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Russian Foreign Ministry Gets New, Outspoken Mouthpiece

By Daria Litvinova

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Maria Zakharova, a Foreign Ministry official generally credited with a dramatic vulgarization of the tone of its official releases, has been appointed its top spokesperson, the ministry said in a statement Monday.

"The Foreign Ministry is focusing on the radicalization of its rhetoric, which doesn't fit into diplomatic traditions, but is apparently appreciated by [the country's] political leadership," Mikhail Vinogradov, head of the Petersburg Politics think tank, told The Moscow Times on Monday in a phone interview.

Zakharova, 39, declined to comment to The Moscow Times on her contribution to the ministry's style, but told the media that she would continue to actively communicate with social media users in a manner they would understand.

"[We] couldn't reach out to social media users with our usual 'The ministry is concerned' and express thoughts in the constrained language used by diplomats. We realized that the audience expects something else from us," she was cited by RIA Novosti as saying Monday.

'Something Else'

Although for the past three months the Foreign Ministry's Facebook account has been filled with formal press releases and official statements that don't differ greatly from any other official governmental account, long-term Internet followers of the ministry remember many inflammatory and outspoken postings.

In September 2014, a photo of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and five of his predecessors holding shovels during the groundbreaking ceremony for the U.S. Diplomacy Center in Washington was published on the ministry's account with the caption "Let's hope that this is not the mobilization of veterans to dig Cold War trenches."

Zakharova herself often uses emotive language in her direct statements, calling the current Ukrainian government a "junta degrading to the level of a dump" and sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union a "revenge for the ultimate failure of the 'Foreign Policy of the European Union' project." She concluded it was "trite revenge — but desperate."

Even some of the formal press releases published on the official website of the ministry during her time as the deputy head of the department have included some surprising metaphors.

In one example that made national headlines, the statement called the European Union a "corporal's widow," referring to a character in a Nikolai Gogol play who smacks herself and then complains about it. The statement was arguing that sanctions against Russia had backfired by hurting the EU as well as Russia.

"I'd phrase it this way: it's [talking about] professional matters using lively language," Zakharova was cited as saying by the Gazeta.ru news website last year. "[Working with] different audiences requires different language. And it's not slang, not lingo, it's the language of the blogosphere," she said.

"It's a story about a person reaching out to [ordinary] people who are just like them — sitting in the garden, drinking coffee, taking selfies, getting outraged, being ironic," Zakharova told Gazeta.ru.

According to an unidentified diplomat quoted by Gazeta.ru, not everyone in the ministry is a fan of her style of communicating with the outer world via social networks. "Foreign policy is not a sphere to experiment with," he said. Some commenters on her Facebook page appear to side with him, accusing Zakharova of violating diplomatic etiquette.

Codename: Blogger

Zakharova may choose to ignore diplomatic etiquette, but she is certainly not ignorant of it, judging by her background.

She was born into a diplomatic family, the TASS news agency reported Monday. Zakharova

spent her childhood in China and in 1998 graduated from the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) as a specialist in international journalism.

Zakharova, who also has a history degree, worked in the Russian Foreign Ministry from 1998 till 2005, when she was appointed press secretary to the Russian ambassador for the UN in New York. She returned to the ministry in 2008 and has been working in the information and press department ever since.

The Russian media has dubbed her the "Foreign Ministry's blogger," a label she has not rejected. According to Zakharova, the ministry's Facebook page has become a unique phenomenon.

"We observed our foreign colleagues' experience, and it didn't inspire us. Their pages were either too formal or too personal," she said last year in an interview with the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper.

"The phenomenon of the ministry's Facebook page is studied all over the world, it has entered the ratings of international agencies that study digital diplomacy," Zakharova added.

Gazeta.ru has called her "our [Russian] answer to Psaki," referring to U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki, known in Russia for her often blunt statements about the country and for making geographical mistakes.

But Vinogradov of the Petersburg Politics think tank doesn't believe this comparison does her justice.

"Psaki [and her image in Russia] is mostly a product of Russian propaganda," he said.

He said with Zakharova as spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry, further radicalization of its rhetoric is expectable but not very likely, because it's radical enough already.

An unorthodox communication style has not prevented her boss Lavrov from maintaining professional relations with foreign diplomats, despite his admission to swearing at his then-British counterpart David Miliband in 2008.

Miliband "was subjected to a tirade of four-letter abuse when he spoke to his Russian counterpart over the country's invasion of Georgia," the Telegraph newspaper reported at the time.

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