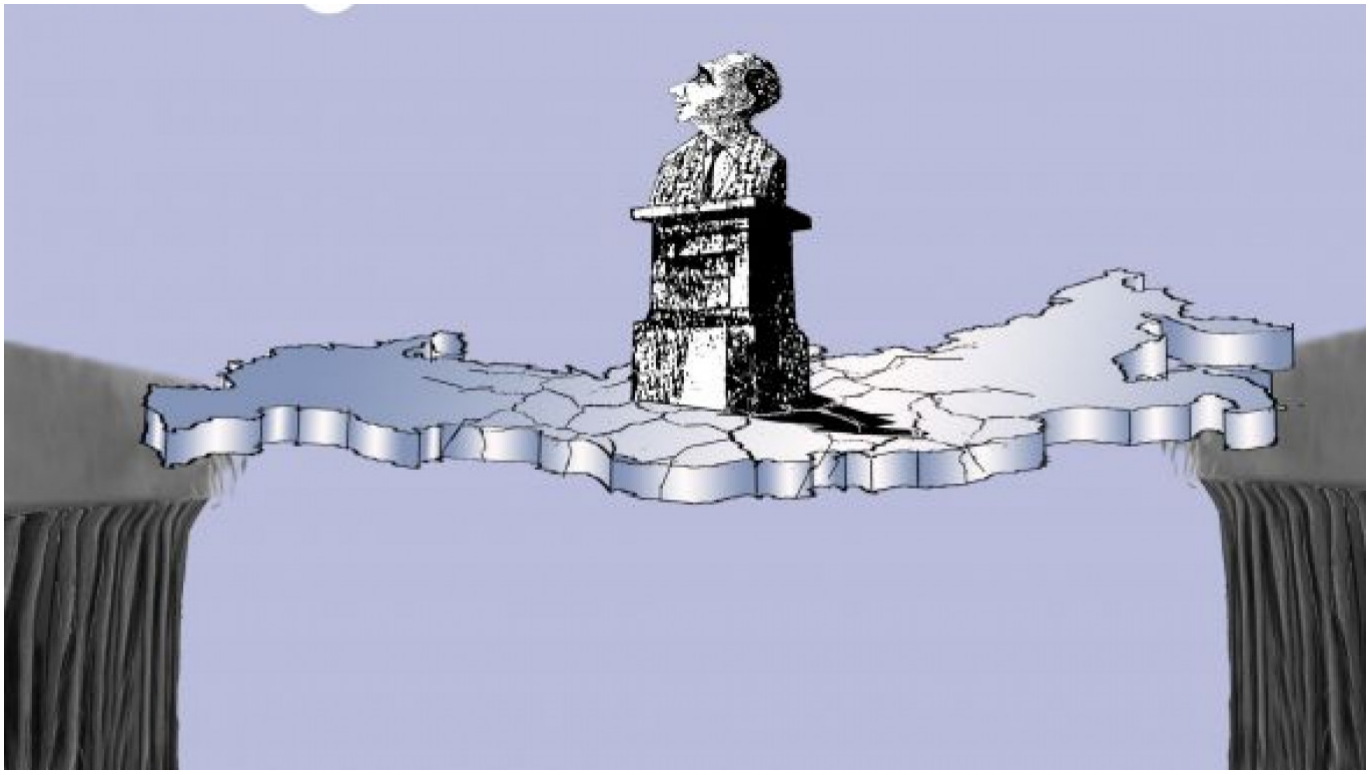
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The Church Has Replaced the Communist Party

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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As President Vladimir Putin tries to strengthen his vertical power structure, the country's social divisions are growing deeper.

The Pussy Riot case divided Russian society between those calling for leniency for the women and those who demanded that they be severely punished. This split also represents the division in attitudes toward the Russian Orthodox Church itself. Many Orthodox believers have openly criticized the church hierarchy for its reactionary stance on the case and for its close alliance with the country's authoritarian leadership. In response, squads of self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes have taken to the streets to enforce the church's moral code of public behavior.

Amid all this, there has been a sharp discussion on the Internet regarding the list of Orthodox church scandals — from the appalling way that Patriarch Kirill pressed charges against his neighbor for leaving excessive dust in his luxury apartment to a series of car accidents involving Orthodox priests, sometimes drunk, driving expensive foreign automobiles.

Topping the list of scandals was a photograph showing Patriarch Kirill wearing a very expensive watch, which the church sloppily tried to erase using Photoshop.

Orthodox leaders claim that there is an organized campaign, supported by the opposition and its supposed sponsors, to discredit the church. In response, public figures accuse the church of colluding with the Kremlin to force obedience to the authoritarian regime, stifle dissent and violate the Constitution by merging the church and state.

It seems that the Russian authorities are the ones most actively and deliberately working to deepen divisions in society. ⊠

There are, indeed, two Russias. The first Russia consists of about 15 million "modernist and European" citizens, or 11 percent of the population, who live mostly in large and medium-sized cities, have a higher education and are employed in the private sector, which makes them less dependent on the state. They are the foundation of the opposition movement that has taken to the streets for the protests that began in December. Most of the Russian intelligentsia belongs to this group, although there are many high-profile members of the "creative intelligentsia," such as singers Oleg Gazmanov and Yelena Vayenga and film director Nikita Mikhalkov, who go out of their way to support Putin.

The second Russia consists of about 40 million conservative citizens, or 30 percent of the population. They are nostalgic about the Soviet period, support Putin and believe the country as a whole is moving in the right direction. They are mainly residents of outlying provinces, small and medium-sized cities and rural areas. Their distinguishing feature is their dependence on government support in the form of salaries, pensions, social benefits and subsidies from the federal budget. The members of this group don't want convulsions to the existing social order and favor stability even when it means stagnation. Uralvagonzavod factory director Igor Kholmanskikh has become a poster child for this Russia, along with Sveta from Ivanovo. Kholmanskikh is now the presidential envoy to the Urals Federal District, and Sveta became the host of a prime-time show on NTV.

These two Russias hold vastly different values and attitudes toward democracy, freedom and human rights. The Western-bent and modernist Russia demands protection of human rights and freedoms, tolerance of dissent, the right to privacy, free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, freedom of the press and guarantees for private property and fair market competition. It calls for a secular government and a strict separation of church and state. In foreign policy, this more educated and progressive class supports closer ties with the European Union and the United States and is suspicious of Russia's friendship with Belarus, Venezuela and Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Much of provincial, conservative Russia has little concern for democracy and human rights and is most interested in receiving government handouts and achieving lifetime job security with positions in the bloated state bureaucracy.

The same people who once bowed before portraits of Vladimir Lenin and Communist leaders now pay homage to the Russian Orthodox Church and its icons. In Soviet times, any criticism of the Communist Party was considered blasphemy. Now, criticizing the Orthodox church qualifies as blasphemy. This Russia is strongly anti-Western and anti-U.S., and it believes that there is a global conspiracy against the country. It is convinced that the opposition is

a fifth column of agents funded by the U.S. State Department.

Putin has openly aligned himself with the conservative Russia and has initiated a war against the values most important to the progressive Russia: freedom of speech, the freedom to form nongovernmental organizations, freedom of creative expression and the right of assembly, and the unrestricted use of the Internet. ⊠

Russia has not been this deeply divided since the supporters and opponents of democratic and market reforms battled each other in the 1990s, a period marked by dangerous social tensions. The danger we face today is that social divisions and the escalating standoff between society and the ruling powers will once again erupt in a violent standoff between retrograde and progressive members of society.

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