breaking disaster at the box office, losing nearly $47 million.

Yet the Kremlin's propagandistic battle goes on. Ever since the Soviet period, the Kremlin has always believed that it can manufacture and inculcate patriotism in Russians. As culture minister, Medinsky is highly qualified to continue this tradition.

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