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Controversial Ex-General Appointed to Defend Russia's Human Rights

By Eva Hartog

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Tatyana Moskalkova spent over two decades in the ranks of the Interior Ministry and was the first woman ever awarded an engraved pistol for her service.

Until recently, Russia's battered human rights community would have been hard-pressed to describe Tatyana Moskalkova as one of their own. Now, they are coming to terms with the reality that the 60-year-old former police general — with backcombed, peroxide hair and bright-pink acrylic nails — is their official spokesperson.

By the time Moskalkova was confirmed human rights ombudswoman by parliament on April 22, the monikers "OmbudsCop" and "ombudsman in epaulets" had already caught on. But, for many critics, it's her controversial career as a lawmaker that is more worrying.

In 2012, Moskalkova proposed criminalizing "affronts to morality" following the stunt of punk group Pussy Riot in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral. And last year, she submitted a proposal to return the Interior Ministry's former name to Cheka, the security

apparatus infamous for mass summary executions during the Russian Civil War and the Red Terror. There was more to it than just a name: Moskalkova wanted the agency to have the required power to "establish order, preserve the country and bring calm and security."

For Sergei Kovalyov, a famous Soviet dissident who was Russia's first human rights ombudsman in 1993, the appointment of a representative of the siloviki — the security and military strongmen not known for pussyfooting around individual rights — is a story come full circle since President Vladimir Putin came to power.

"We now live in a country where an ex-KGB colonel is president and a former major general is our human rights defender," Kovalyov told The Moscow Times. "This is not a crisis, it's a catastrophe."

Woman With a Pistol

When it came, the overwhelming victory of Just Russia opposition party lawmaker Moskalkova in the State Duma election last week was hardly a surprise. After the United Russia ruling party, which holds 237 out of 450 State Duma seats, openly backed her candidacy ahead of the vote, her victory in the secret ballot was less a secret than a near-guarantee.

United Russia and the presidential administration could have proposed their own candidate, as the Kremlin did in the case of Moskalkova's predecessor Ella Pamfilova, who was appointed head of the Central Election Commission last month. But by keeping its distance, at least publicly, the authorities have given the new human rights representative a hue of independence.

The truth is that Moskalkova is very much an establishment figure. She spent more than 20 years in the ranks of the Interior Ministry, for which she was awarded the dubious honor of being the first Russian woman ever to have been awarded an engraved pistol for her services. In interviews, Moskalkova has said she never carries the gun on her person.

Her supporters point to a long-running interest in social issues. With a background in law and philosophy — one of her dissertations was fittingly titled "The Culture of Combating Evil in the Work of Law Enforcement" — Moskalkova served for years in a Soviet and Russian advisory pardons commission body that reviewed people's prison sentences.

That combination of experience with the authorities, social interest and her gender are now being used as arguments in her favor. As she told the Govorit Moskva radio station in an interview: "You can't refuse a woman, and you can't turn away a general."

Russia's small but tight circle of human rights activists, however, consider her past to be more of a burden than an advantage. "It's desirable not to have ties to those institutions that could infringe upon the very rights [you are meant to protect,]" says Valentin Gefter, director of the Human Rights Institute and one of the founders of the Memorial human rights group.

Her track record as a Duma deputy since 2007 is harder to swallow.

As well as her proposals to punish "affronts to morality" by up to a year in prison, she has

backed a law banning foreign adoptions of Russian children, and the so-called foreign agents law that has seen scores of NGOs, including the most prominent Russian NGO Memorial, labeled a foreign agent for receiving foreign funding.

Further blots on her reputation in the eyes of civil rights upholders are her support of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's controversial proposal to raze to the ground the homes of relatives of militant fighters. More recently, her backing of the creation of a National Guard that is widely seen as Putin's back-up army to be used in case of public unrest.

So while even Moskalkova's opponents praise her competence as a lawyer, they are not at all convinced she will use her talents to the benefit of individuals. "Her mode of thinking is always geared towards defending the rights of government, not people," says columnist Andrei Pertsev.

Putin's Ally

Since her appointment, Moskalkova has done little to assuage those fears. On her first day on the job, she denied the existence of political prisoners in Russia in an interview with the Dozhd television station.

Moskalkova has also vowed to use her role as ombudswoman to counter the West's alleged attempts to use human rights as a means to "blackmail, threaten and attempt to destabilize and pressure" Russia. "The human rights ombudsman has plenty of tools to counter that," sounded her ominous promise.

One of her priorities, she says, is to defend the rights of Russians abroad, echoing the Kremlin's own use of reported breaches of Russians' rights to justify interventions, such as in eastern Ukraine — in language closer to that of Putin than that of iconic dissident Andrei Sakharov.

Social Rights

Meanwhile, Moskalkova's speeches have focused on the need to protect Russians' socio-economic rights such as salary payments, pensions and medical care — an agenda that is likely to go down well with most Russians suffering the effects of a slowing economy.

Polls show Russians are traditionally most concerned about social services, and much less troubled over political rights such as freedom of speech. With Moskalkova confirming that hierarchy of priorities, it gives the Kremlin license to further encroach upon the activities of NGOs and civil rights activists in the country.

"The government can now point to Moskalkova and say: Here's our real human rights defender, who is working on the rights that you're most concerned with," says Pertsev. "And then there are 'evil people' who are playing into the West's hands, the 'foreign agents.'"

In such an atmosphere, one could imagine Putin showing more leniency toward politically charged cases, such as that against Pussy Riot, than the country's human rights ombudswoman.

Despite their concern, most human rights activists spoken to by The Moscow Times

recognized that Moskalkova's real influence on policy will be limited.

"Little will depend on just one person," says Gefter. "You would have to change the entire pipeline network, not just the tap, in order to effect real change."

Today, for many of Russia's human rights activists, that is a blessing in disguise.

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