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In the Name of God: Atheists in Russia Under Fire (Op-ed)

A recent court case demonstrates that the Russian church has teamed up with the state to take aim at atheists

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Vova Zhabrikov / URA.RU / TASS

Since Russian video blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky was sentenced to three years probation in a Yekaterinburg court this month, the debate in Russia is on — the debate about whether it's even lawful in Russia not to believe in God.

This national conversation came to a head this week when major Russian television anchor Vladimir Pozner asked if he was breaking the law simply being an atheist. Russia's Constitutional court judge Gadis Gadjiyev responded later in an interview that atheism is not an offense under Russia's constitution.

But, he added, if a specific action is taken, "It depends on who the action was taken against. And every single case should be looked in."

For 75 years under the Soviet system, atheism was state policy. In the 1970s and 80s, those who fought for the rights of believers were dissidents and the Soviet regime treated them exactly the same way.

Then, on September 5, 1991, the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR passed the Declaration of Human Rights and Freedoms. Everyone had the right to profess a religion belief, to spread religious or atheistic views, and to engage in the religious or atheistic raising and education of children.

This was the first and last time that the rights of atheists were affirmed in Russia. Now, a quarter of a century later— on the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution—the Russian church is targeting atheists with the help of the state. And Orthodoxy has become state policy.

The clericalization of Russia is, of course, not just beginning. The country's arts and creative spheres were the first to sense it. They began to send warning signals to society through modern art.

The first criminal case involving the "political" Article 282 of the Criminal Code (combating extremism) was prophetically targeted at an anticlerical performance. Artist Avdei TerOganyan's Southern Atheist group held an action in Moscow in 1998 that let people buy a reproduction of an icon and pay to have it defiled on the spot.

In 2000, performance artist Oleg Mavromatti nailed himself to a wooden cross across from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. He had written "I'm not the son of God" on his back. Again, a criminal charge was filed under Article 282. Both Ter-Oganyan and Mavromatti have left Russia.

Human rights activists were the next to suffer. In 2003, director of the Andrei Sakharov Center Yury Samodurov hosted the scandalous exhibition "Caution, Religion!" in its museum. Orthodox activists attacked the museum and broke up the exhibition, but the police did not see their actions as criminal.

The organizers of the exhibition were charged under Article 282. The court found them guilty.

Four years later, history repeated itself. Samodurov and the prominent Tretyakov Gallery curator Andrei Yerofeev organized the Forbidden Art exhibition in the Sakharov Museum, leading to another criminal case of extremism and another sentencing: a fine of 100,000 rubles ($3900).

And then came 2012. First, human rights activist Maxim Efimov from the northern Russian region of Karelia was investigated for extremism for a post titled Karelia Is Tired of Priests. He nearly landed himself in a psychiatric hospital.

Then the group Pussy Riot demonstrated in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, and their criminal case became known to the whole world. Pussy Riot was criticizing the coalescence of the Orthodox Church and the state. Nadia Tolokonnikova and Masha Alekhina became the first Russian citizens to be imprisoned for criticizing the church.

The Pussy Riot case prompted the Kremlin to introduce a new, separate article into the Criminal Code—Article 148 on offending the sensitivities of believers. Since then, attacks on the church have been singled out from general extremism.

It did not take long for the first criminal case to be brought under Article 148. In Stavropol, in southern Russia, blogger Viktor Krasnov published a post titled There Is No God in the heat of a religious debate and he called the Bible "a collection of Jewish folktales."

That case came to nothing, but it became clear that Article 148 was was levelied against atheists. It also became clear that the church was willing to go to law enforcement, not only in response to provocations by artists, but even for typical rhetoric on the Internet.

This habit reached its apogee a little less than a year ago, when video blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky, who has 300,000 subscribers on YouTube, shot a video about playing Pokemon Go in a church in Yekaterinburg. The diocese contacted the prosecutor's office, which involved the police and the investigative committee in the incident. Sokolovsky was arrested and held in custody for eight months before being released by the court. The guilty verdict against him remains in force. Sokolovsky received a suspended sentence. And one of the charges was just that: public denial of the existence of God.

These major cases did not come out of nowhere. Now the repression of alternative Christian denominations is underway in Russia. Recently, the activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who number 150,000 in Russia, have been banned. The Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church and Pentecostals are under pressure. Hare Krishnas and even completely nonreligious practitioners of yoga are being subjected to detention, trial and fines.

Similarly, citizens who protest the construction of churches in Moscow experience persecution and harassment. The Russian Orthodox Church, in conjunction with the police, private security forces and pro-government activists, act against these demonstrators. In one district of Moscow, a protest action was met with a criminal case. Meanwhile in St. Petersburg, the church is trying to take over St. Isaac's Cathedral, the city's most renowned landmark.

The church has a powerful lobby in the Russian political elite. And it uses it—despite the fact that the Russian population is not very religious. Only a small part of it actually participates in religious rites.

Cases like Sokolovsky's are an irritant and stir a feeling of protest in a very large section of society. But, thanks to the state, super-archaic values prevail, which only strengthens the tension between progress and Russian conservatism in its official form.

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