

Writers Snub Putin Prior to Literary Conference

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The First Russian Literary Meeting, a meeting of Russian writers and literati organized by the descendants of literary greats like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, would seem to be an uncontroversial opportunity for Russia to show off its significant literary heritage.

However, the announcement on Wednesday that President Vladimir Putin would attend the meeting on Nov. 21 has resulted in criticism and reluctance from many writers, with novelist Boris Akunin and writer Dmitry Bykov among those who declined to attend.

"I will gladly talk with Putin on the theme of literature and reading, as soon as all of the 'political' prisoners have been released," Akunin wrote on Facebook on Wednesday, saying that as long as there were such political prisoners, he could "not even remain in the same room" as Putin.

As examples of political prisoners, Akunin cited Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former owner

of Yukos; Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina of Pussy Riot; and those arrested as part of the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protests.

Eduard Limonov, a writer and former leader of the now-banned National Bolshevik Party, also criticized Putin's presence, saying that he did not wish to use his own name "to enhance the credibility and weight of higher public officials," Gazeta.ru reported.

Bykov explained his absence by saying he had a previously planned meeting in St. Petersburg, yet also expressed skepticism about the motives behind the meeting.

The Russian Literary Meeting was announced earlier this year as "a far-reaching gathering of the defenders of literacy," Izvestia reported. While the meeting was organized through the Culture Ministry, the descendants of famous Russian authors were given prominent places among the organizers.

"All told, seven people took part [in the organization]. Their last names were Pushkin, Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pasternak, Sholokhov, and Solzhenitsyn," said Vladimir Tolstoy, cultural adviser to the president. "It seemed to us, that from the names of our great ancestors we could raise pressing issues connected with literature."

Despite the illustrious pedigree of the organizers, the concept of the government-sponsored literary gathering raised some questions from the beginning. Many prominent Russian writers are also prominent critics of the regime, though efforts were made to include even dissidents such as Dmitry Bykov and Boris Akunin, both of whom have previously clashed with Putin's administration.

Additionally, no agenda for the meeting was announced, leaving it unclear what the writers would actually discuss or if the whole event was simply a photo op. Bykov commented on this suspicion, saying: "If this is an initiative that aims to support those kinds of literature that may die in the marketplace, that is commendable. If what we see is just an attempt to put literature in the service of the state, it is simply futile," Gazeta.ru reported.

The Kremlin was quick to respond to Akunin, by far the most vocal of those who declined to attend. Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov expressed his regret that Akunin would not attend, yet denied that there were any political prisoners and denounced Akunin's actions as "social nihilism."

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