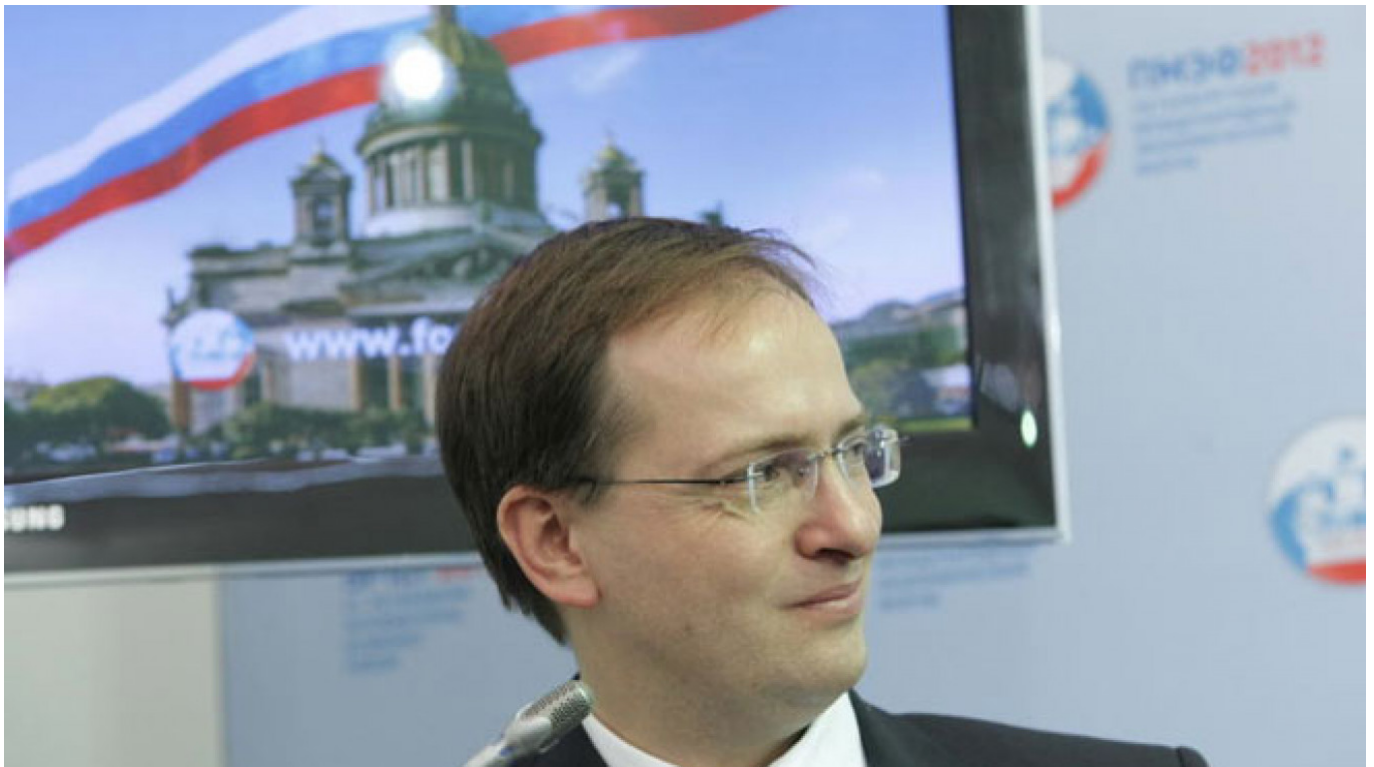


Soviet-Style Censorship Returns to Russian Arts

By [John Freedman](#)

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How many bulls does it take to trash a china shop?

We may have an answer by the time the dust settles in a seemingly self-refueling controversy that keeps swirling around an opera house in Novosibirsk.

Russian Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky said this week on the Vesti Nedeli television program that events "funded by the government should not create schisms in society, should not be the cause of mass unrest, speeches, court cases and demonstrations."

But Medinsky and large numbers of individuals in and out of government, have done much lately to split society, cause unrest and foment demonstrations.

Ground zero in this tumult is a production of Richard Wagner's "Tannhäuser" that a young director named Timofei Kulyabin mounted at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater in December.

In February, Metropolitan Tikhon of Novosibirsk and Berdsk moved against the production, convincing local prosecutors to try Kulyabin and the theater's managing director Boris Mezdrich for "desecration of objects of religious worship."

Kulyabin transported the opera's tale into contemporary times where the main character is a director shooting an erotic film titled "Venus' Grotto," about Jesus Christ's early, unknown years.

The trial opened amid international hue and cry on March 5, but one of the most powerful statements was made in the courtroom itself by Boris Falikov, a religious scholar from St. Petersburg. Supporting the defense, he noted it is "religious ignorance" for "a believer to equate an artistic construct with reality."

He said it is the job of religious leaders to help believers distinguish between invention and reality, not persecute the former for imitating the latter.

In a verdict that surprised many for its speed and independence, judge Yekaterina Sorokina threw the case out of court on March 10 for "lack of evidence that a crime was committed."

Few paid attention when the state declared it would appeal. Instead, there was much joy among those who believe in the intrinsic good of freedom of speech and artistic freedom. In fact, what seemed like the end of a minor nightmare morphed into a massive new push against the arts.

The last week of March and first days of April were packed with events and declarations, including the announcement on Thursday that the Novosibirsk prosecutor had withdrawn his appeal of the decision to exonerate Kulyabin and Mezdrich. But that only made it clearer: the case against "Tannhäuser" had been a pretext for further persecution.

News struck like lightning on Sunday that Medinsky had fired Mezdrich, one of Russia's most respected theater administrators.

Replacing Mezdrich was Vladimir Kekhman, a scandalous figure from St. Petersburg who, conveniently, had used the ministry's website earlier to smear Mezdrich and Kulyabin. Describing himself as "a believer who has been christened in the Orthodox faith, and as a Jew," Kekhman labeled "Tannhäuser" "a demonstration of internal godlessness in the style and spirit of a union of warring infidels."

Kekhman made a fortune importing bananas before going bankrupt in 2011. He was named managing director at the Mikhailovsky Theater of opera and ballet in 2007 in St. Petersburg, where one of his first major acts was to cast himself as Prince Lemon in a production of "Cipollino."

An awkward video of him rehearsing can be found on YouTube. In it he admits, "It's been my longtime dream. That's basically why I came to [this] theater. I very much want to sing and dance."

Kekhman received his diploma in theater management from the St. Petersburg State Theater Arts Academy in 2009 without attending classes or submitting course work. St. Petersburg critic and pedagogue Marina Dmitriyevskaya detailed that story in newspaper Novaya Gazeta

on Tuesday.

Kekhman is still a plaintiff in an embezzlement case brought by Sberbank in 2012. On the other hand, he has received three honorary orders from the Russian Orthodox Church, according to a biographical timeline compiled by news agency RIA Novosti.

The Church, or, at least, people clinging to its robes, had a busy, if confusing, week.

On Saturday the website of the Novosibirsk eparchy attacked those who would defend "Tannhäuser," including managing director Vladimir Urin of the Bolshoi Theater and artistic director Mark Zakharov of Moscow's Lenkom Theater. Both have invited Kulyabin to work on their stages.

"Unlike us," the diatribe addressed Urin and Zakharov, "you and your position lack a single point of support. You cannot invoke a higher authority."

Curiously, the Orthodoxy and the World website sought Wednesday to distance the church from the hoopla by denying it was involved in the "Tannhäuser" controversy: "The whole legal situation surrounding the opera 'Tannhäuser,' as well as personnel decisions in the system of the Culture Ministry of the Russian Federation, fall outside the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church."

But it was too little, too late and too implausible. On Wednesday, Russian Orthodox protesters, who in 2013 interrupted a performance of Konstantin Bogomolov's production of "An Ideal Husband" at the Moscow Art Theater, left a pig's head at the theater's doorstep, hung a sign proclaiming "Art up the a--" on the main entrance, and chanted "Russia without blasphemy!"

Scholars have jumped on the bandwagon. The Likhachyov Heritage Institute in St. Petersburg convened a conference at which speaker after speaker condemned some of Russia's top directors — Bogomolov, Rimas Tuminas, Dmitry Chernyakov, Vladimir Mirzoyev and Kulyabin — for staging productions of works by Alexander Pushkin that, purportedly, desecrate the spirit of the great national poet.

Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Executive Office Magomedislam Magomedov called on Monday for government oversight of theater productions before they are shown publicly.

His idea was supported Wednesday by the Public Chamber and other government offices. Andrei Kovalchuk, head of the chamber's culture committee, declared this would not be censorship, although he admitted this is how theater was censored in Soviet times.

None of this is random. An atmosphere of hostility and repression has reigned in cultural spheres ever since Medinsky became culture minister in 2012. He aggressively espouses "traditional Russian values," leaning on the church and ultraconservative groups for inspiration and support.

Medinsky has railed against "Gayropa," a common slur among Russian traditionalists who equate European tolerance of social diversity with moral decay; he is a champion of the notion that Russia has been maligned by historians, and he repeatedly has trotted out the old Slavophile notion of Russia as a nation destined to pursue a unique spiritual mission.

Early in the week the small CinemaUnion, a group existing independently of the Union of Cinematographers, called for Medinsky's resignation. A Change.org petition urging Medinsky to quit had gathered over 3,400 signatures by Thursday afternoon.

With such guardians of national treasures in charge, how much longer can the china shop of Russian culture last?

John Freedman is a theater critic for The Moscow Times.

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