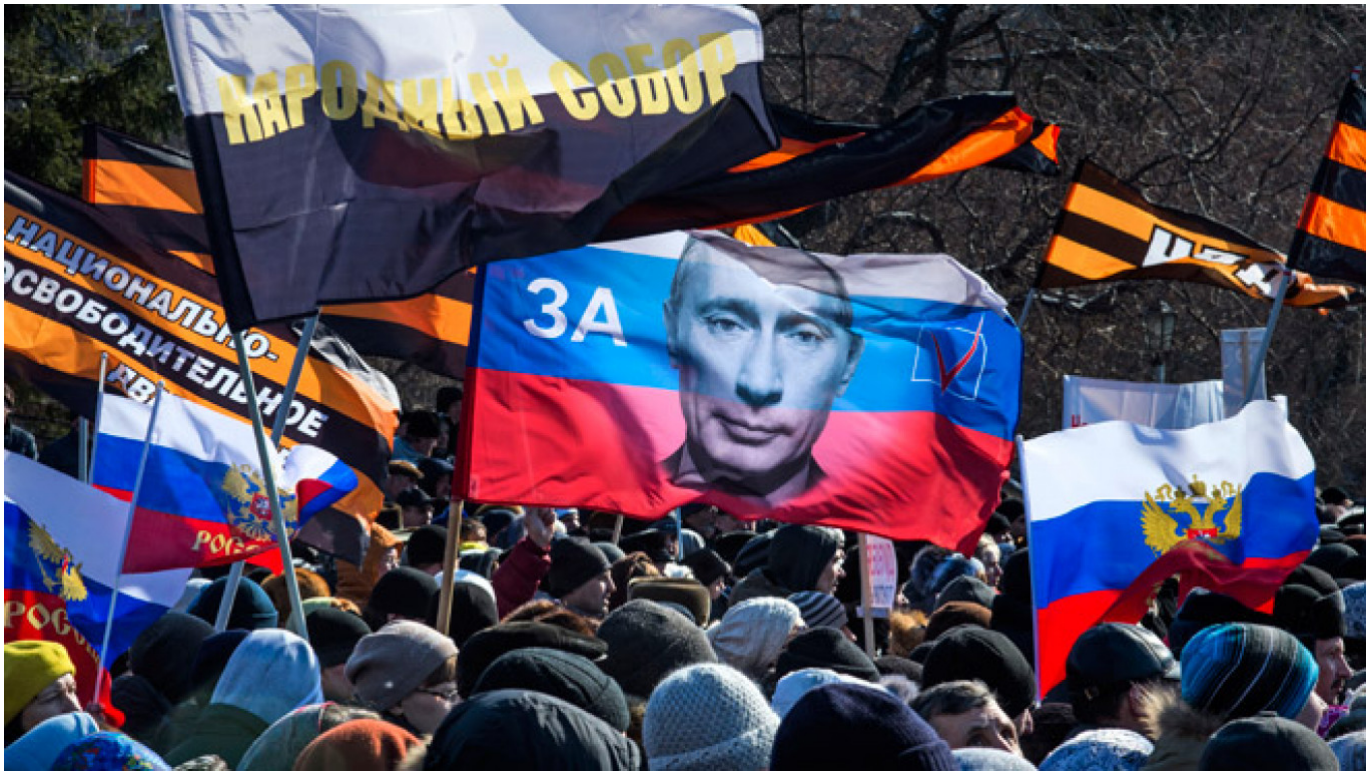
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Russian Cultural Elite Wants Medinsky Fired for Interfering With Wagner Opera Production

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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Activists protesting Kulyabin's scandal-mired rendition of Wagner's "Tannhauser" in Novosibirsk on Sunday.

Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky fired on Sunday the director of a Novosibirsk opera house that for weeks has been embroiled in scandal over a recent production of Richard Wagner's "Tannhauser" which provoked the ire of Russian Orthodox activists, Russian media reported.

The stated reason for Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater director Boris Mezdrich's dismissal was his failure to comply with instructions, the TASS news agency reported, citing the Culture Ministry's press service.

In an interview with Izvestia on Sunday, Mezdrich appeared free of regrets. "As they said in Soviet times, I am experiencing a sense of deep satisfaction. If we're being serious, I'm

feeling very happy. I'm happy that I have withstood the pressure — that I didn't pull the performance. Unfortunately, we did not survive to the end and win. But I am grateful to everyone who supported us: colleagues, spectators, the theater collective. I went my own way, it seems, with dignity," the newly ousted director said.

Happy though he may be with his choices, Mezdrich did not seem to believe the coast is clear going forward. "I expect troubles over 'Tannhauser' still lie ahead," he told Izvestia.

Mezdrich's dismissal is the most recent iteration of a series of dramas spawned by director Timofey Kulyabin's recent production of "Tannhauser," which religious activists have slammed as sacrilegious for its use of religious images seen by critics as offensive. Mezdrich's support for Kulyabin and his production has been unwavering, despite the difficulties.

Kulyabin's staging of the opera focuses on a film competition. The protagonist's entry to the contest centers on the years of Jesus Christ's life that were not described in the New Testament. The film — the plot of which is also portrayed on stage — suggests that Jesus lived in "Venus' grotto" between the ages of 12 and 30, where his strength to resist the temptations of love and pleasure were put to the test. In the end, Jesus destroys the grotto.

At the film's culmination, viewers see the opera's protagonist, Tannhauser, present a poster for his film entry, depicting a crucifix between a naked woman's open legs. That scene appears to have incited the bulk of the controversy surrounding the opera.

Following a complaint by the regional leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Tikhon, prosecutors launched a case against Kulyabin and Mezdrich, based on allegations that the production was offensive to the sentiments of religious believers.

On March 10, local prosecutors tossed out the case. The local Prosecutor General has appealed the court's decision. Novosibirsk's City Court will consider the case on appeal next week.

News of Mezdrich's dismissal broke as a large group of activists gathered in Novosibirsk to protest what they saw as attempts to "destroy [their] national culture," Interfax reported. News site Tayga.info estimated that the attendees numbered somewhere over 1,000.

Local liberal activists had been planning to stage their own rally in support of the production on April 5. It is unclear at this stage whether those plans will change in light of Mezdrich's ouster.

Amid the tumult, many prominent Russian theater directors, actors and public figures have issued letters in support of the production. The head of Moscow's iconic Bolshoi Theater has offered Kulyabin the opportunity to stage an opera in Russia's most famous theater.

Mezdrich, who has served as the theater's director since 2001, is set to be replaced by Vladimir Kekhman, who also heads St. Petersburg's Mikhailovsky Theater. Kekhman has vocally disparaged Kuylabin's production, referring to it as a "personal insult" in comments published on the Culture Ministry's website.

"[The production] is a demonstration of an internal ungodliness in the style and spirit of militant atheists," Kekhman said in the comments.

Kekhman, who is popularly known as the "banana king" in St. Petersburg due to his involvement in the fruit import business, has pumped a great deal of his personal wealth into the restoration of the Mikhailovsky Theater.

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