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Fight Over School Textbooks

By Peter Rutland

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At the end of January, State Duma Deputy and Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov gave a blistering speech in the Duma attacking a new draft curriculum for high school students. He complained that beloved Russian classics from Alexander Pushkin to Anton Chekhov were being cut from the curriculum, while students are being exposed to the work of degenerate post-modern authors such as Viktor Pelevin, Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Asar Eppel.

Mironov also personally attacked Boris Lanin, a professor at the Academy of Education who headed the team drawing up the model curriculum. He accused Lanin of being a paid agent of the West since he was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in Washington. Even worse, he is a Facebook friend of Michael McFaul, the U.S. ambassador to Russia.

Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov joined the criticism, detecting the diversion of a "fifth column" bent on destroying Russian students through curricular reform at the behest of nefarious Western organizations such as the World Bank. Vladimir Nikitin, founder of the new Russian Style nationalist movement, attached to the Communist Party, complained about walking into a library in Pskov and seeing a display of books by poet Joseph Brodsky, whose

works were denounced by Soviet authorities in the early 1960s for being "pornographic and anti-Soviet." Brodsky was later sentenced to five years of hard labor.

Mironov's charges were picked up by President Vladimir Putin himself. A week ago, Putin unexpectedly appeared before a conservative group called Parents of Russia, where he said he regretted the disappearance from the curriculum of Pushkin, Chekhov, Nikolai Leskov and Alexei Tolstoi.

Pro-Kremlin political analyst Sergei Markov also weighed in, accusing Lanin of pursuing a strategy of "hyperindividualism" aimed at undermining patriotism and respect for traditional Russian values.

The problem is that Mironov's accusations are false. It seems that he did not read the draft curriculum he was criticizing. The section of the new curriculum introducing contemporary writers is confined to a mere two lessons. Classic Russian authors such as Alexander Griboyedov and Nikolai Gogol are absent from grades 10 and 11, but only because they were already assigned for grades 5-9. As for Chekhov's "Lady With a Dog," this work has not been taught in schools for many years because the subject of adultery is considered inappropriate for children. It is strange to see conservative defenders of family values demanding the inclusion of this story.

It is also worth bearing in mind that the model curriculum in question is just a guide for teachers, one of 18 published by the Institute of Education. Since there is no national curriculum in Russia, each school is free to set its own program of studies.

One of the main reasons the list of authors covered in the literature curriculum was shortened is to leave space for other subjects that have been added, such as introduction to religious studies and fundamentals of life safety, a course on civil defense. In the 10th and 11th grades, literature is reduced to two hours per week.

The theme of families and children has emerged as a central plank of Putin's efforts to redefine Russian identity. First, he initiated an ambitious and expensive program to encourage Russians to have more children. Then, in retaliation for the passage of the U.S. Magnitsky Act, he signed into law a measure banning the adoption of Russian orphans by U.S. families, which was accompanied by instructions to authorities to support adoptions by Russian families.

Pro-Kremlin political analyst Sergei Kurginyan, who organized the Parents of Russia conference, has emerged as the leading ideologue of this new wave of Russian patriotism. A perennial feature of the Russian patriotic movement since the early 1990s, Kurginyan was one of the leaders of the pro-Putin demonstrations last winter. Kurginyan pledged to fight the "orange plague" lapping at Russia's shores.

In any society, it is ugly to see politicians getting involved in telling teachers what to teach and hurling accusations of disloyalty at professionals who are just doing their job.

It is also regrettable that in the current political climate, Putin is trying so hard not to be rhetorically outdone by nationalist demagogues.

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