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Russian Orthodox Church Says Not All Atheists Are Criminals

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Atheists, you've nothing to fear from Russia's largest Christian group, according to Vakhtang Kipshidze, a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church, which respects both religious and nonreligious views, he says.

On Monday evening, television show host Vladimir Pozner appealed on air directly to President Vladimir Putin, Constitutional Court Chairman Valery Zorkin, and Patriarch Kirill, asking for an "exhaustive explanation" about whether atheism constitutes a crime in Russia, where the justice system has frequently convicted militant atheists of offending religious people.

Just last week, for instance, a court in Yekaterinburg gave blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky a 3.5-year suspended sentence for uploading videos to his YouTube channel, including one showing him playing Pokemon Go inside a cathedral. Sokolovsky's verdict cites the fact that he "denies the existence of Jesus Christ and the Prophet Mohammed."

Following the Sokolovsky trial, Pozner reminded his audience that he is himself an atheist, and asked if it's illegal to tell people that he denies the existence of God.

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"Verdicts like the ruling in Sokolovsky's case," the Russian Orthodox Church's spokesperson later told the news agency RIA Novosti, "arise not because he holds atheist views, but because his statements addressed to religious people were disrespectful. This is about defending human dignity, not persecuting one people who hold to one worldview or another."

The press office for Russia's Constitutional Court refused to comment on Pozner's question, telling reporters that it only responds to formal legal appeals.

Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin's spokesperson, also declined to answer Pozner's question, saying it was only rhetorical. Peskov also added that such legal matters are for Russia's courts, not the government's executive branch.

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