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# Creative Unions Seen to Back Kremlin Views

By Oleg Sukhov

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Schoolchildren walking under a portrait of Vladimir Putin as they participate in a Cossack club in Mikhailovsk.

Last week, the State Duma gave its final approval to a bill introducing criminal penalties for "spreading lies" about the Soviet Union's role in World War II.

The legislation, under which offenders face up to five years in prison, has prompted renewed allegations that the Kremlin is imposing a state ideology and rooting out alternative opinions.

Critics claim the law is only the most overt strategy of this campaign, and that beyond the Duma, professional associations such as the Russian Historical Society and the filmmakers and writers unions are being hijacked as tools in the same process.

## A Time-Honored Tradition

In Soviet times, membership in professional unions or organizations was effectively mandatory for those who wanted their books to be published or their films to be produced. The government set ideological guidelines for members, and the unions ensured members toed the party line or faced certain professional death.

Their modern successor organizations have rejected such comparisons, but an increasing number of them are chaired by high-ranking politicians and allies of President Vladimir Putin.

One of the most prominent is the Russian Historical Society, which was set up in 1866 under the tsar's aegis and abolished after the October Revolution of 1917. Revived in 2004, the society is now chaired by Sergei Naryshkin, speaker of the State Duma and a close ally of Putin.

The Russian Geographical Society's board of trustees is chaired by none other than Putin himself, while its president is Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.

Another longtime vocal Putin supporter, veteran actor and director Nikita Mikhalkov, has headed the Russian Union of Filmmakers since 1997.

## Educating the Masses

While there is nothing illegal about the appointment of public officials to head such associations, the organizations have been accused of promoting an artificial agenda set by the authorities.

Naryshkin said in 2012 that one of the Russian Historical Society's goals was to fight "falsifications of history," echoing statements made by lawmakers and other officials in recent years against interpretations of Soviet history that they say are factual distortions.

The Historical Society has been behind the efforts to create a unified history textbook, which the government has said would promote patriotism and prevent confusion. Critics say the state is simply destroying academic freedom by trying to entrench a single state-approved version of history that suits the current regime and often whitewashes over the darker episodes.

Some historians are open about their views on the ideological purposes for which history can be harnessed.

"Official history is a tool for educating citizens," historian Boris Yulin said at a joint meeting this month of the Russian Historical Society and United Russia's liberal platform, a group of economic and social liberals within the ruling party.

Sergei Shchebetkov, a deputy mayor of Smolensk and another member of the "liberal platform," shared this view.

"The state should give assignments to historians," he told The Moscow Times at the meeting. "History should reflect the state's vision for society."

Shchebetkov said that the government's ideology should be based on the idea of promoting "strong, confident people," and that he agreed with Stalin's efforts to make the Soviet Union a superpower.

### Soviet Celebration

The historical establishment has been accused of trying to rehabilitate the Soviet period after it became a target of harsh criticism from the 1980s to 1990s.

The Russian government has increasingly used celebrations of the Soviet Union's victory in World War II to promote patriotism. Opposition figures have argued that the celebrations are beginning to resemble a religious cult, with anyone who disagrees with the official version of history branded a heretic.

At the Historical Society meeting, most participants stopped short of idealizing the Soviet period, but some criticized the view of the Soviet Union as a totalitarian dictatorship, and rejected the notion that the revolution was ultimately a dead end that led Russia away from the common path of world history.

"The great October Revolution was an attempt to leave behind the rest of mankind. Who else has ever tried to make a leap to heaven like that?" political analyst and television anchor Vitaly Tretyakov said. "You would have to be an idiot to call a way that led to the stars a dead end."

The apologetic view of the Soviet period spurred a backlash from another participant of the meeting, who questioned whether those who lost loved ones to the Ukrainian famine in the 1930s should be grateful for Stalin's industrialization and collectivization policies.

The current ideology, however, differs significantly from that of Soviet textbooks, according to some observers.

"The Soviet model was that we are the best and most progressive and the hope of mankind, and anyone who tries to thwart us is bad," historian Mark Solonin said by phone.

The current ideology is more pragmatic and does not claim that Russia is the best, Solonin said. It is based on the principle "might makes right," and accordingly, the only fact that makes Stalin right is that he won World War II, while Hitler lost it, he added.

### Patriotism in Art

Another group that has been accused of promoting a Kremlin-backed ideology and reviving Soviet ideas is the Union of Writers of Russia, which emerged as a rival organization to the Union of Russian Writers in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and mostly comprises writers with conservative and pro-Soviet views.

Last month, members of the union threw their support behind the government by signing a letter in support of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

But Valery Ganichev, chairman of the union, said by phone that, unlike in the Soviet period, the union was independent from the government. The government does provide some

funding, including grants, to members of the union, he said.

Ganichev denied that the Kremlin was imposing a specific ideology on the union. "There is no censorship," he said. "Everyone writes what they deem necessary."

Similar accusations have been made against the Russian filmmaking industry.
The government has urged the production of "patriotic" movies intended to glorify certain episodes of Russian history. Such films — like "Alexander. Battle of the Neva," a 2008 film about a 13th-century war between the principality of Novgorod and Sweden, or "Stalingrad," a film released last year about the  of Stalingrad — have been accused of being biased in favor of the Soviet Union or the idea of a strong, militarily powerful state in general.

The industry is heavily dependent on government funds, with about half of financing for all domestic films coming from the state. In January the Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky — a historian by education who has himself produced a series of patriotic books aimed at debunking "Myths About Russia" — proposed introducing quotas limiting the number of foreign films being shown in Russia in an effort to promote the distribution of homegrown movies.

**Dissenters**

Gradually, a backlash against the generally Kremlin-loyal official professional organizations appears to be emerging. In February, a group of historians set up the Free Historical Society to escape what they described as ideological bias and government interference.

"For irresponsible politicians and businessmen, there are ample opportunities for manipulating people's consciousness by substituting arbitrary opinions for historical research based on sources," the group said in a manifesto published in March. "There are more and more incorrect and bigoted publications that give birth to and entrench historical and social views that contradict modern scientific knowledge."

A similar trend has been observed in other spheres. In 2010 more than 100 filmmakers left the Russian Union of Filmmakers, accusing Mikhalkov of totalitarianism and cozy relations with the Kremlin, and set up a parallel association, KinoSoyuz.

Whether such groups will prove any match for their better established rivals remains to be seen, but for now, they are fiercely defiant: Last month, 169 members of KinoSoyuz demonstrated their independent stance by signing a letter against Russia's invasion of Crimea and in support of the Ukrainian revolution.

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