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Christ Versus Satire

‘Russian Orthodox Rapid Response Center’ threatens police action against popular Internet community

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Pixabay

The “Russian Orthodox Rapid Response Center,” which is a real thing, has threatened “Lentach,” one of the most popular satirical communities on the Russian Internet, with an inspection by federal investigators, claiming that Lentach shared “sacrilegious memes.”

Lentach’s representatives say Georgy Soldatov, a member of the rapid response center, contacted them this week and demanded that they delete “all blasphemous materials” shared on Lentach’s Vkontakte community — dating back to the creation of the group in March 2014.

If Lentach refuses to purge its archives of anything that might upset a religious person, Soldatov threatened to file a police report with Russia’s Investigative Committee, accusing the

online group of two felony crimes: “obstructing the exercise of religious liberty” and “inciting hatred against a social group.”

Lentach’s administrators told the website TJournal that nothing they publish is illegal. Demonstrating this certainty, Lentach has even invited Soldatov and his friends to “go ahead and submit a thousand police reports.”

In his message to Lentach, the Christian activist reportedly highlighted a few dozen examples of memes that offend him. If Soldatov’s goal was to remove the images from the Internet, however, it’s fair to say the effort has backfired, at least for now, insofar as Lentach later republished every single meme he cited, when the group revealed to its 1.4 million subscribers the threat from the Russian Orthodox Rapid Response Center.

Following the threatening letter, Lentach representatives turned to the “Agora” international human rights group for advice. Damir Gainutdinov, a legal analyst for Agora, reportedly concluded that Lentach’s content doesn’t break any Russian laws.

According to TJournal, Soldatov rejects this assessment and vows to take the matter to state investigators in St. Petersburg. He says his group of Christian rapid responders are also fielding complaints about other communities on social media, including a Lentach splinter group and several atheist societies.

Crossing the Russian Orthodox Rapid Response Center is no laughing matter. Last month, after the group complained to police about “hostile anti-Russian Orthodox propaganda” by MDK (another satirical online community), experts from the Interior Ministry endorsed the activists’ complaint, agreeing that content shared by MDK offended religious sensibilities. Police have supposedly identified the author of the meme and opened an investigation.

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