

The Orthodox Church's role in Russia's anti-gay laws

Jamie Manson | Aug. 14, 2013 Grace on the Margins

Though the unjust treatment of gays and lesbians is all too common in our world, it doesn't often make international headlines.

But the upcoming 2014 Winter Olympic games in Sochi, Russia, has cast a spotlight on a string of anti-gays laws passed in the last month by Vladimir Putin.

On July 3, Putin [signed a law](#) [1] banning the adoption of Russian-born children by gay couples as well as all couples or single parents living in countries where marriage equality exists.

Days earlier, another law [was passed](#) [2]*, stating that those accused of promoting "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations" (which supporters of the legislation defined as "relations not conducive to procreation") will be subject to arrest. Anyone who argues for lesbian and gay equality, including judges, lawyers and lawmakers, could be fined.

The law will impose sizable fines for holding gay pride rallies or providing information to minors about the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Individuals who break the law will be given a fine of up to 5,000 rubles (\$156) and media organizations could be penalized up to 1 million rubles (\$31,000).

Included in that law is a provision that allows police officers to [arrest and detain](#) [3] (up to two weeks) any foreign nationals or tourists whom they suspect to be gay, lesbian, or "pro-gay."

Critics argue that the language in this law is so vague that almost anyone could be accused and jailed, and members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) are worried that athletes who travel to Russia for the games could be jailed themselves.

Sadly, this may be only the beginning of unjust legislation targeted at sexual minorities. Media reports suggest that Putin may sign an edict that would allow police to remove the children of gay or lesbian parents. Children could even be taken if their parents are only suspected of being gay or lesbian.

Though Russia decriminalized homosexuality just after the fall of communism in 1993, anti-gay sentiments have been on the rise in the country in the past few years. Putin blames gays and lesbians for the steady population decline since 1991. But activists also believe that Putin is using the crackdown to appeal to conservative voters.

It is a tactic, some say, right out of "the Nazi playbook." Playwright Harvey Fierstein, a gay man and a Jew, argued in a [recent op-ed](#) [4] in the New York Times that "Mr. Putin's campaign against lesbian, gay and bisexual people is one of distraction, a strategy of demonizing a minority for political gain ... his condemnations are permission to commit violence against gays and lesbians."

British actor Stephen Fry, also a gay man and a Jew, made a similar argument in [an open letter](#) [5] to Prime

Minister David Cameron and members of the IOC. Calling for a boycott of the 2014 Olympic Games, Fry writes that Putin "is making scapegoats of gay people, just as Hitler did Jews. He cannot be allowed to get away with it."

Fry continues, "Every time in Russia (and it is constantly) a gay teenager is forced into suicide, a lesbian "correctively" raped, gay men and women beaten to death by neo-Nazi thugs while the Russian police stand idly by, the world is diminished and I for one, weep anew at seeing history repeat itself."

Tragically, the injustice and violence faced by members of the LGBT community also have a direct link to the Russian Orthodox Church.

In June, just before the vote on the "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations" bill, gay rights activists attempted to hold a "kissing rally" outside the Duma, the Russia legislative building, which is located across the street from Red Square in central Moscow.

[CBS News](#) [6] reported that the activists "were attacked by hundreds of Orthodox Christian activists and members of pro-Kremlin youth groups. The mostly burly young men with closely cropped hair pelted them with eggs while shouting obscenities and homophobic slurs."

Though riot police moved in, only the gay rights activists were detained. Protesters who were not detained were later beaten by masked men on a central street about a mile away. The police, it seems, turned a blind eye.

CBS also reported that, earlier in the day, dozens of anti-gay activists picketed the Duma. "One of them held a poster that read: "Lawmakers, protect the people from perverts!" while others held Orthodox icons and chanted prayers," the report said.

These Russian Orthodox Christians are likely taking their cue from their leader, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill.

The patriarch believes that the recognition of same-sex unions by Western countries is a harbinger of impending doom. In July, [Russia Today](#) [7] reported that after a liturgy in Red Square's Kazan Cathedral, Kirill said, "This is a very dangerous apocalyptic symptom, and we must do everything in our powers to ensure that sin is never sanctioned in Russia by state law, because that would mean that the nation has embarked on a path of self-destruction."

Kirill called on Russians to "fight for freedom from sins," saying, "Where sin is elected through freedom, there comes death, terror and dictatorship."

Putin reportedly has been strengthening his alliances with the Russian Orthodox Church in the past few years.

In a September 2012 piece entitled "[Putin's God Squad](#)," [8] Newsweek's Peter Pomerantsev observed, "After near extermination under Communist rule, the church and religion are back at the heart of [Russia's] politics ... Since Putin's reelection, a parade of priests have been loudly denouncing forces aligned against the president."

Pomerantsev reported on the rise of a group of Russian Orthodox vigilantes who have taken to patrolling the streets of Moscow at night, dressed in all-black clothing emblazoned with skulls and crosses. "The enemies of Holy Russia are everywhere," Ivan Ostrakovsky, the leader of a group, told Pomerantsev. "We must protect holy places from liberals and their satanic ideology."

It's very likely that these vigilantes are from the same group that has been attacking gay and lesbian activists.

At least one study suggests that Putin's anti-gay sentiments are largely supported by the Russian population.

According to a poll conducted in June by the All-Russian Public Opinion Center (VTSIOM), 54% of respondents believed that homosexuality should be banned and criminalized. 88% supported the recent anti-gay laws. The statistics, however, are questionable since VTSIOM is a state-owned polling agency that was [taken over by the Kremlin](#) [9] in 2003.

But Russia is not exactly a model "pro-life" nation, and its social conservatism is complicated at best. According to the New Yorker's [Masha Lipman](#) [10], "Russia has one of the world's highest rates of both divorce and abortion, and some of the most liberal laws on the latter. Russia's birth rate is not dissimilar from that of secular cultures of western Europe. Premarital sex and single motherhood are fairly common; in one survey, a mere fourteen per cent of respondents said they believed a single parent can't raise a child properly."

Studies suggest that Russians aren't especially pious either. "While a large majority of Russians identify themselves as Orthodox Christians, the proportion of those attending services or observing religious rituals in Russia is not dissimilar from many European countries," Lipman writes.

It's highly unlikely that the repression of gays and lesbians will lead any nation to ultimately ban the Sochi Olympics. (A spate of human rights violations didn't impede China for hosting the games in Beijing in the summer of 2008.)

Nevertheless, having the eyes of the world on Russia has helped raised the visibility of the growing victimization of gays and lesbians in a European country. And for those interested in the ways in which religion can be used as an instrument of violence against sexual minorities, Russia, sadly, is quickly becoming a premiere example.

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**This column has been revised to clarify details of the Russian laws.*

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[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/03/us-russia-putin-gay-idUSBRE96210N20130703>

[2] <https://www.ncronline.org/abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/qa-anti-gay-legislation-russia-19935992>

[3] <http://www.ibtimes.com/gay-pro-gay-athletes-tourists-will-face-arrest-sochi-2014-winter-olympics-russian-lawmaker-says>

[4] <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/opinion/russias-anti-gay-crackdown.html>

[5] <http://www.stephenfry.com/2013/08/07/an-open-letter-to-david-cameron-and-the-ioc/single-page/>

[6] http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57588738/russian-anti-gay-bill-passes-protesters-detained/

[7] <http://rt.com/news/church-same-sex-unions-404/>

[8] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/09/09/putin-s-god-squad-the-orthodox-church-and-russian-politics.html>

[9] <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1001/p07s02-woeu.html>

[10] <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2013/08/the-battle-over-russias-anti-gay-law.html>

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