

Kremlin Reliance on the Russian Orthodox Church May Backfire, Analysts Say

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The Russian Orthodox Church has become one of the bulwarks of President Vladimir Putin's return to traditionalism and conservative values.

While the Russian federal government's burgeoning reliance on the Russian Orthodox Church is a tool aimed at consolidating society, in using it the authorities risk giving the clergy too much power, an issue that may eventually backfire against the Kremlin, experts told *The Moscow Times* on Tuesday.

Recent public scandals have cast into the spotlight relations between the Church, society and governments at both the regional and federal levels. Most recently, the Church and its faithful activists have pitted themselves against members of Russia's cultural elite on a number of occasions, from a controversial rendition of a classic Wagner opera in Novosibirsk, to the drama presently unfolding around a popular rock festival in Kaliningrad.

Addressing these recent incidents, analysts interviewed by The Moscow Times said that any time the state sides with the Church, it exacerbates rifts in Russian society, and in doing so, inevitably bolsters and provokes opposition-leaning members of the cultural elite.

Meanwhile, by showing that local clergy members can serve as a separate pillar of power in the Russian regions, the Kremlin risks alienating regional authorities, the experts added.

"When the economy is in crisis, [regional governments] need the Church, because it often has more legitimacy among the local populations. Imagine if a governor comes out and tells people that there is no money to pay pensions, and then imagine if a priest comes out and says that though money may be scarce, people still need to rally around the national leader, to defend against an external enemy: who do you think people will find more credible?" Alexei Malashenko, chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center's Religion, Society and Security Program, told The Moscow Times

"This situation could shore up the Church's grip on power, which would ultimately force President Vladimir Putin to fight back once the crisis is over," he added.

Orthodoxy Against Rock

On Monday Nikolai Tsukanov, governor of the Kaliningrad region — Russia's exclave in central Europe — asked Orthodox activist Mikhail Cherenkov to leave a meeting of the local culture council, which had gathered to vote on whether their region should host the popular Kubana rock festival this summer.

Tsukanov's request was based on the Cherenkov's vociferous opposition to the festival. At the meeting, Cherenkov said the rock festival — which has traditionally been held in the more conservative Krasnodar region, but which was ousted from that region amid a tightening of the screws by the local government — cultivates alcohol consumption and debauchery, and should be investigated by the Federal Security Service and Federal Drug Control Service, according to an entry he later posted on his LiveJournal page.

Cherenkov was initially described by the media as a delegate of the Russian Orthodox Church, but his official links to the Church were quickly denied by local religious leader, Metropolitan Seraphim, Kaliningrad news site Klops.ru reported.

Once Cherenkov was removed from the meeting, Tsukanov told newspaper Kommersant that the decision to host the festival had been approved.

"We understand well that youth festivals are always emotional, but following the law is another thing. If there are violations, law enforcement agencies will react, plain and simple," Tsukanov was quoted as saying.

The 'Tannhäuser' Mess

The recent Kaliningrad incident has drawn numerous comparisons to the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater's recent scandal-mired production of Richard Wagner's "Tannhäuser."

After Novosibirsk's Church elder Metropolitan Tikhon blasted the production — which featured a racy speculation on Jesus Christ's life between the ages of 12 and 30 — as

sacrilegious, chaos ensued.

Prosecutors filed administrative charges against the theater's director, Boris Mezdrich, and opera director Timofei Kulyabin. The charges were tossed out by a court on March 10.

Then in late March, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky fired Mezdrich. Reporting on the incident, news agency TASS attributed the firing to his refusal to follow instructions, citing the Culture Ministry's press service.

The scandal incited outrage among members of the cultural elite both in Novosibirsk — where activists turned out en masse on Sunday to demand Medinsky's resignation — and across the country where directors of Russia's leading theaters wrote letters in support of Kulyabin's rendition of the opera, and denounced conservative censorship.

One analyst told The Moscow Times his theory that the Kubana drama was inspired by "Tannhäuser" fallout. "The Kaliningrad issue is a reaction to 'Tannhäuser.' Local government officials do not want the Church to issue orders," Alexei Makarkin, deputy president of Moscow-based think tank the Center for Political Technologies, told The Moscow Times in a phone interview.

"The fact that a local Church official has quickly denied any involvement means that they understand that there is opposition from the government," he said.

Us Versus Them

Makarkin added that Russia's diplomatic standoff with the West over Ukraine has pushed Russia's federal authorities to champion an "us versus them" mentality, favoring a loyal majority and marginalizing a contrarian minority.

This separation of society into two groups — friends and foes — has compelled the authorities to make awkward decisions that have only exacerbated the "Tannhäuser" scandal and similar affairs, he said.

"It appears that the oppositional minority groups wanted to avoid marginalization," he said. As such, groups that have traditionally been fragmented and relegated to the fringes of society — such as the cultural intelligentsia and religious activists — have grown stronger, and have better consolidated their forces, Makarkin explained.

Malashenko added that Church leaders in other Russian regions may see the "Tannhäuser" scandal as an example of their snowballing potential for power. "The Novosibirsk situation was a signal to the clergy that they are more powerful than they thought they were," he said.

The Russian Orthodox Church has become one of the bulwarks of President Vladimir Putin's return to traditionalism and conservative values since the beginning of his third term in the Kremlin in 2012.

One of the most telling manifestations of this pivot was the trial of feminist protest group Pussy Riot, after some of its members staged an anti-Putin protest in Russia's iconic Christ the Savior cathedral.

Three members of the band were then sentenced to two years in prison, though one of them was released on appeal after her sentence was commuted to a suspended one.

The other two — Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, who became international celebrities during the course of their legal battle — were released in late 2013.

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