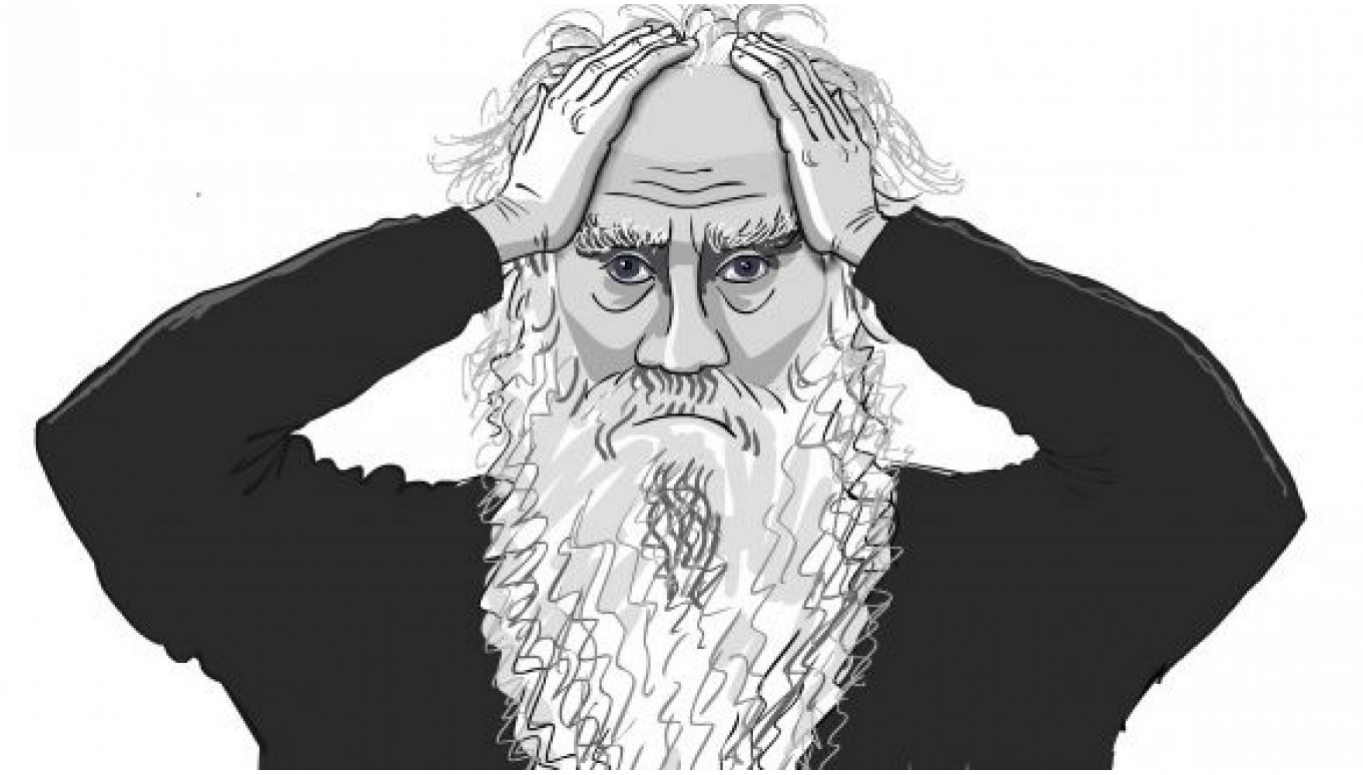
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Uses Writers to Send Message to Opposition

By Victor Davidoff

November 24, 2013



If you got an invitation from Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Alexander Pushkin to attend a literary get-together where President Vladimir Putin was scheduled to speak, you would probably think it was a prank or some avant-garde performance art. But the event that took place on Nov. 21 at the People's Friendship University in Moscow was real.

More than 500 writers, poets, editors and publishers attended. The guests of honor were distantly related descendants of Russia's greatest writers, even if most of them had never written a line in their lives, like the great-great-grandson of Dostoevsky, who is a retired tram driver. But Putin was there and spoke. The whole event was called the Russian Literary Assembly.

Putin spoke last
week at a
congress

of Russian writers. Was this a revival of a Soviet tradition, or was it an attempt to start a dialog between the authorities and the intelligentsia?

Russian tsars were not in the habit of holding public forums for writers. They preferred less formalized dealings. Huge congresses of writers were the invention of Josef Stalin in the 1930s, and they continued until Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. After several decades without them, the biggest question was what the Kremlin organizers hoped to achieve with this latest event? Was this a revival of a Soviet tradition, or was it an attempt to start a dialog between the authorities and the intelligentsia?

As the discussion at the assembly showed, the two sides had very different opinions. Putin dedicated the greater part of his speech to announcing a rather vague "National Program to Support Reading" and stressing the need to improve the teaching of literature in schools. But during the discussion, Putin had to listen to some awkward questions.

The young writer Sergei Shargunov asked him about people who had been imprisoned in the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protest — in particular, about a student who has been kept in pretrial detention for 18 months for allegedly throwing a lemon.

The widow of writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn spoke about the renewed use of slave labor in the country's prison camps. Putin also had to answer questions about the Greenpeace activists who are facing criminal hooliganism charges that carry prison terms of up to seven years.

Unfortunately, all of Putin's replies boiled down to the banal phrases such as "the law must not be broken" and the promise that state agencies would also follow the law. "We will never return to that terrible time in the past when Pasternak was exiled," Putin promised, apparently confusing Solzhenitsyn with writer Boris Pasternak, who was never exiled anywhere.

Several of the writers invited to the assembly seemed to sense ahead of time that the whole event would turn into a farce. One of the founders of the Russian PEN Center, Yevgeny Popov, called it a "puppet theater" and refused to take part. The popular writer of detective stories, Boris Akunin, also declined the invitation to attend. As he wrote in his blog on LiveJournal: "As long as there are political prisoners, I cannot get near the leader or even be in the same room with him. That would mean that I considered it acceptable to listen to speeches about the finer things in life from a man who is keeping people in prison for their political convictions. I would enjoy talking to Putin about literature after all the political prisoners are released. Until then, it is not possible."

Apparently Akunin's opinion deeply offended the Kremlin. Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, felt compelled to respond, accusing Akunin of "civic nihilism."

"I don't know what he means by 'political prisoners,'" Peskov said in an interview to the web portal Slon.ru. "Does he mean the people arrested in the Bolotnoye case? They're not political prisoners. They are being tried for hooliganism and taking violent actions against law enforcement officers. It has nothing whatsoever to do with politics."

Peskov's words show why the intelligentsia and authorities in Russia can't communicate. They don't speak the same language. The view in the Kremlin is that people who have been imprisoned for taking part in political demonstrations are not political prisoners. This also extends to Pussy Riot, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and dozens of other individuals who have been repressed or are under investigation for expressing their views on the Internet or in public performances and exhibits. From this point of view, the country lives by the rule of law and cannot possibly return to the time when, in Putin's words, "Pasternak was exiled."

In the view of the intelligentsia, Russia has turned into a kind of U.S.S.R.-lite because of four main factors: the absence of freedom of the press and assembly; the forced imposition of Orthodox Christianity as a de facto state religion; the state-sponsored violations of the rights of minorities, whether they be homosexuals or migrant workers; and the widespread falsification of elections. Most important, the continuation of these tendencies will lead to a greater political schism in society, as well as more radicalized protests and violence on both sides.

This could be avoided by opening a dialog between the authorities and leaders of the liberal opposition.

Unfortunately, the two groups seem to live in separate countries and inhabited by different nations. They can only communicate through gestures whose meaning often remains obscure, like the meaning of the Literary Assembly so widely advertised on the state mass media.

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