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Religious-Themed Art Show Sparks Protest

By Alexander Bratersky

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Edgy art, like this piece from an earlier show, is a Gelman hallmark.

A religiously themed art exhibition organized in Krasnodar by a prominent patron of the arts has sparked a flurry of protest from activists and even a fake bomb threat, despite being supported by a senior Russian Orthodox Church official.

The Icon Expo, put together by Marat Gelman, features works by several contemporary artists — some devoutly religious and others atheists — that aim to show modern icon painting that differs from the traditional style of Russian orthodoxy.

But despite the exhibition being welcomed by high-ranking Russian Orthodox Church official Vsevolod Chaplin, who said he saw "nothing unholy" in the works, local priests have rallied against the exhibition.

The uproar has been joined by hard-line religious activists, including Cossacks who verbally

attacked Gelman.

Someone even called in a bogus bomb threat, temporarily shutting down the exhibition hall, Gelman wrote on his LiveJounal page Wednesday.

Outside the hall, protesters have shouted "Hands off the Orthodox Church!" and "Gelman get away from Kuban!" referring to the name of the area of southern Russian where Krasnodar is located.

The attack on the exhibit and Gelman — a former political operative and Kremlin insider noted for controversial exhibits in the past — comes soon after he publicly voiced support for the members of the all-female punk band Pussy Riot, which has been engaged in a high-profile fight with the church.

Three members of the band were arrested in March after playing a protest song against Vladimir Putin's re-election inside Christ the Savior Cathedral. The band members have been held for months in pretrial detention while awaiting trial on hooliganism charges.

Several senior church officials said the protest amounted to desecration of a holy site and have demanded that the band members be severely punished.

"Many of the protesters were organized," Gelman wrote on his LiveJournal blog, saying some of the protesters told him that they were acting on the orders of the local administration.

Krasnodar region Governor Alexander Tkachyov, who is known for his conservative views, said last week that he warned Gelman not to "offend the believers" with his exhibition, but told Interfax that he welcomed "art pluralism."

Earlier last week, city authorities in Novosibirsk cut electricity to a former airport building that served as a hall for another modern art exhibit Gelman had staged, called "Rodina," or homeland.

He also received a letter from the hall's owners, annulling the rental contract and ordering the show out.

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