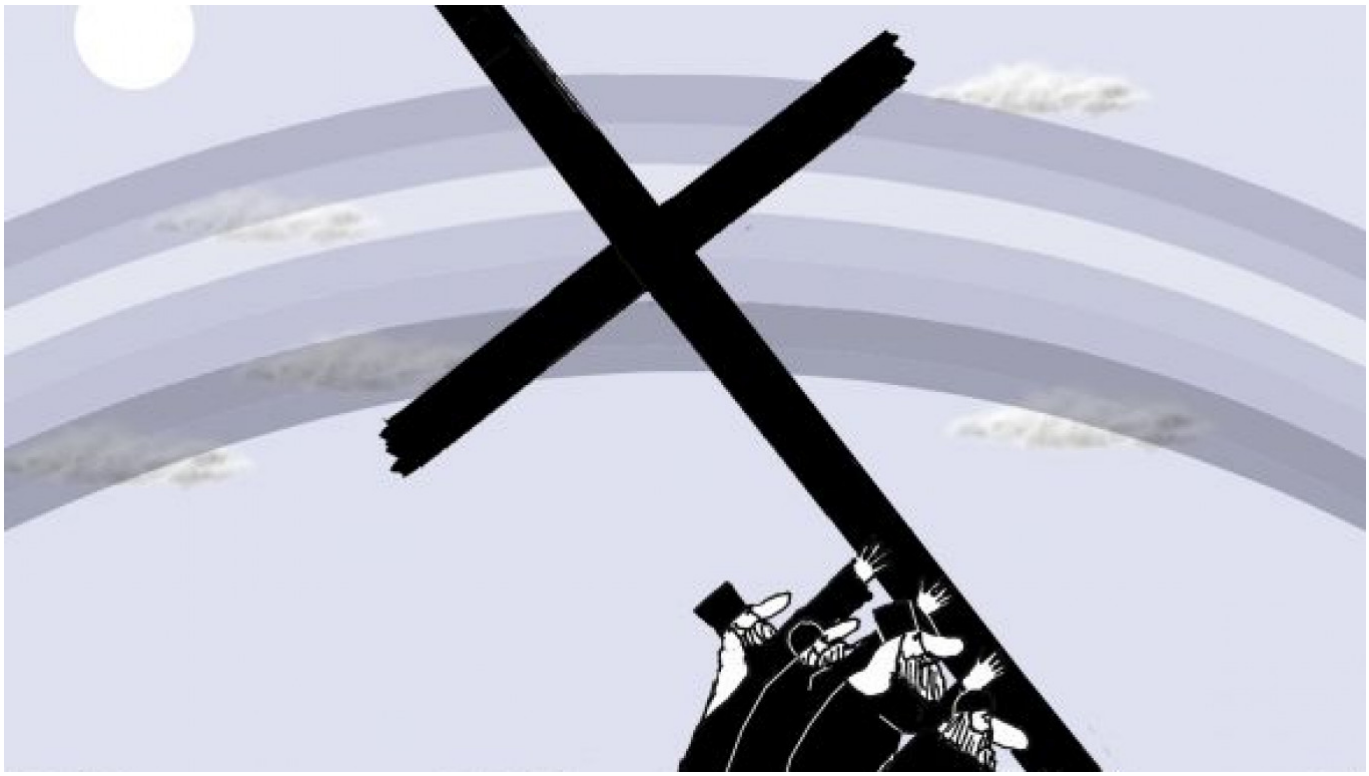
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Gay Milk and Sacrilegious Knees

By Victor Davidoff

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For ages, Russian roads, vodka and bureaucracy have been the source of jokes for both foreigners and Russians. But times change, and old stereotypes turn into myths. Today in Russia, you can find excellent highways and spend an evening in perfectly sober company. And there is at least one state structure that functions efficiently — and it's not even the secret police. It's the State Duma.

Since Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin, the Duma has been working overtime. Sometimes the deputies stay at work until midnight to ratify legislation. The only strange thing about this hyperactivity is that they are making existing laws much tougher by approving a large number of new articles in the criminal and administrative codes.

Last week, the Duma considered a raft of amendments to the Criminal Code that would toughen sanctions for profaning religious symbols and objects and make "offending the religious beliefs of others" a felony. After the legislation is approved, which is expected to be in October, insulting citizens' religious beliefs in public or demeaning religious services, rituals and ceremonies will carry a three-year prison sentence.

The drafters of the bill have made it clear that the measure became necessary after Pussy Riot's infamous "punk prayer" in Christ the Savior Cathedral. The band deserves a place in the Guinness Book of World Records. No other group anywhere in the world has inspired lawmakers to write so many new laws. The Beatles would have been envious.

Pussy Riot was charged with hooliganism, which was legally absurd. But now singing in church is finding its way into the Criminal Code. And the punishment for this crime will be three times harsher than it was in the Russian Empire, when Orthodoxy was the state religion.

This tough new bill has dumfounded even some members of the Orthodox clergy, who might be expected to support it. Deacon Andrei Kurayev wrote on his LiveJournal blog that the initiative "opens the door to abuse. In the near future, there will not be a consensus among experts about what polemics, humor or satire is and what offends religious beliefs. As a result, this article of the Criminal Code will be a club in the hands of those in power."

Leaders of other faiths have expressed their doubts openly. Rabbi Mikhael Edvabny believes that the legislation will be counterproductive. Instead of protecting religious groups, it will set them against one another, since the principles and rituals of different religions are sometimes at odds. "If they broadcast on television the matins on Good Friday, which has a text that condemns the actions of Jews for sentencing Jesus to death, the priest might be accused of insulting the religious beliefs of Jews," he said. "On the other hand, the raucous celebration of the Jewish holiday of Purim during Great Lent might insult the beliefs of Orthodox Christians."

But the strongest criticism came from atheists. Yelena Lukyanova, a lawyer and member of the Public Chamber, called the bill "in actual fact a ban on antireligious propaganda." In Lukyanova's opinion, this "elastic" measure could be used against anyone. "Tomorrow I might go out in a short skirt and be told that my knees offend someone's religious feelings," she said.

Maybe short skirts are an exaggeration, but religious fundamentalists have never had trouble finding things that offend their religious feelings. A court in Grozny already banned the scandalous YouTube video "The Innocence of Muslims," and not only in Chechnya but throughout Russia. In Rostov-on-Don, the local theater was pressured by Orthodox Christians to cancel a tour of the rock classic "Jesus Christ Superstar," even though all the tickets had been sold.

In Moscow on Sept. 20, a group of Cossacks and Orthodox activists blocked the entrance to an exhibition of works by artist Yevgenia Maltseva at Winzavod. The activists attacked visitors to the gallery and photographers, tried to burn an advertising poster, and dispersed only when riot police made several arrests. This action was inspired from almost the very top of the church hierarchy. The secretary of the Moscow Patriarchate's council on culture, Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, called the exhibition nothing less than "an act of cynical terror" directed against Russian culture.

In St. Petersburg, an Orthodox organization called the People's Council filed a complaint with the prosecutor's office against Wimm-Bill-Dann, accusing it of promoting homosexuality with its Jolly Milkman label. No, the Jolly Milkman wasn't kissing his boyfriend. The Orthodox activists were enraged by the rainbow in the background, which they interpreted as a symbol

of the gay-rights movement.

A joke attributed to the writer Denis Dragunsky immediately began making the rounds on the Internet: "A group of Orthodox activists filed a complaint with the prosecutor's office to hold God responsible for putting rainbows in heaven, thereby violating the law banning the promotion of homosexuality among minors. The prosecutor's office turned down the complaint, saying that it could not guarantee the defendant's appearance for questioning. Now a group of Orthodox activists is drafting a bill banning minors from looking at the sky after a rainstorm."

Jokes aside, after the blasphemy bill's passage — of which there is little doubt, since it is supported by all the Duma factions — Russia will join the club of countries that includes Iran, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where improper handling of religious books can get someone in serious trouble.

This dispels one more myth about Russia: that the country lives by its Constitution, which clearly says that it is a secular state.

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

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