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Debate Rages Over State History Textbooks

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Military cadets watching a rollerskater in St. Petersburg on Wednesday prior to a Victory Day parade rehearsal. **Dmitry Lovetsky**

This is part of an occasional series.

As part of his effort to promote patriotism among younger generations of Russians, President Vladimir Putin has proposed creating a single set of history textbooks for schoolchildren, arguing that there should be more consistency in what students are taught and that textbooks should be free of internal contradictions and ambiguities.

Speaking at a meeting of the Kremlin council on interethnic relations in February, Putin said textbooks must be "designed for different ages but built around a single concept, with the logical continuity of Russian history, the relationship between the different stages

in history, and respect for all the pages of our past." He called for specific proposals to be prepared by November.

Advocates of the new textbooks say discord in the historical narrative has brought about a lack of patriotism in the country, while opponents say they fear that failures of state policies will be omitted to promote a more positive image of the country, with the emphasis exclusively on victories and achievements.

The president's initiative is supported by many, but it faces strong resistance from some school teachers.

Tatyana Kartashova, a history teacher at High School 272 in northern Moscow, said that while she does not hold "democratic views," she cannot help but acknowledge that the project bears some similarities to Soviet methods.

"It was predictable that authoritarian power would try to establish a single ideology," she said.

"Of course, it will be easier for children and teachers because a limited amount of information is always easier than when there are different approaches. All philosophy will be deleted from history," Kartashova said.

Ruling party United Russia has said it is impossible to educate children without a single set of history textbooks. Irina Yarovaya, a United Russia deputy and the coordinator of the party's patriotic platform, has said United Russia has specific proposals for the books, but she hasn't elaborated on what those proposals entail.

"History is a subject about state policies, and part of such policies is to create this textbook that is aimed at normalizing the patriotic education process," Alexander Degtyaryov said in March. Degtyarov is head of the State Duma's Education Committee and a United Russia party member.

'Canonical History'

The unified textbooks are set be written over the course of two years by Russian historians — professors at Moscow State University, St. Petersburg State University and Russian State University for the Humanities — who are supposed to find a consensus on how to present the more controversial events of Russian history.

The project will entail creating not one textbook for all ages but a series of books for each grade, as well as different textbooks for ordinary schools and those specializing in the humanities.

The first step of the initiative will involve a review of the current textbooks, a job to be done by a working group composed of experts from the Academy of Sciences, the Historical Society and the Military History Society. At the moment, a presidential decree to create the group is anticipated. No information has been made available on how much the textbook will cost to develop.

At an All-Russia People's Front conference in March, Putin said he was closely following

the public discussion surrounding the initiative.

"I absolutely agree that there should be a 'canonical version of our history' for the sake of national unity, and it should be reflected in a unified textbook, but that doesn't mean that a teacher shouldn't present the students with different points of view," Putin said at the conference.

It is not clear whether Putin will play a role in the creation of the textbooks. The initiative has provoked a great deal of discussion on the Internet, with many comparisons being made to Soviet history textbooks, the writing of which was personally controlled by Soviet leader Josef Stalin during his time in power.

The Stalin-era textbook was focused on the idea of continuity and succession. Alexander Nevsky, Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great were presented as patriots building a strong nation and battling foreign invaders, with Stalin depicted as their successor in these endeavors.

Textbooks of the later Soviet period were of a similar nature to the one used under Stalin. The main focus was given to the history of the Communist Party, and generally one perspective was provided on each issue.

"There will be fewer and fewer people who can think, and any crisis for them will be a tragedy like the '90s was for the Soviet people, because they will think only the way they were taught," said Kartashova, the history teacher.

Gaining Momentum

This is not the first time that discussions about the creation of a universal history textbook have arisen, but it is the first time the idea has gained significant momentum.

In 2007, Putin said the Education and Science Ministry should tighten control over educational materials because some textbooks distorted facts.

Two years later, then-President Dmitry Medvedev approved the creation of a presidential commission to deal with cases when the falsification of historical facts harmed Russia's national interests.

The issue of Russian history took on special importance after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., when former Soviet republics, particularly the Baltic states, and former Soviet allies in Eastern Europe said Russians had occupied their countries during Soviet rule and during the reign of the Russian Empire.

"Textbooks of former Soviet republics still show Russia as a colonizer, imperialist and invader, but we want to teach our children without aggression and bias," said Yury Petrov, head of the Russian History Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Vladimir Yakunin, head of Russian Railways and of the Governance and Problem Analysis Center at the Russian Academy of Sciences, said a single set of state textbooks would help to preserve the state system.

"If we don't create our own textbook, our children will study books written with [George] Soros' money that contain only two paragraphs about the role of the U.S.S.R. in World War II and two pages about the contribution of the Western coalition," he said at a meeting of the Russian Historical Society in February.

Yakunin and a group of scientists at the Governance and Problem Analysis Center have already written a book for history teachers on how to teach their subject.

Too Much Variety?

Supporters of the single set of textbooks say the existence of too many textbooks with varying narratives complicates the teaching process. The most visible disparity can be seen in federal and regional textbooks, which often present the facts differently.

Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, who supports the idea, said there were currently some 110 history textbooks for schoolchildren.

Education and Science Minister Dmitry Livanov has also supported Putin's idea and said there was no need for so many different history textbooks. But he said teachers must have a choice and emphasized that every textbook was currently subject to review by both the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Russian Academy of Education.

It is believed that the last 20 years of Russian history constitute one of the most difficult periods to teach, given the fierce and still fresh debates in society over the causes and impact of such events as the privatization of state property, which helped some Russians gain huge riches overnight.

Sergei Naryshkin, State Duma speaker and head of the Russian Historical Society, said information about the events of the last two decades should be written with the help of those who were directly involved, meaning politicians and public figures.

"We need to take the events of the last 20 years seriously, as there are lots of omissions and contradictory information, although those who made this history are among us. They know what happened, so the textbook's authors should cooperate with them," he said at a Russian Historical Society meeting in April.

Kartashova said it was a shame that the government apparently did not want to listen to the opinion of school history teachers, most of whom, according to her, are not in favor of the idea of a single textbook.

"As the great Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevsky put it, a chronicler sees history from the window of the princely palace, so our children will now see history from the window of the princely palace, too," she said.

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