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# The Witch Hunt Against Gays Has Begun

By Victor Davidoff

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On Jan. 25, the State Duma passed in the first reading a bill prohibiting display of "homosexual propaganda" among minors. The bill stipulates that an individual found guilty of violating the law be fined up to 5,000 rubles ($167) and that a legal entity face a fine of up to 500,000 ($16,667) rubles. During the vote, gay rights activists protested outside the Duma. Orthodox Christian supporters of the law appeared, attacked the gay activists and threw snowballs, dirt and paint bombs at them — all under the eyes of the police officers standing nearby. And when the police finally took action, the attackers went free. Instead, 20 gay protesters were arrested.

For the bill to become law, it must go through two more readings in the Duma. It was sent back for more work so that the meaning of the vague phrase "homosexual propaganda" could be clarified. So while all the implications of the law are still unclear, two things are certain even now.

First, the bill is unconstitutional. Mikhail Fedotov, head of the Council of Human Rights, said in an interview with Interfax, "If we say that propaganda of heterosexuality is allowed, then we immediately contradict the constitutional guarantee of equality among citizens, since

the rights of a person belonging to a sexual minority are impinged upon in contrast with the rights of a person belonging to the sexuality majority."

Second, regardless of how " homosexual propaganda" is ultimately defined in the bill, the legislation, if passed, will be applied much more broadly and affect more than homosexuals. An analogous law on the books in St. Petersburg makes it a misdemeanor to "propagandize sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality and transgenderism" to minors.

As a result, St. Petersburg is renowned as the European capital of homophobia, where measures are periodically taken to take rock musicians to court — Madonna, Lady Gaga and Rammstein — or to block MTV. The Duma's Committee on Family, Women and Children goes even further in its recommendations and demands a ban even on "performances involving homosexuals in places accessible to children." This would produce a blacklist of gay actors and musicians who would be banned from television screens before 11 p.m. Who knows how far these state homophobes may go? Perhaps as far as banning Oscar Wilde's fairy tales and the music of Pyotr Tchaikovsky.

It is certain that the legislation will spark a nationwide witch hunt against public figures, journalists, teachers and others. Ilya Kolmanovsky was almost fired from a lycee where he teaches biology after school administrators received a number of letters, ostensibly from parents of his students, accusing him of homosexuality. Kolmanovsky had to prove that he isn't gay and that he is married with two daughters. He insisted that he was the subject of a smear campaign simply because he defended gay rights.

Gay teenagers, who are already bullied at school and in their communities, are sure to be victims of the law. Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov wrote on his Facebook page: "My children have a traditional sexual orientation. My daughters are interested in boys, and my son is interested in girls. But it could have turned out differently. There are families in which the children have a nontraditional sexual orientation. Can you imagine how hard it is for the parents and children in those families and the pressure they are under every hour of every day? ... Surveys have shown that 20 to 35 percent of gay teenagers think about suicide or have tried to kill themselves. This is 10 times more than teens with traditional sexuality. ... It's clear to me that the law passed by the Duma against propaganda of homosexuality will ramp up the level of hatred, first of all against gay teens. Thousands of young people, intimidated and scorned, will take their own lives. This law will bring nothing but tragedy and death."

Journalist Daniil Rotshtein agrees with Nemtsov that the law will increase the level of hatred in society. In a post on the Facebook page of Kommersant radio, he wrote, "Russian children ... are shielded from being sent for adoption in savage America and soon from propaganda of homosexuality. The only thing Russian children aren't protected from is hatred. And hatred in our country is expanding. We are taught to hate America, people from the Caucasus, gays, liberals, Orthodox Christians, non-Orthodox Christians."

Rotshtein believes that "the law banning the propaganda of homosexuality is not needed to prevent that propaganda. Even the most dim-witted deputy knows that there isn't any propaganda of homosexuality at all. The only real effect of the law is to split society and incite one group against another. Apparently Vladimir Putin and his team find it easier to stay afloat on a nasty, roiling sea of malice. While we choke on hatred for one another and see the enemy

in every person who in some little way doesn't look like us, we don't notice how the political noose is slowly getting tighter around the neck of all of society. And when that noose is pulled tight, no one is going to be able to utter a peep — not gays, Orthodox Christians or even deputies.

We can only hope that Rotshtein's prophesy doesn't come true.

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

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