

Cultural Figures Demand Minister's Sacking Over Opera Scandal

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March 30, 2015



Leading cultural figures launched a petition Monday calling for the dismissal of Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, saying his position on a controversial opera production was an attack on freedom of creativity, while the Kremlin said it had the right to influence the content produced by cultural organizations financed by state money.

The exchange was part of the continuing fallout from the public scandal over a production of Richard Wagner's opera "Tannhäuser" at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater that was labelled as sacrilegious by some conservative Orthodox Church activists but highly praised by eminent art critics.

The Russian government took the side of the Orthodox activists by firing the theater's head — who had defended the production and refused to apologize for it — and issued a series of statements calling for tighter control over what appears on theater playbills.

"Of course the state, which through various subsidies and grants allocates state funds for the

making of films, theater productions and so on, has the right to expect appropriate productions that at the very least do not provoke such a strong reaction from the public," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was cited by Interfax as saying Monday.

Peskov added that his comment "should not be perceived as some kind of attempt to introduce censorship."

Earlier Monday, a deputy head of the presidential administration called for tighter control of what Russia's major theaters show on their stages.

"We should make sure that on such important, national stages as the Novosibirsk theater — a leading theater — there are productions that work to unite our people and country. [People] should stage works like this, not ones that divide society," Magomedislam Magomedov told journalists in Novosibirsk, Interfax reported.

Some of Magomedov's instructions appear to have been heeded already. The Novosibirsk Globus Theater revised part of its "Songs About the Motherland" production due to be performed on April 1 under pressure from Orthodox activists and the local culture department, the Komsomolskaya Pravda daily newspaper reported.

According to the paper, the part that was axed told the story of a squirrel who drowns while being baptized by a hedgehog. The theater issued a statement saying that the production had been changed "following recommendations from the Novosibirsk region's Culture Ministry."

Kinosoyuz, a public organization that unites Russia's leading filmmakers, issued a statement Monday calling for the sacking of state Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky over his decision to fire the director of the Novosibirsk theater.

"Standing up to defend freedom of artistic creativity from obscurantism, Kinosoyuz thinks the firing of Boris Mezdrich, director of the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater, is an example of egregious lawlessness," read a statement published on the organization's website.

"We demand Mezdrich's immediate restoration and the removal of Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, who has repeatedly violated Russia's Constitution by introducing censorship and oppressing those who disagree with his anti-cultural policies," said the statement, which was signed by 32 members of the organization, including its chairman.

Some of Russia's most prominent theater directors, including Lev Dodin, Valery Fokin, Oleg Tabakov and Mark Zakharov have spoken out in support of "Tannhäuser."

The Culture Ministry said in a statement that its decision to sack Mezdrich was due to his "unwillingness to take into account society's values and for his failure to respect citizens' opinion."

The statement also said that offending religious sentiment produces a confrontation within society that often leads to "human victims." It cited the opinions of prominent religious and cultural figures in support of the decision to sack the theater's head.

A case launched by prosecutors into whether or not the production was offensive to religious

believers — a crime in Russia since 2013 — was thrown out by a local court in March. The local prosecutor general has appealed the decision.

Some commentators have argued that it was not so much the performance itself that split society, but rather the scandal ignited by a regional leader of the Russian Orthodox Church's condemnation of it.

Metropolitan Tikhon said that the avant-garde production offended believers' feelings in February, almost two months after the production — directed by 30-year-old Timofei Kulyabin — premiered in two performances.

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