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Russia's Blasphemy Laws Are Just Kremlin Censorship in Disguise

By Lucy Ash

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Blessing Easter cakes at a bakery in Yekaterinburg. **Donat Sorokin / TASS**

Recent incidents involving a kulich Easter cake sparked a social media frenzy. One involved the cake being used as a base for a hookah. The other featured a sex toy. But disputes over what counts as blasphemy are nothing new in President Vladimir Putin's Russia.

One August day nearly a decade ago, Ruslan Sokolovsky walked into a church in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, armed with his mobile phone. Later, the 21-year-old posted a video of himself playing Pokémon Go and walking silently around the church for several minutes, against a backdrop of candles and icons. The church was almost empty, and nobody appeared to notice him. At the end of the video, he said that, unfortunately, he missed out on catching "the rarest Pokémon — Jesus," adding provocatively, "Rumor has it that he doesn't even exist."

Soon, the young vlogger was facing a surge of manufactured media outrage. One TV show

brought in a psychiatrist who diagnosed him with mental illness. Another channel asked if the Japanese game causes hallucinations. The regional news outlet Ura.ru urged law enforcement to examine whether Sokolovsky had breached Article 148 of the Criminal Code — the law against "insulting the feelings of believers." The legislation was introduced after Pussy Riot performed their infamous punk prayer at the Christ the Savior Cathedral, criticizing the unholy alliance relationship between church and state and calling on the Virgin Mary to remove Putin.

Back then, in 2012, the Russian Orthodox Church had responded with anything but forgiveness. It did everything in its power to ensure that the young activists, Nadya Tolokonnikova and Masha Alyokhina, who both had small children, were locked up for two years. In his first public statement after the women's arrest, Patriarch Kirill said, "The devil has laughed at all of us. We have no future if we allow mockery in front of sacred shrines." He called on believers to attend a *molitvennoe stoyanie,* a standing prayer in defense of the faith. Tens of thousands gathered outside Christ the Savior to hear the Patriarch proclaim, from a specially built stage, that these modern "defilers" were just like the foes of Christ. The Church, he told the crowds, had once again come under attack from "enemy forces." Twenty bishops in full red and gold regalia lined up to purge the blasphemy.

While most clergy fell into line and condemned Pussy Riot, Father Pavel Adelgeim, a much-respected priest from Pskov, was among the few who spoke in their defense. He regarded Article 148 as misguided, arguing that "rights should be defended and feelings educated."

In other words, if someone's right to worship or live according to their faith is physically obstructed, the law must step in. But if a believer feels insulted by a protest, a joke or a piece of art, that is a spiritual matter, not a legal one. It is the duty of the Church and not the police, he argued, to educate those feelings so that a Christian responds to an affront with patience, forgiveness and prayer rather than seeking to punish the offender.

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Four years later, in 2016, none of this washed with Bishop Evgeny of Sredenuralsk. He insisted the vlogger in his diocese be imprisoned "not for three years, as the law stipulates, but for at least five, if not more," to discourage others from committing blasphemy in sacred spaces." Within a week, police had forwarded Sokolovsky's Pokémon video to the Center for Combating Extremism. By the time the case reached the court, the indictment was 350 pages long. The vlogger's lawyer, Alexei Bushmakov, repeatedly asked a witness for the prosecution, a woman in a flowery headscarf, to say exactly how her feelings had been insulted. She struggled to answer. An exasperated Bushmakov predicted that by 2030, "Russia will be like medieval Spain, where the Inquisition persecuted heretics." He added, "It's terrifying to think what will happen if people are deprived of the right to choose what to believe and what not to believe in."

Sokolovsky received a 3.5-year suspended sentence and was recognized by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. If he hadn't been the sole caregiver for his seriously ill mother, he probably would have been jailed. He was put on list of people suspected of

financing extremism and terrorism and his bank accounts were frozen. But the fallout from his case affected others. A teacher at a Yekaterinburg seminary was sacked for supporting him. The head of the history department at the Missionary Institute of the Yekaterinburg Diocese was also blacklisted for defending him in court.

Sokolovsky's case became a textbook example of the crackdown on dissent and the expanding clerical influence during Putin's third term, a theme I was researching for my book, "The Baton and The Cross." One religious scholar said it reminded him of the persecution of believers in the U.S.S.R.

Now, a Moscow bartender is facing criminal charges after posting a video of herself using a kulich as a base for a hookah pipe. From the conversation heard in the background, it appears Ksenia Shirokova was asked to create the unusual pipe by a customer who had bought the cake inscribed with the Cyrillic letters ХВ, which stand for "Христос Воскрес" (Christ has Risen). Shirokova captioned her post: "Even Christ would rise from the dead for this."

Within hours, the Investigative Committee announced it had opened a case after a tip-off from a pro-war blogger and founder of the misogynist Male State movement. Activists from the ultra-Orthodox group Sorok Sorokov also filed a complaint with law enforcement. Shirokova, who swiftly deleted her post and apologised, now faces a fine of up to 300,000 rubles ($3,800) or imprisonment for up to one year. For the maximum sentence, the investigation will have to prove that she deliberately intended to humiliate believers, rather than merely seeking likes online.

According to Sova, a group that monitors religion and nationalism in Russia, most of the 39 people convicted for insulting believers in 2024-2025 received fines, community service, or suspended sentences. Two offenders were subjected to compulsory psychiatric treatment. Some of the cases prosecuted over the last decade could be classed as attention-seeking, such as a girl who lit her cigarette from church candles, or the man who decapitated a rooster on a holy shroud. Many Orthodox see these as tasteless rather than criminal.

Other incidents deemed blasphemous aim to provoke serious debate. That was certainly the case with Pussy Riot. Those who complained that the cathedral was the wrong venue to stage a political protest were missing the point. In her court statement, one band member, Yekaterina Samutsevich, said they chose Christ the Savior as their platform precisely because it had been "used openly as a flashy backdrop for the politics of the security forces."

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Father Andrey Kordochkin, one of the most well-known anti-war priests now living in exile, says the situation is paradoxical. Russia, he argues, is far more secular than most European countries. Church attendance is low and it is rare to have any religious education in schools.

"Yet it behaves like a theocracy," he says, "in that the secular authorities speak in religious terms." He cited the theological language used by the head of the foreign intelligence service, Sergei Naryshkin, in an extraordinary attack on the Ecumenical Patriarch in January. Naryshkin called Bartholomew of Constantinople the "Antichrist in a cassock" and accused him of being "mired in the mortal sin of schism." Both the Kremlin and senior Russian clerics

have long sought to undermine the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, especially after it recognized the autocephaly (independence) of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, a move heavily opposed by Moscow.

At the same time, this Christmas, Patriarch Kirill suggested that those who disagree with the government's actions — specifically in the context of the war — should be considered "traitors to the Motherland with all the legal consequences that follow." Words which belong more to a security chief than to the leader of the Church.

"They are legitimising themselves and deciding what is good and what is evil", says Kordochkin. "For them, morality is about sexuality, so they say Europe is bad for tolerating gay pride parades. But as for torture, mass killings and kidnapping children, apparently none of this offends the feelings of believers in Russia."

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