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The Return of State Ideology

By Victor Davidoff

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Viktor Shenderovich is well known as a writer, playwright and acerbic but witty critic of the current political regime. Shenderovich is also a big sports fan. In an article published on Ej.ru on Feb. 10, he wrote about how hard it was for him to combine joy over the victories of Russian athletes in the Olympic Games with disgust over the propaganda show created by the official Russian mass media, especially state television. Shenderovich wrote that when the Olympic Games are held in countries with authoritarian regimes, they contribute to a better image of the regime and therefore ultimately do a disservice to the people in those countries.

A reference to the 1936 Olympics held in Nazi Germany immediately brought down a firestorm of official indignation. The very next day in a speech to the State Duma, Vladimir Vasilyev, a high-ranking United Russia deputy, called Shenderovich's text "fascist" and demanded an apology. Another deputy, former speed skater Svetlana Zhurova, declared that Shenderovich's article "fit right in with the campaign against the Olympics being run throughout the Western mass media."

It might seem strange that an article by an independent writer published on the Internet

became the subject of a discussion in the Duma. But even stranger was the reaction of the state television channels that Shenderovich criticized. The channel Rossia-24 began its evening news broadcast with a bizarre, seven-minute piece mostly consisting of secretly shot footage of a naked Shenderovich in an intimate encounter.

Meanwhile, the Russian PEN center defended Shenderovich and warned the authorities that "silencing freedom of speech might release the darkest instincts in the public." This dire prediction seemed to immediately come true. On the next day, Shenderovich began to get anonymous threatening text messages calling him a "kike."

The smear campaign against Shenderovich might have been written off as an isolated episode if it were not for a whole series of official pronouncements against writers in recent weeks. On Jan. 31 in an interview to Ekho Moskvy radio, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky called a book about the World War II siege of Leningrad by one of the country's oldest and most respected writers, Daniil Granin, a "pack of lies." The minister was outraged by evidence that the city's party elite did not starve during the siege but, on the contrary, ate delicacies that were inaccessible to average Soviet citizens, even during peace time.

Writer and anthropologist Vera Timenchik was questioned by the Investigative Committee about her book, "Family Here and Abroad." The book stated that "homosexuality is rather widespread across cultures" and that there are single-sex families in other countries. These indisputable facts are being analyzed to see if they are "homosexual propaganda."

Interestingly, none of these "outrageous" texts are new. Timenchik's book was published five years ago, and Granin's descriptions have been known to historians for years. The official reaction is part of a new trend. The Kremlin wants to replace open discussion of the country's current problems and dark aspects of its history with its own "true" version that cannot be challenged.

These attempts to bring back the Soviet standard of a single state ideology are worrying more than writers. They prompted film director Alexander Sokurov to write a letter to President Vladimir Putin protesting the official campaign to institute groupthink. "Once again, my homeland is in the trenches. Once again there are curses, frontline skirmishes and vicious speeches," he wrote. "Once again energy is being wasted on a battle instead of being spent on creativity. And once again, that battle is against an internal enemy. Watching political programs on the nationwide television channels fills viewers with despair. Officials call for people to be burned, discriminated against, exiled and killed. Being different is officially deemed a crime."

As Sokurov correctly notes, this ideological gap is reflected in a generation gap. People born and raised in the post-Soviet period reject the ideals of empire, the Kremlin's "traditional values" and officially irrefutable "truths." Attempts to foist these notions on them will simply start a fight with the most valuable asset of the nation: its young people.

It is not clear if Putin will understand Sokurov's concern. But judging by the events in Ukraine, it is clear what happens when the front lines are inside the country.

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