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Putin's Patriotic Frenzy Is Turning on Him (Op-ed)

'We're sorry, Adolf,' was the Russian social networks' sarcastic reaction to a student's conciliatory WWII speech

By Leonid Bershidsky

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Nikolai Desyatnichenko (R) / Deutscher Bundestag

A Russian high school student expresses sympathy for a German soldier who died in a Soviet prisoner camp after World War II. A wave of condemnation rises on Russian social networks and spills over into parliament.

At first glance, nothing to be excited about: Russia is the troll capital of the world. But it also looks an awful lot like a sobering harbinger of what Russia may be like after President Vladimir Putin.

On Sunday, a high school student from the Siberian city of Novy Urengoy made a

conciliatory speech to Germany's parliament. His focus? The tragic loss of German life during Hitler's invasion of Russia, a subject he researched as part of a German-sponsored project.

"I was extremely upset," Nikolay Desyatnichenko said, "because I saw the graves of people who died innocently, and many of whom wanted to live peacefully and didn't want to fight." He ended his short speech by saying he hoped "the world would never see war again."

Not long after a Bavaria-based Russian posted the speech on Facebook with his outraged comments, thousands of posts ripped apart the high schooler, his school and his family.

Thousands of people recalled the atrocities their grandfathers had suffered at the hands of the Nazi invaders. Because Desyatnichenko is a Ukrainian name, the family was discussed as a traitorous cell. Bloggers filed complaints to the Prosecutor General's Office, accusing the boy of "exonerating Nazism," a crime in Russia. The story got big enough for Vladimir Yabarov, a legislator in the upper house of parliament, to ask the local government to review the curriculum at Desyatnichenko's school.

The backlash was fierce, but also unsurprising. The cult of Russia's World War II victory has been whipped up to a hysterical pitch by Putin, especially during his current presidential term. Russia's role in defeating Nazism has been easiest for Putin to lean on: It's sufficiently recent and interwoven with the family histories of most Russians.

It's also uncontroversial because of the nature of the enemy. Suggesting that German invaders deserved better than dying from harsh deprivation sounds absurd to Russians who know that Josef Stalin subjected many Soviets to the same treatment. Suggesting that German soldiers may not have wanted to fight is akin to blasphemy. "We're sorry, Adolf," was the Russian social networks' sarcastic reaction to Desyatnichenko's conciliatory speech.

What makes the story noteworthy is the backlash to the backlash — and how it played with the high schooler's critics.

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It wasn't just the hapless and ignored Russian liberals who defended Desyatnichenko, but also the mayor of Novy Urengoy, Nikolai Kostogriz. "The interpretation of the boy's sincere words by adults," he wrote, "can be considered a provocation not just against the school student but also against all Russian people."

Soon, the Kremlin itself spoke up in Desyatnichenko's defense. "It's absolutely incomprehensible, this highly emotional persecution," Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov told the state news agency TASS. "I consider it wrong to accuse him of any evil intent, Nazi propaganda and all the deadly sins."

The Kremlin's pushback did nothing to stem the outrage. Now, many posts on blogs and social media mention the role of Gazprom — the state-controlled Russian natural gas company that sponsors Nikolai's school and, along with its German partner Wintershall, organized the Berlin trip — and Rosneft, the state-owned oil giant for which the boy's father works as a security executive.

These are more than companies: They are pillars of the Putin regime, the main tools of its trade policy, the main conduits of Russia's economic influence on Europe and China. The wealth of Novy Urengoy residents, many of whom work for Gazprom and Rosneft, is the envy of the rest of Russia.

Some Russians responded angrily to Peskov himself. A typical tweet: "On our part, this isn't persecution but the people's opinion. It must be heard so that [Nikolai] and others like him find out what country they live in."

Putin and his team did their best to build up a patriotic frenzy after the 2014 Crimea annexation. They harnessed Russian nationalist resentments for a while by fueling rebellion in eastern Ukraine.

They used World War II imagery to back up their claims to a moral high ground in a growing conflict in the West. But this brand of patriotism is a double-edged sword. In reality, nothing binds Putin's kleptocratic, oil-fed regime to the thin-skinned Russian nationalist's worldview. No matter how hard Putin has tried to build a bridge to this audience, it's far shakier than the actual bridge that a Putin crony's company is building to Crimea.

As Putin approaches the constitutional limit of his presidential service, the people bashing Desyatnichenko are just waiting for a signal to smash the Putin-era elite and embark Russia on an even straighter collision course with the West. Expect Putin's potential heirs to make a play for their sympathies.

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