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Anti-Semitic, Anti-Gay but Not Anti-West

By Alexei Bayer

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Dictators prefer to keep their borders closed, and in Russia, the land of the original Iron Curtain, isolation and repression have always been inexorably linked. In Vladimir Sorokin's "Day of the Oprichnik," a dystopia of backward, oppressive Russia is inaugurated by a ritualistic burning of passports in Red Square as Russians pledge allegiance to their new tsar by agreeing to give up their right to travel abroad.

The official anti-Semitism of the Soviet era was part of the government's attempt to cut its citizens off from the outside world. Jews have always been international in outlook, thanks to the existence of a widely scattered Jewish diaspora.

Because of extensive emigration from the Russian Empire, many Soviet Jews also had relatives abroad. Stalin took advantage of their ability to connect to other Jews around the world in World War II, forming the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and sending its prominent members to the United States to raise money for the Soviet war effort. With the advent of the Cold War, Stalin began an anti-Semitic purge, accusing Jews of disloyalty and "cosmopolitanism." The members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested

and shot in August 1952.

In the 1970s, the Brezhnev government allowed some 200,000 Jews to emigrate as part of a detente with Washington, the first major breach of the Iron Curtain since World War II. Official anti-Semitism had flared up anew because Jews were suspected of disloyalty and a lack of Soviet patriotism. However, emigration proved damaging and was promptly ended.

Anti-Semitism, especially of the official variety, abated in the post-Soviet era, when borders were opened and censorship disappeared. Xenophobia was focused on other outsiders: newcomers from the Caucasus, Central Asian and Chinese migrants and African students. But anti-Jewish sentiment returned to pro-government publications — at least on the Internet — with the start of street protests in December, intensifying during the recent trial of the Pussy Riot punk band.

Significantly, there has also been a flurry of anti-gay legislation, such as laws penalizing "the propaganda of homosexuality." The modern gay culture is highly international and open, and the gay community in many ways resembles the Jewish community, being both integrated in the mainstream and maintaining a certain distance from it — enough to be accused of belonging to some "worldwide conspiracy."

Such xenophobic trends are worrisome, but they may not be as dangerous as they seem. Russia's borders remain wide open, and the ruling elites have no interest in depriving themselves of trips abroad, real estate holdings on the Riviera and imported luxury cars. On the contrary, a deal to ease visa requirements with Washington is going into effect Sept. 9, and talks are ongoing about abolishing visas for Russians traveling to Western Europe.

Moreover, in the past two decades, Russia has been integrated into world commerce. It sells oil and gas and buys imports, including food, in global markets. It hedges commodity prices and recycles petrodollars in financial markets. Closing the border would cause the economy to collapse and plunge Russia back into poverty. But most important, ordinary Russians outside Moscow have now become open to the outside world. They all travel and have relatives, friends and neighbors who emigrated or work abroad. Their kids get summer jobs in Europe and the United States and study in foreign universities.

There is simply no going back to the Stalinist isolation of the past. The xenophobic elements in Russia may be trying to stir up hatred for the "fifth column," but their rage is as intense as it is impotent. They can't help but see that they're fighting a losing battle.

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