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Gays Are New Enemy No. 1

By Victor Davidoff

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The State Duma unanimously passed a law prohibiting adoption of Russian children by foreign single-sex couples on Friday. In practice, the measure will have little effect. The number of children adopted abroad has nearly halved since 2008, and none were adopted by same-sex families. But the law has great symbolic meaning. Along with the "gay propaganda" legislation that was passed earlier this month, the law is really a declaration of cold war against the West, where granting the LGBT community the same rights as heterosexuals has been a step toward offering equality for all.

Anyone who gets news from CNN might be puzzled by the way same-sex marriages have gotten mixed up in the heads of Russian legislators with the Orange and Arab Spring revolutions.

But for the officials and propagandists of the Kremlin line, all these notions form a single whole. The writer Alexander Prokhanov, who has a knack for clearly articulating what Russian officials only hint at, said in an interview to Ekho Moskvy radio: "Everything that is connected with Russia and Orthodoxy is under attack. Everything connected with the empire is under attack. Russian history, Stalin and the family are under attack."

His words were repeated by Zakhar Prelepin, another apologist of Russian imperialism. "We shouldn't pretend that 'same-sex tolerance' is some sign of special human freedom. It is a sign of the breakdown of the state and end of the national spirit," he said.

Of course, these complex philosophical notions are not formulated so clearly in the minds of average Russians. But homophobic hysteria, fueled by the unanimous Duma votes and state media propagandists, has consumed the country like wildfire. In St. Petersburg, metro passengers handed over to the police two young women who dared to kiss. A Zabaikal region lawmaker proposed a local law that would give Cossacks the right to "grab gay people, haul them onto the square and whip them." Moscow police arrested an 18-year-old woman who protested the homophobic laws with a line from a Shakespeare sonnets: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments." And in Novosibirsk, a doctor warned the mother of a sick child that boys over the age of 3 cannot have rectal suppositories because "that might lead to homosexuality."

For those who remember history, the situation today has clear parallels to the Stalinist anti-Semitic campaign. In those years, people were afraid to go to Jewish doctors because they were supposedly inoculating patients with cancer. As the journalist Alexander Timofeyevsky noted on his Facebook page: "Vilifying gays in Moscow in 2013 is the same as vilifying Jews in Moscow in 1949. Today's campaign against homosexuality is the new version of the campaign against Zionists. The authorities have identified homosexuality as the main weapon in the surreptitious foreign war to destroy the spiritual legacy and sovereignty of the homeland."

Historically, any dictatorship needs both internal and external enemies to maintain its stability. This principle was used for a long time in the Soviet Union, which lived by the "battle against enemies" — from Argentinean spies to speakers of Esperanto to rock musicians and non-conformist artists. In 2000, Putin came to power on a wave of anti-Chechen hysteria. When the second Chechen war began, Kremlin propagandists appeared on Channel One television to call for carpet bombing of the Chechen cities. Later the country's No. 1 enemy was migrant workers, the Baltic states, Georgia, mythical agents of the U.S. State Department, and nongovernmental organizations.

Today, gays perfectly fit the bill for the country's main enemy. In a country where homosexuality was decriminalized only 20 years ago, anti-gay sentiment was already high. But history also teaches that distracting society from serious economic and social problems with the "battle against enemies" only works for so long. In 1969, the dissident writer Andrei Amalrik wrote his famous essay, "Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?" Amalrik wrote that the ethnic and social tensions in Soviet society were so high that any slight push could topple the empire. Although he miscalculated by a few years, Amalrik was proved right.

Since Vladimir Putin began his third term as president, the return to Soviet methods of rule has been clear to see. But it is also patently clear that a country that opposes the tolerant post-industrial world doesn't have a future. So today it's probably time to ask the question: Will Russia survive until 2024?

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

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