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Duma Approves 'Blasphemy Bill' in 2nd Reading

By The Moscow Times

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The State Duma has reacted to mounting criticism of a controversial piece of legislation that introduces tough penalties for offending believers' feelings by passing an updated version of the bill in the crucial second of three stipulated readings.

The new draft lowers the maximum prison sentence that future religion offenders will incur to three years, while the maximum fine stays at 500,000 rubles ($16,000).

In addition, the prosecutors will have to prove that the offenders' actions were premeditated.

The list of religions that "constitute an integral part of Russia's historical heritage" has also been removed, meaning that offending the feelings of any religious believers will be punished.

The updated bill is unlikely to satisfy the numerous vociferous critics who talk about the increasing clericalization of Russia.

Since returning to the Kremlin for a third term last May, President Vladimir Putin has increasingly relied on asserting traditional Russian values in his rhetoric and policies.

The resurgent Russian Orthodox Church has occupied a special role in this policy with the government unleashing a broad campaign in its support with its various agencies handing back church property, seized following the 1917 Revolution.

During his May 5 address at the Easter celebrations Putin praised the special role that the church plays in the society.

"The church incessantly cares about strengthening high moral and ethical ideals and family traditions in society, and the younger generation's upbringing. The church does a lot to solve pressing social problems," said Putin.

The bill was allegedly provoked by the all-female Pussy Riot punk band's action in Moscow's biggest Christ our Savior Cathedral last year that caused outrage among the conservative-leaning segments of Russian society.

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