

Russian Propaganda Feeds on Kiev's Culture War

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The ban on books — which does not involve burning them — is the latest escalation in a so-called “cultural war” between Kiev and Moscow.

A series of Ukrainian bans on Russian cultural works and prominent artists, including a recent blacklist of 38 Russian books, has been seized on by state-owned Russian media and used to burnish already pervasive propaganda tropes of Ukraine as an openly fascist state.

“Eighty-two years ago Nazi Germany burned thousands of books, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, and it is said that fascism began with the burning of books,” one announcer on tabloid news channel LifeNews said at the beginning of a Wednesday piece on the book ban.

“We are daring to draw a parallel between radical Nazism and Ukrainian politics,” she added, as the tagline “Fascism or censorship?” flashed up at the bottom of the screen.

The ban on books — which does not involve burning them — is the latest escalation in a so-called “cultural war” between Kiev and Moscow, which has seen the harassment of prominent Russian artists who express pro-Ukraine sympathies, or who give performances inside Ukraine.

Ties between the two countries deteriorated rapidly last year after Ukraine's pro-Russia president was toppled in street demonstrations, and Moscow annexed the southern Ukrainian region of Crimea and began backing rebels in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine who took up arms against Kiev.

Forbidden Books

The list of prohibited books was published Sunday by the Ukrainian State Television and Radio Committee, which cited the need to counter Russia's “information war.”

Most of the authors on the list are Russian journalists, publicists or political scientists who strongly oppose the current Kiev government and support Moscow-backed separatists in the east of the country.

The banned books include “Kiev Kaput,” “Independent Ukraine: the Project's Implosion,” “War 2010: Ukrainian Front” and “Russia. Crimea. History” with the most well-known writers being nationalist political philosopher Alexander Dugin, hardline political activist Eduard Limonov, presidential adviser Sergei Glazyev and journalist Sergei Dorenko.

Many of the Russian authors — some of them relatively unknown — were shown on state-owned Russian television in the days following the ban.

“The Ukrainian authorities decided to respond, not by writing a symmetrical book, or, for example, through some sort of intellectual answer or philosophy, but simply by forbidding my books. To me this looks to be in the spirit of the neo-Nazi Kiev junta,” Dugin told the state-controlled NTV television channel Tuesday.

It was unclear how the ban would be enforced, or how violations of it would be punished.

'Worst Soviet Tradition'

Forbidding the books could actually boost the influence of the authors and their writings, according to Konstantin Bondarenko, head of the Ukrainian Politics Foundation, a think tank in Kiev.

“They are propaganda in the worst Soviet tradition,” said Bondarenko. “[But] I don't see the point in banning these books, not least because no normal person would be able to get to the end of them.”

The prohibition has also been criticized by global rights body Amnesty International, which urged Ukraine not to mimic the tactics of Russia's information war.

“The best antidote to malicious misinformation is truth, and such lists and bans violate freedom of expression and cast a shadow of doubt over the image of a country that proclaims to uphold democratic values,” Amnesty researcher Yulia Gorbunova said in a statement

Tuesday.

'No Blacklist'

While Ukraine has opted for formal bans, Russian officials have said they will not impose any blacklists on Ukrainian artists, or publications.

“We are normal people. We were never mixed up with [the square on which Ukrainian protests were focused] Maidan. We will never have any 'white' or 'black' lists,” Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky said Tuesday, according to state-owned newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta.

“We [Ukrainians and Russians] are, of course, one people — genetically. Everything else is the fantasy of politicians,” Medinsky added.

Russian artists with pro-Ukraine views, however, have experienced problems finding venues, seen disruptions during their concerts and been publicly criticized.

Rock singer Zemfira was vilified by Russian officials and media outlets after she tied a Ukrainian flag to her microphone during a concert in Tbilisi on July 3, while legendary rock musician Andrei Makarevich was attacked by Russian officials and had concerts canceled in Russia after he performed in Ukraine last year.

“The aim of the [Ukrainian] bans is to tear the cultural fabric binding Russia and Ukraine ... there is no point in the Russian authorities doing the same because it would work to the advantage of the Ukrainians,” said Pavel Salin, head of the political science center at Moscow’s Financial University.

Personae Non Gratae

Prominent Russian artists that have been barred from Ukraine in recent weeks include Russian rapper Timati and singer Stas Pyekha — both musicians had concerts canceled in the southern resort city of Odessa after local governor and former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili attacked them for their allegedly anti-Ukrainian views.

A full list — reported to include up to 500 names — of those forbidden from entering Ukraine has never been released by Kiev, but the country's Culture Ministry last week published a list of 14 blacklisted Russian artists, including French actor Gerard Depardieu who took Russia citizenship in 2013, pop crooners Iosif Kobzon, Grigory Leps and Oleg Gazmanov and actor Ivan Okhlobystin.

Many Russian artists, including those now banned from Ukraine, have publicly expressed support for President Vladimir Putin and the annexation of Crimea, even signing open letters backing the Kremlin.

Russian actor Mikhail Porechenkov caused an uproar last year when he was filmed firing a machine gun at Ukrainian army positions while on a trip to areas controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

The Ukrainian Culture Ministry said in a statement accompanying its blacklist last week that the Russian artists were a “threat to national security.”

Ukraine has also issued a “white list” of cultural figures that the authorities consider to be sympathetic to the current regime and has banned all Russian movies produced after Jan. 1 last year.

Prominent Russian art curator Marat Gelman spoke out in defense of Soviet rock great Boris Grebenshchikov, known as BG, last week after the singer prompted bitter criticism inside Russia for performing in Ukraine and posing for photographs with Odessa governor Saakashvili.

"BG is more important," he wrote. "In the 21st century the competition is for people, not for territory."

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