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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Author of Anti-Gay Law Is Putin's Conservative Champion

By The Moscow Times

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Mizulina speaking during a news conference in Moscow in May 2011. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

She has the sober demeanor and tightly wound bun of a boarding school headmistress. And she is Vladimir Putin's new morality crusader, spearheading efforts to curb gay rights, punish online cursing and impose a tax on divorce.

State Duma Deputy Yelena Mizulina has used her position as the head of the Committee on Family, Women and Children to author increasingly conservative laws, including a ban on homosexual "propaganda" that went into force last month.

Her pearls, bland blazers and matronly mien belie a fierce fighter who is ready to take her loudest critics to court. In turn, they have labeled her the "Inquisitor" and ridiculed her online. One recent blog posting shows her gritting her teeth with the speech bubble: "You will behave yourself while on My Internet."

While the morality enforcer's policies have drawn the criticism of Western activists and liberal Russians, they strike a chord with a socially conservative Russian majority that is President Putin's support base.

Since returning to the presidency last year following unprecedented street protests, Putin has bolstered his eroding popular support by turning toward the Russian Orthodox Church and integrating its rhetoric of traditional values. The Kremlin pits this conservatism against what it casts as a decadent West that threatens Russian society.

Mizulina's committee has been responsible for a score of laws and projects promoting traditional Russian values and warning of Russia's moral and demographic decline, as persistently low birthrates have resulted in a shrinking and aging population. Mizulina proposes to fight this in part by fighting gay relationships and taxing divorce.

"Of course policies on family issues revolve around the question: What in Russia do we consider a family?" said Olga Batalina, Mizulina's close ally and deputy chairman of the committee. In Russia, she said, a family is a marriage between a man and a woman with children, preferably at least three. Mizulina declined requests for an interview.

In a policy planning paper drafted in late May, the committee called for the increased involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in family issues, more financial support for families with many children and the divorce tax. Ironically, the paper was published within a week of Putin announcing his own divorce, sparking jokes that the timing of the split with his wife was, in effect, tax evasion.

The two women lawmakers stirred the most controversy this spring when they championed the law banning the spread of propaganda of "nontraditional sexual relations" among minors.

The law, which describes homosexual propaganda vaguely as anything "aimed at the formation of nontraditional sexual behavior," levies fines of up to 5,000 rubles ($150) on individuals and up to 1 million rubles ($30,000) for companies, including media organizations, that violate it.

While the law provoked a backlash in the West, where protesters called for a boycott of Russian vodka in gay bars across North America, it has stirred little contention in Russia.

The number of people who consider homosexuality either "licentiousness" or "a sickness or result of some psychological trauma" rose from 68 percent in 1998 to 78 percent in 2013, according to a May poll conducted by the independent Levada Center. Whereas 51 percent of Russians said in 2005 that gays and lesbians should have the same rights as others, the number dropped to 39 percent by 2013, according to the polls, which have a margin of error of 3.4 percent.

Maria Plotko, a sociologist at the Levada Center responsible for its polls on homosexuality, said the level of social intolerance increased significantly within the last year as homosexuality became a frequent topic of political discussion.

"It's easy to set people up against them [gays], because the percentage of people who know

them is very small," Plotko said. In a Levada poll from early July, 80 percent of respondents said they didn't have a single LGBT acquaintance.

Plotko emphasized that Russian conservatism differs from its Bible belt counterpart in the U.S.: Russians widely condone and practice abortion, common law marriage and divorce. But the growing sense of a national identity, rooted in Orthodox Christianity, has meant that minority groups that fall outside of the church — from gays to Muslims — face increasing disapproval in society.

Vigilante homophobia is on the rise among some extremist nationalist groups. Nationalists in a new movement called Occupy Pedophilia use gay dating websites to lure young men and boys into meetings, where they taunt them on camera and then publish the videos online.

Nikolai Alexeyev, a founder of the Russian gay pride movement, called it a vicious circle.

"On the one hand, you have the fact that the majority supposedly support these initiatives. And on the other, you have the authorities, like Mizulina, who instead of making this majority more tolerant, are tossing logs on the fire," Alexeyev said. "They'll end up burning all of us."

Despite the support of a vast majority of Russians, Mizulina and Batalina have proven intolerant of dissent from liberals who take issue with their policies. They have persuaded prosecutors to open a criminal case against Alexeyev and others on charges of slander and "insulting a representative of the government."

"We decided that it was a matter of principal to set a precedent," Mizulina said recently on radio station Ekho Moskvy. She said Alexeyev's criticism was aimed at "turning public opinion against us to make us look like some kind of crazy old aunts."

She was quoted by newspaper Izvestia as saying he should be punished with community service "somewhere where he can't be involved in gay propaganda, like in a morgue van."

The career trajectory of the 58-year-old politician, who has a Ph.D. in law, reflects the political changes that have transformed Russia since Putin came to power in 2000.

In 2001, she left Yabloko, the party of the Moscow-based intellectual elite, citing its miserable showing in elections. "The people, our voters who believe in us, want something in their lives to change," Mizulina said in an interview with the newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta. "And in order to change something, we have to be a party that doesn't look down its nose at power."

She joined another liberal party, but after another failed election, left it in 2007 for A Just Russia, a left-leaning party created by the Kremlin to sap votes from the Communists. On certain issues Mizulina still goes against the Kremlin line, as she did in November when she argued before Russia's highest court that a law levying heavy fines for unsanctioned protests was unconstitutional.

Since returning to the presidency for a third term, Putin has wielded a two-pronged approach to politics.

On the one hand, the Kremlin has pushed through repressive laws aimed at suppressing dissent among the liberal, middle-class Russians who joined the anti-Putin protests. But

through championing a conservative agenda, he is also reaching out to a broad base of Russia to bolster his popular support.

Putin's conservative turn threatens to add some drama to the 2014 Winter Games, which Russia is hosting in Sochi in February.

Jacques Rogge, the president of the International Olympic Committee, said Friday in Moscow that the IOC is waiting for more explanations from Russia on the anti-gay law that has cast a shadow over the Sochi Winter Games.

"The Olympic charter is clear," Rogge said. "A sport is a human right and it should be available to all, regardless of race, sex or sexual orientation."

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