

'Blasphemy Bill' Signals Return to 18th-Century Morals, Activists Say

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Rights activists on Thursday ridiculed the notion that Russia is a secular state, saying draft legislation seeking tougher penalties for offending believers' feelings shows the country is returning to 18th-century morals.

"Officials and religious leaders are leading us back to Peter the Great's times," Viktor Bondarenko, founder of rights group Russia for Everyone, said at a news conference held just a stone's throw from Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral.

"We are witnessing, or have witnessed, a clerical coup," he said. "The Russian Orthodox Church is flouting the Constitution at will, openly and cynically violating the principle that all ethnic and religious groups should be treated equally."

Banned under the Soviet Union, the Orthodox Church has flourished over the past two decades, assuming pride of place among the country's many faiths.

Since returning for a third term last May, President Vladimir Putin has increasingly presented himself as a champion of traditional Russian values, while Patriarch Kirill, Russia's top religious official, has declared Putin's 13-year rule a "miracle of God."

Activists on Thursday characterized the so-called "blasphemy bill," which would impose fines of up to 500,000 rubles (\$16,000) and maximum prison sentences of five years for offending believers' feelings or defiling places of worship, as repressive and said it was further evidence of the cosy relationship between church and state.

Duma deputies overwhelmingly passed the legislation, which supporters say would help stave off attempts to dilute Russia's traditional beliefs by heretics including punk rockers Pussy Riot, in a first reading last month.

State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin, a United Russia heavyweight, said at a meeting with non-parliamentary parties on Wednesday that such legislation is urgently needed.

"By offending believers' feelings, you not only offend them personally, but also touch on serious social issues," Naryshkin said, according to a statement on his party's website.

Opinion polls show that roughly 80 percent of the population backs the bill, he said.

It must pass two further readings in the lower house, one in the upper house and be signed into law by Putin before it takes effect. Given that the bill enjoys open Kremlin support, few doubt that it will be formally approved in the near future.

"Quite simply, the bill should be thrown out," said Sergei Buryanov, co-chairman of the Institute of Freedom of Conscience.

"We need to stop this madness, but our lawmakers do whatever they're told," he said, referring to the Duma by the catchphrase "the mad printer," a term used by opposition bloggers to paint the parliament as a rubber-stamp body.

Yekaterina Samutsevich, of Pussy Riot fame, told reporters at the news conference that the bill would become a weapon to intimidate Kremlin opponents.

Two of Samutsevich's fellow band members are currently serving two-year jail terms for staging a provocative performance railing against Putin and Kirill in Christ the Savior last year. Samutsevich was freed at an appeal hearing in October.

"It's not even clear whom the law is designed to protect," she said. "It seems it's been thought up to allow authorities to open criminal cases whenever they want."

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