

Attack on Exhibit Sparks Fears New Law Has Empowered Russian Marginals

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Visitors to the vandalized exhibit Sunday were greeted with an empty plinth and sign saying the missing item had been damaged due to illegal actions.

As Russian lawmakers and Orthodox Church officials voiced their dismay over an attack by controversial activists on an art exhibit in central Moscow, many observers said the state was to blame for giving people license to attack anything they say offends their religion.

On Friday, members of God's Will, an ultra-conservative right-wing movement led by self-proclaimed "missionary" Dmitry "Enteo" Tsorionov, vandalized an exhibit at the Manezh — a vast exhibition space next to Red Square — shouting that the works on display were offensive to religious people and therefore could not be exhibited legally.

"The Sculptures We Don't See" exhibit that opened Thursday features works by participants of the LeSS group active in the 1950s-1960s, whose works "were to stay in the cellars of their studios for ages" due to ideological restraints in the Soviet era, according to a news release

on the Manezh's website.

What was pushed to the margins in the aggressively atheist Soviet Union has now become a target for the opposite extreme: a group of pro-life, creationist and anti-Communist activists in today's Russia, where offending the feelings of religious believers was made a crime two years ago.

In a video of the incident posted on YouTube, Mila Odegova, one of the activists, ripped off its plinth a linoleum engraving depicting Christ naked made by the highly acclaimed late sculptor Vadim Sidur. She then threw it on the floor and stomped on it.

Enteo targeted an element of a work by another artist, Megasoma Mars, titled "Beheading of St. John the Baptist #2" and comprising a series of heads made from cloth and other materials. He seized one of the heads and smashed the plate on which it had been displayed.

"Russian laws are being violated here," Enteo told a security guard at the scene.

"Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are being mocked here. This is punishable under the criminal code," he can be heard saying on the video.

As a result, four works by Sidur and one work by Mars were damaged, Manezh spokeswoman Yelena Karneyeva told The Moscow Times. Sidur's linoleum engravings have been on display in a museum dedicated to the sculptor himself for 20 years without any problem, the exhibit's curator Vera Trakhtenberg said in an interview with The Moscow Times.

"What they did is more an act of persecuting Christianity than [an act of desecrating] artistic works," said Trakhtenberg.

The exhibition is still open to the public. The missing works have been replaced with signs reading: "Due to unlawful actions, this work has been damaged. We apologize for this."

The Manezh will file a complaint with police on Monday, Karneyeva told The Moscow Times.

Enteo, who is infamous for his high-profile attacks on cultural events that have included disrupting a performance at the prestigious Chekhov Moscow Art Theater, insists it is the exhibit's organizers who violated the law. During his stunt, he made a point of saying that the exhibit offends religious feelings.

The bill that criminalized offending religious believers was signed into law by President Vladimir Putin in 2013, a year after members of the Pussy Riot female protest group staged an anti-Putin performance protest in Moscow's Christ the Savior cathedral. Three members of the band were sentenced to two years in prison for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred."

The text of the law on offending religious sentiment, which carries up to a year in prison, does not clearly specify what qualifies as an offense and what doesn't.

Visitors to the exhibit attempted to protect the works from the activists. One of the visitors, Lyudmila Dyagileva, called the activists "fanatics and extremists whose actions have nothing to do with faith and Christianity" in an interview with The Moscow Times.

"If they get away with it, it will send a message that you can do anything you want. It is a signal that you can destroy everything if the authorities do nothing," she said.

Enteo was detained briefly by the police on Friday before being promptly released the same evening.

On Sunday, he staged another protest, this time in front of the Manezh.

Enteo verbally attacked two elderly visitors to the Manezh who said they were religious but did not have a problem with the works of art, and questioned the activist on his religious stance. He said they could not be true believers and added that they would be better off being sent to a labor camp.

"Such people are not believers — they do not know God and they have no relationship with Him or with the Church," Enteo told The Moscow Times on Sunday.

High-ranking members of the Russian Orthodox Church have been skeptical of Enteo's activities.

"What so-called Orthodox activists do, as a rule, has nothing to do with religion," Vladimir Legoida, a spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchate, wrote on his Facebook page on Sunday, describing Sidur as "an artist acclaimed around the world."

Konstantin Kosachyov, head of the international affairs committee in the Russian parliament's upper chamber, the Federation Council, called the trashing of the exhibit "disgusting" on his Facebook page on Saturday.

The head of the presidential Human Rights Council, Mikhail Fedotov, compared Enteo's actions with those of "barbarians from the Islamic State [terrorist organization]," Interfax reported on Friday.

A similar incident took place Saturday in the Kaliningrad region, Russia's Baltic exclave.

During an event titled the Franz Kafka and George Orwell Intellectual Forum, a group of activists rushed into the open-air venue shouting: "We are patriots of Russia and you have sold yourselves to the U.S. State Department," and threatening to burn everything there. Police arrived at the scene, Roman Yukhnovets, a witness of the incident, wrote on Facebook.

As a result, a speech by the prominent Russian journalist Oleg Kashin was disrupted.

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