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The Roots of Russia's Homophobia

By Michael Bohm

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U.S. President Barack Obama made his boldest statement about the sorry state of gay rights in Russia when he said on "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" last month that he has "no patience for countries that try to treat gays, lesbians or transgender persons in ways that intimidate them or are harmful to them."

Thus, it is no surprise that Obama decided to meet Friday with members of Russia's LGBT community on the sidelines of this week's Group of 20 summit in St. Petersburg. In this way, Obama can draw further global attention to a law that President Vladimir Putin recently signed that prohibits the dissemination of "gay propaganda" to minors.

The new anti-gay law punishes those who "propagandize" LGBT lifestyles. But the real

propagandizers
are the Orthodox
church and state,
which are
pushing their
own political
agenda.

Is this law necessary? Gays aren't usually active in "propagandizing" nontraditional sexual lifestyles to minors for the simple reason that it is a useless endeavor. Minors do not become gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender because of a newspaper article defending LGBT rights that they may stumble upon — including this one — or a gay parade that they may accidentally witness once a year while walking down the street. They are born that way.

Although this fact was proven decades ago by the overwhelming majority of Western psychologists and sexologists, Russian lawmakers and church officials still believe that heterosexuals can be "propagandized" into becoming LGBT.

Showing the same level of ignorance, many lawmakers also believe that homosexuality is a disease that should be treated through "proper education" and psychological counseling. Even more disturbing, 80 percent of Russians agree with them, according to an April poll by the Levada Center. What's more, 42 percent believe that homosexuality should again be a criminal offense, according to a June 11 VTsIOM poll, as it was during the Soviet period.

This widespread homophobia provided fertile ground for the new anti-gay law. It was thus no surprise that 88 percent of Russians support the law, according to a June VTsIOM poll.

If by "propagandizing LGBT lifestyles to minors" the government really means "sexual harassment of minors," this crime is already covered by the country's pedophilia laws — and in any event, there are many more cases of pedophilia among heterosexuals than homosexuals, so it would seem that the authorities are barking up the wrong tree.

Perhaps the lawmakers are driven in part by an infantile belief that if Russians don't talk, write or discuss LGBT rights, maybe the "problem" will go away.

This begs the question: Whose political agenda does this law serve in Russia?

The answer can be found in the law's key phrase prohibiting the "distorted understanding of the social equality of traditional and nontraditional sexual relations."

What is a "distorted understanding?" Who decides what is distorted and on what legal grounds?

In reality, what this means is that the government, with the clear backing of the Russian Orthodox Church, has the "correct understanding" — that is, traditional, heterosexual relationships are healthy and normal, while nontraditional, LGBT sexual relations are perverted and dangerous to society. And anyone who disagrees with this and believes that LGBT members should have the same basic rights and legal protections — something that is guaranteed by the "equality clause" in Russia's Constitution — would then have "a distorted

understanding" and be subject to fines of up to 5,000 rubles .

But if there is anyone who has a distorted understanding of the LGBT issue, it is the lawmakers and pro-Kremlin analysts, who spread the homophobic myth that homosexuality and pedophilia are synonymous and who often portray LGBT members as circus freaks and predators.

Take, for example, State Duma Deputy Tatyana Yakovleva, one of the 430 Duma deputies who voted unanimously for the anti-gay law in mid-June. She said "homosexuality is a sexual perversion ... [that] contradicts human nature." Then there's Dmitry Kiselyov, the co-host of a popular talk show on state-controlled Rossia 1 television, who said on air that if homosexuals die in a car accident, "their hearts should be burned because they are unsuitable to prolonging the lives of others."

The first reported violation of the anti-gay law underscores the danger of this legislation. Dmitry Isakov staged a one-man protest in the center of Kazan on June 30 with a poster that read, "It is normal to be gay." A week later, Erik Fedoseyev, a minor from Archangelsk, filed a complaint with the police after seeing on the Internet a photo of Isakov holding his poster, claiming that it violated the gay-propaganda law. (He later admitted that his father forced him to write the complaint, according to GayRussia.ru.)

Notably, there are higher penalties if the person "propagandizing" LGBT equal rights is a foreigner: fines of up to 100,000 rubles, 15 days in detention and deportation. What's more, if a foreigner spreads "gay propaganda" through a media outlet, the company could be fined 1 million rubles or forced to cease its operations for up to 90 days.

Why the special attention to foreigners? Judging by comments made by the law's most-fervent supporters, Duma deputies believe that Russia's LGBT "phenomenon" is a morally noxious virus that the West has infected Russia with — together with prostitution, pornography, drug abuse and unhealthy fast-food chains. Thus, the argument goes, the law must impose harsher penalties on foreigners from the West because they are the chief provocateurs behind the gay propaganda campaign. They are the ones who are plotting to weaken Russian by corrupting its traditional values, exacerbating its demographic problem and increasing its number of AIDS cases.

The irony is that the new law is presented as a defense against gay propaganda, but the real propagandizers are the government and church, which are trying to impose their "spiritual, traditional and moral values" on those who have "nontraditional" values. This is a de facto violation of Russia's constitutional clauses on equal rights, separation of church and state and the prohibition of a state ideology.

Russia, it would seem, is also taking a page from one of the worst chapters of U.S. history. Just as the authors of the anti-gay law cynically hide behind the cover of "protecting minors," U.S. racists during the decades-long segregation period hid under the hypocritical, pseudo-legal cover of "separate but equal." And like Russia's anti-gay law, segregation laws sent a clear signal to all Americans in the South: It is OK to discriminate, beat, degrade and even lynch African-Americans.

During the civil rights movement, U.S. African-Americans fought for their equal rights

by staging peaceful protests, which ultimately led to the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. In Russia, however, peaceful protests for LGBT equal rights, including one-man pickets, are already being prosecuted for supposedly propagandizing LGBT lifestyles to minors.

This underscores the danger of when the government sponsors an essentially homophobic law. It sends a strong signal to the population that it is acceptable to discriminate against LGBT members. Just like state-sponsored anti-Semitism during the Soviet period sparked an increase in grassroots anti-Semitism for decades, so will state-sponsored homophobia increase the discrimination, prejudice and violence against LGBT members in society.

As prominent journalist and historian Nikolai Svanidze said in a recent episode of "Historical Process," a popular talk show on Rossia 1 television, Putin has continued the Soviet practice of state-sponsored homophobia by signing the gay-propaganda law on June 30. Josef Stalin started this tradition when he first made homosexuality a crime in 1933, punishable by up to six years in prison. Stalin's problem with homosexuality, Svanidze noted, focused less on the moral aspect and more on the fact that homosexuals — much like Jews, Chechens and other minorities — were "unreliable elements" and should be persecuted.

Similarly, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev lashed out at a nonconformist art exhibit on Moscow's Manezh Square in 1962, it is significant that the word he used to denigrate the artists was "pederast" — his term for anyone who didn't adhere to the official state ideology.

It would seem that every autocratic regime needs its own "pederasts" to ostracize and stigmatize for political gain. By passing the anti-gay law, Putin and his loyal followers in the Duma have shown that they are no exception.

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