

A Week of Controversy in Russian Culture

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The  Moscow Times

RIA Novosti provides a video report of Vladimir Putin's meeting with writers on Thursday.

It's been a rocky week in the sphere of Russian culture.

A couple of big names, such as President Vladimir Putin and St. Petersburg director Lev Dodin, can attest to that.

Putin met with a group of writers, the Russian Literary Assembly, on Thursday, getting both less and more than he may have expected. Several writers boycotted the meeting. Some of them gave him an earful anyway.

"While there are political prisoners in this country, I cannot be near the ruler, even if it is just to be in the same building," detective writer-turned-historian Boris Akunin wrote in a [blog](#) posted on the website of radio station Echo Moskv. "This would mean that I consider it possible to listen to speeches about the beautiful emanating from a person who holds people

in prison for their political beliefs. No, I do not consider that possible. I will gladly talk to Putin on themes of literature and reading after he releases all the political prisoners. We hear that an amnesty is promised soon. Let's see if that is extended to the May 6 prisoners. Let's see if a third case is not brought against Khodorkovsky. Let's see if Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina are released."

According to [accounts](#) in The Moscow Times and on the [website](#) of Radio Liberty other writers who did not accept invitations to the meeting at the Friendship of Peoples University were Dmitry Bykov, Eduard Limonov and Yury Buida. Some 500 writers, critics, scholars, librarians and students did attend, however. The event was organized by a group of descendants of great Russian writers.

Some of those who did show up asked pointed questions. Writer Sergei Shargunov brought up the case of political prisoners, to which Putin replied, "Russia does not put people in prison for their political beliefs, although you can't break the law."

In his prepared remarks, [quoted](#) by the Moskovsky Komsomolets daily, Putin proposed to make 2015 the Year of Literature and talked about the loss of interest in reading in Russia.

"We can no longer call ourselves the nation of the most readers in the world," Putin said. "Russians devote only 9 minutes a day to reading and this statistic is on a downward trend. Many young people are no longer able to express their thoughts articulately."

Putin's plan to combat this trend is to carry out a reform of school-level literature. However, many of the reforms Putin has attempted to carry out in the spheres of science and education over the last few years have brought about huge opposition. Increasingly, professors are being laid off, and institutes of higher learning are being closed or merged with one another.

One can only wonder what Putin's notion of a reform of school-level literature means. A recent op-ed [piece](#) in The Moscow Times pointed out that a new official history textbook paints the deeds of Ivan the Terrible and Joseph Stalin in quite positive light (the former was a "reformer," the latter a "modernizer"), dismisses the roles of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, and presents Putin as something of a knight in shining armor who returned Russia to its glory days.

In a [report](#) published by RIA Novosti, Stavropol region presidential envoy Alexander Khloponin this week moved to ban some books by Vladimir Nabokov and Sergei Yesenin from local school curricula. Khloponin insists it is not a complete ban of these writers, but that only their "adult" works will be removed from libraries.

Are these the kinds of reform Putin has in mind?

The fallout from the meeting has been mostly unpleasant for Putin. Yelizaveta Alexandrova-Zorina, [writing](#) in Moskovsky Komsomolets, declared, "I understand why Putin wanted this event. For him writers, like Siberian cranes and amphorae, are decoration in a theater of one actor. Comrade Putin is now a great scholar who has plumbed the depths of linguistics."

Alexandrova-Zorina, like many, ridiculed comments made by Dmitry Dostoevsky, a great-grandson of the 19th-century novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. The younger Dostoevsky declared

to Putin that prison was an excellent teacher for his forbear.

"Inspired by the words of Dostoevsky-the-younger, why don't we transfer the Literary Institute to Siberia? And maybe it would be good to grant membership in the Writers Union only after a prison term," scoffed Alexandrova-Zorina.

Meanwhile, renowned director Lev Dodin has found himself at the center of an as-yet small controversy. A group calling itself the Cossacks of St. Petersburg chose to protest a theater festival that Dodin was hosting at his Maly Drama Theater by scribbling the word "scum" (mráz) near the theater's entrance. According to a public letter from the group, they also left a pig's head at the door, although that object seems to have disappeared before anyone saw it.

The Cossacks of St. Petersburg may have been offended by comments made by German director Thomas Ostermaier following a performance of "Death in Venice" for the Schaubühne of Berlin. According to the Fontanka.ru [website](#), Ostermaier took to the stage during the curtain calls and spoke to the public in English.

"I must say that we are very happy that we came to St. Petersburg," the German director reportedly said in English (provided here in a back translation from Russian). "But before we came we spent a long time discussing the possibility of our visit to your city in regards to a new law, which you, of course, know. We were afraid to come."

Ostermaier's reference is to a law that was passed in June and bans the "propaganda of gay lifestyle" among children.

The Cossacks of St. Petersburg have thrust themselves into the news several times in the recent past. In March they protested a provocative exhibit called "Icons" by the outspoken liberal gallery owner Marat Guelman. A year ago they caused the cancellation of a one-actor performance of Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita" at a St. Petersburg museum. According to Fontanka.ru, at that time "a bottle with insults aimed at 'pedophiles' flew into a window at the Nabokov Museum."

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