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How Satan Is Destroying Russia

By Victor Davidoff

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Welcome to 1598. In this year, King Henry IV of France proclaimed the Edict of Nantes, which regulated relations between the country's Catholics and Protestants and put an end to a religious war that had been raging for decades. Four centuries later, in Russia, in September 2012, billionaire and former presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov proposed a federal religious code to prevent an all-out religious war.

"In recent months, the relationship between citizens and the state and church has already led to a schism in society that threatens Russian culture," Prokhorov wrote in a comment published in Kommersant on Sept. 12. He noted that despite the secular government clause in the Constitution, "the majority of politicians, including the leaders of parties in parliament, prefer to ignore what's written there. Cozying up to the church ... undermines the basic principles of the country's supreme governing document and creates a multitude of dangers."

The words "threat" and "danger" are bandied about by just about every Russian politician and public figure these days. But leaders have vastly different notions of what exactly the danger is. In a meeting with the public in Krasnodar on Sept. 12, President Vladimir Putin

said the main danger for the country is insufficient patriotism and a lack of "respect for our history and traditions and the spiritual values of our peoples."

Putin also said Russia has become the "focus of an overt information war ... and certainly of a well-directed propaganda attack."

Putin's speeches often sound like they have been written by professional diplomats, and their ambiguity raises more questions than his statements answer. For example, what "spiritual values" does Putin have in mind? This is, after all, the man who used the phrase "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" to describe the dissolution of the Soviet Union, one of the most militantly anti-religious regimes in history. And who is "directing" these attacks against the spiritual values of Russia's nations?

Perhaps the key to understanding Putin's speech can be found in a recent television program by Arkady Mamontov, "Provocateurs. Part Two," aired on Rossia 1 state television a day before Putin spoke in Krasnodar. Mamontov, who has already established himself as a politically sensational filmmaker, revealed in his latest program that the United States has developed a plan for revolution in Russia. The foot soldiers in this revolution are members of the punk-performance group Pussy Riot. We were told that the main organizer of the revolution, including the Pussy Riot stunts, is billionaire Boris Berezovsky, who is pulling the revolutionary strings from his self-exile in London.

Neither Mamontov nor his interview subjects, professional Putin-lovers, produced a single fact proving contact between Berezovsky and the punk musicians. Nor did Mamontov interview Berezovsky, although the tycoon immediately responded with a categorical denial of having anything to do with Pussy Riot.

The film was harshly criticized not only by the liberal end of the political spectrum but even by some members of the Russian Orthodox clergy. Deacon Andrei Kurayev, whose views are hardly liberal, wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "I am not a supporter of Pussy Riot or Berezovsky. But why lie? Why pass off licentious animal instincts for the norms of Christianity?"

Perhaps Kurayev and Mamontov have different notions about Christianity and its norms. In an interview with the Internet portal Orthodoxy and the World, Mamontov spun out a truly apocalyptic picture: "The devil really wants to destroy Russia and its people, to build something else on its territory," he said.

Mamontov isn't the only one seeing dark visions. A statement issued by the Eurasian Youth Union, headed by the pro-Kremlin ideologue Alexander Dugin, reads: "Everyone who sympathizes with liberals, Pussy Riot and the West belongs to Satan. This is the army of hell."

In the days leading up to Saturday's opposition march, the Eurasian union called upon its supporters to take to the streets to defy them: "On Sept. 15, the devil's spawn will crawl out on the streets. Eurasians will go out with crosses, daggers and silver bullets to stop hell."

Satan, evil oligarchs and punk rockers who have sold their souls to the devil, silver bullets, daggers and crosses. It sounds like a script for another Hollywood film about the eternal war between mortals and vampires. Unfortunately, in Russia this is simply a description of public

opinion, which exists alongside the Internet and digital television. In fact, technology just spreads the paranoia.

Society has become split between the liberals and the Orthodox fundamentalists, who are locked in a Cold Religious War. There are no fatalities in this war yet, but there are casualties and prisoners of war. Take, for example, the three Pussy Riot members locked up for two years in prison.

In this context, Prokhorov's proposal to ratify a religious code likely won't go anywhere, at least in the near future. If we are lucky, the cold war won't turn hot, and virtual silver bullets won't be transformed into real bullets fired from a Kalashnikov rifle.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist who follows the Russian blogosphere in his biweekly column.

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