The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Russia’s Yaroslavl Region Bans Abortion for One Day 'In Memory of Bethlehem Babies'

January 11, 2017



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Russia’s Yaroslavl region has banned all abortions from taking place on Jan. 11 in an effort to honor babies killed by King Herod, Russian news reports said Wednesday.

The initiative was advocated by the Russian Orthodox Church which hoped to honor the memory of “Bethlehem babies assassinated by the Herod the King, who wished to kill the newborn Infant God,” a church spokesperson told the Interfax news agency.

All state-run medical institutions have been prohibited from terminating pregnancies on Jan. 11 and have been encouraged to hold events devoted to “protecting the value of motherhood,” the Church said. Private clinics have been urged to take part in the ban.

In comments to the Medizona legal news outlet, local official Yelena Vinogradova denied that the ban had been imposed on local clinics.

“We can't force medical facilities to stop [terminating pregnancies]. We asked them to take part in the event, and they supported it,” she said. “[Some doctors] just don't do abortions. It's against their religious beliefs.”

Medical lawyer Anna Kryukova told Mediazona that refusing to provide a medical service, as outlined in the compulsory state medical insurance that every Russian is entitled to, was a violation of the law. “Patients must remember that they have the right for medical treatment, and refusals should be reported,” she said. “If doctors believe [in God,] and their belief is so strong that they can't perform certain procedures, they should look for a different job.”

Russia reopened its own abortion debate in Sept. 2016 when the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, endorsed an anti-abortion petition. The document, drafted by the religious groups “For Life” and “Orthodox Volunteers,” had been approved by a patriarchal commission on family, motherhood, and children, the church said in a statement.

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This wasn’t the first time Russia's most powerful cleric called on the ⊠government to end its support of abortions (90 percent of which are ⊠state-funded in Russia). Patriarch Kirill addressed the government with ⊠similar pleas in 2015.

While⊠ the Kremlin generally supports the social conservatism propagated by ⊠the church, officials have largely ignored its calls to reduce access to⊠ abortion.

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