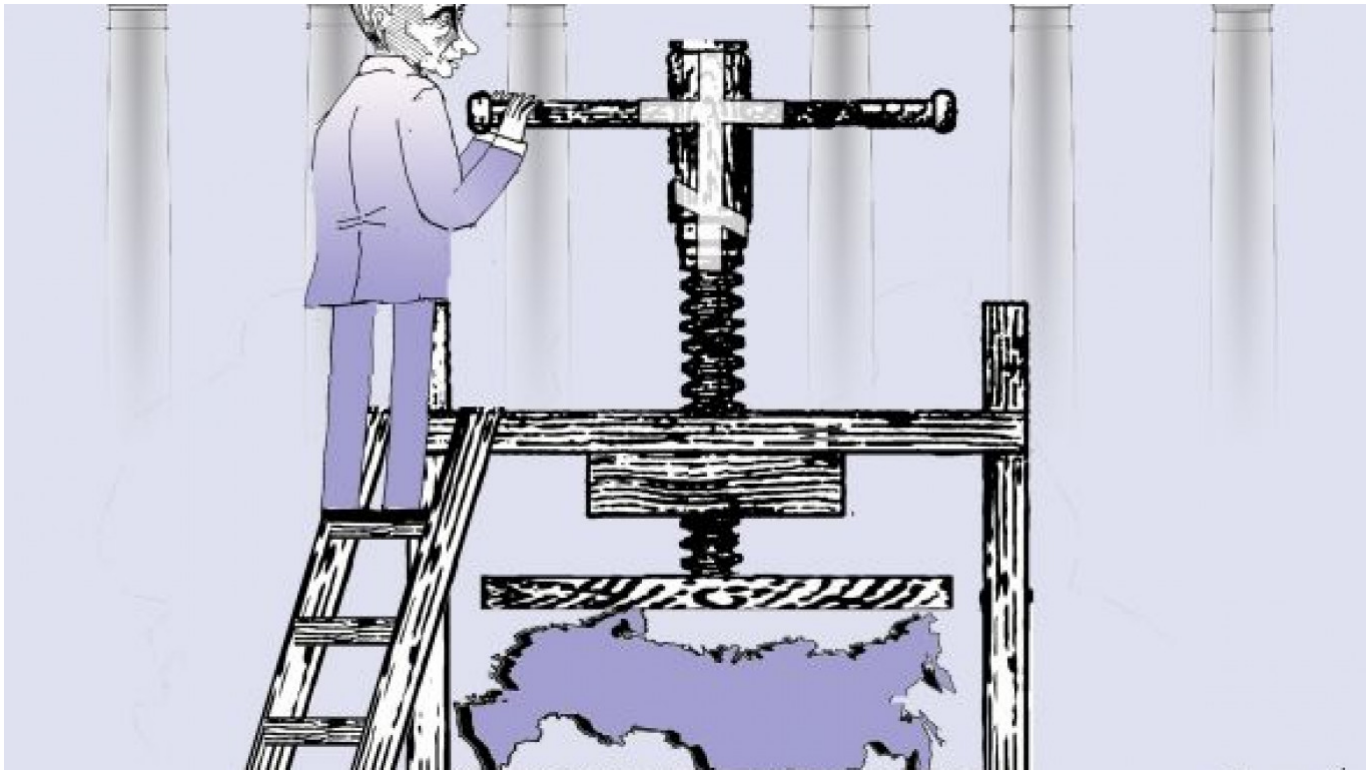
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Anti-Gay Bill Takes Russia Back to Middle Ages

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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On Jan. 25, the State Duma passed a bill on the first reading that prohibits homosexual propaganda aimed at children. This obscurantist legislation is part of a broader attack that Russia's political and ideological reactionary forces have waged against dissenters since President Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin last May.

Working closely with the Russian Orthodox Church, the Putin regime is deliberately playing to the primitive stereotypes, ignorance and hatred of the conservative majority, actively bearing down on all forms of dissent and nontraditional behavior, focusing their efforts on residents of Moscow, St. Petersburg and other large cities. The attack on homosexuals is only a small battle in the larger war against the "creative class," the opposition and other dissenters who gave the Kremlin such a bad scare during the mass protest rallies last year.

This war has been extended over the past year to target liberals, contemporary artists, atheists, political cartoonists, bloggers and volunteers. It also includes legislation restricting Internet freedoms and other laws aimed at "blasphemers" and those who "slander"

politicians and the state. In short, the Kremlin is methodically persecuting the most active, creative and free-thinking members of society. Like all authoritarian regimes, the Kremlin is trying to create a country of loyal and inert conformists who are driven by herd instincts.

The authorities are creating an increasingly unbearable atmosphere for the most active and freedom-loving Russians, one that is filled with hate, intimidation and persecution. As a result, the brain drain of Russia's most talented professionals is increasing at an alarming pace, which makes the ambitious innovation and modernization initiatives such as the Skolkovo technology park a useless endeavor. Up to 100,000 Russians leave the country every year, with about 2 million Russians now living permanently abroad. Meanwhile, polls consistently show that the number of Russians thinking seriously of emigrating increases with every passing year under Putin. The main reason is that they see no future for themselves living, working or raising a family in a Russia that is decaying because of systemic lawlessness, corruption, stagnation and autocracy.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev made a Freudian slip when he joked at the recent World Economic Forum at Davos that if Google co-founder Sergei Brin had not left his native Soviet Union in the late 1970s, he would probably have been arrested in Russia today. But this is no laughing matter for many Russians. The chances of being arrested in Russia are higher than ever. There have been cases of people being thrown in jail arbitrarily for opposition activities, participation in peaceful demonstrations, critical comments made on blogs, "blasphemous" songs or cartoons and "libelous" newspaper articles. Over the past year, the Investigative Committee has become the most important repressive institution in the country.

In an effort to suppress active, free-thinking Russians and mobilize the conservative majority around the Kremlin, the Putin regime relies on old, Soviet repressive instruments with one important new addition: the Russian Orthodox Church. The Kremlin ideologues have a new strategy: combine the stagnation of former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev with the ultra-conservative ideology of the Orthodox Church. The tactic of inciting homophobia, taken directly from the Soviet playbook, is now actively supported by the Orthodox Church.

Homosexuality was a criminal offense in the Soviet Union from 1934 until 1993, and thousands of people with a nontraditional sexual orientation served terms in Soviet prisons and punitive psychiatric institutions. In the early 1990s, that law was repealed because it violated European conventions that Russia had signed on protecting human rights. Now Soviet thinking and legislation are gradually seeping back into Russian society. The Kremlin can't ban homosexuality — not yet, at least — but it can introduce repressive measures against gays by packaging the bill as a ban against "homosexual propaganda aimed at adolescents." This is not a laudable drive "to protect children" as proponents of the bill contend. It is a thinly veiled display of homophobia.

As in most cases with Russia's repressive laws, the legislation is loosely worded to give the authorities maximum latitude to apply it arbitrarily. The bill does not define "homosexual propaganda," which will give the police and courts free rein to interpret the legislation as they please if it becomes law. For example, two homosexuals holding hands on the street where a minor is present could be enough to arrest those who are "spreading homosexual propaganda." It effectively declares that all homosexuals, by definition, are dangerous freaks and inferior to heterosexuals. Many of the supporters of this bill view homosexuality as

a perversion and an illness. They believe that homosexuals should be either subjected to mandatory psychiatric treatment or be isolated from society.

This anti-gay legislation not only contradicts international norms of tolerance and protection of minority rights, but it also directly contradicts established, decades-old medical and psychological understandings about the nature of human sexuality. With their obscurant views of homosexuality, Russian lawmakers and their supporters are very much stuck in the Middle Ages.

Notably, the homophobic initiative by Russian authorities has been condemned by former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; German Foreign Affairs Minister Guido Westerwelle; Catherine Ashton, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs; British Foreign Minister William Hague; and the Council of Europe. They all consider Russia's new anti-gay legislation a violation of human rights — in particular, a violation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

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