The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Graffitist Who Painted Crucified Soviet Cosmonaut Yury Gagarin Faces Jail

By Peter Spinella

April 16, 2015



Prosecutors are considering opening a case against the artist for creating a public display that offended the sentiments of religious believers.

A Russian graffiti artist who painted a mural depicting the first man in outer space — Soviet hero Yury Gagarin — crucified on a cross on Orthodox Easter faces a year in prison for insulting religious beliefs, state media reported Thursday.

Alexander Zhunev created the work with acrylic paint and glued paper on a downtown wall in the Urals city of Perm last weekend. He wrote on the Russian social network VKontakte that the depiction combined religious and scientific themes to mark Russia's Cosmonauts Day, April 12, which this year coincided with Easter Sunday.

"Such a confluence on the calendar is very symbolic because science and religion have long been on different sides of the barricades, fighting for their share of influence on our minds," Zhunev wrote on his VKontakte page. One commenter posted a link to a site selling T-shirts

and iPhone covers featuring the painting.

Zhunev was called in for questioning by prosecutors in Perm on Thursday, state news agency TASS reported, citing prosecutors. He was previously questioned by police, the report said.

Prosecutors are considering opening a case against the artist for creating a public display that offended the sentiments of religious believers, the report cited a prosecutor as saying. Insulting religion is a crime in Russia under legislation enacted in the wake of the Pussy Riot trial.

"Easter is not an appropriate time to create such a thing, especially in the center of the city," Viktor Bevkh, a senior adviser in the Perm region prosecutor's office, told the news agency, adding that if tried and convicted, Zhunev could be sentenced to up to a year in prison.

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