

Jesus Christ Superstar? Not in Rostov, Russia

The Russian parliament's vote in support of a declaration against acts offending religious sentiments is symptomatic of worrying trends, write Olga Shvarova and Dominic Burbidge.



In response to tensions over religious-secular divisions in Russia, the State Duma, lower house of Russia's parliament, voted in September 2012 for [a declaration against acts](#) that offend religious sentiments, proposing increased sentences for those who commit acts of violence, vandalism and blasphemy against spiritual leaders or church property. Although the declaration has no binding force, it gives a green light to future legislative changes that build on the popular resentment to recent acts deemed offensive to the religious beliefs of Russian citizens. The declaration by the Duma came in the wake of the [Pussy Riot controversy](#) where two band members were sentenced to two years' penal service for producing a music video on the altar of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

Despite the attention given to the Pussy Riot episode, the declaration was also motivated by other incidents. Yaroslav Nilov of the Duma's Social and Religious Organizations Committee is spearheading the commitment to stronger legislation and listed the two terrorist attacks in

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Dagestan and Tatarstan, which [killed a Muslim Sheikh](#) and the [deputy of a Muslim Mufti](#), as further evidence for the need to intervene on how religious discourse is affecting the stability of the Russian nation. The Duma's declaration of taking further action against those who act to offend religious believers has [found support](#) amongst representatives of Russian Muslims, Jews and the Russian Orthodox Church, but the new law was [criticised](#) as unconstitutional, confusing and capable of inciting rather than pacifying religious tension. An example of the tensions surrounding the debate came through the cancellation of a [proposed staging of Jesus Christ Superstar](#) at the Rostov Philharmonic in response to a letter, signed by 18 individuals, who [complained](#) that the image of Jesus Christ in the musical was deeply offensive; a similar complaint was lodged by the local administration. The scandal was eventually resolved by the decision of the state attorney to allow the performance, leading to the musical being [staged](#) in Rostov without incident.

The sudden proliferation of new laws concerning freedom of expression in Russia may seem like a movement towards western-styled legislation, designed to protect human rights. Taken separately, however, these laws are usually reactive to particular political events. For example, the proposed law on protecting the feelings of the believers is commonly interpreted as a reaction to Pussy Riot's punk-prayer. The proposed law on internet censorship is also known to be in reaction to the Innocence of Muslims YouTube video. A closer look at these laws reveals a unifying principle of state control at work: it is possible to see how this new wave of lawmaking is an attempt to foster a certain political ideology that attempts to cement a deteriorating and dissenting society; a new ideological platform to support the ruling elite. This political stance is comprised of patriotism (anti-Western, anti-liberal nationalistic culture) and Orthodox Christianity (Orthodox morality and ethics).

This new strategy is a political tool, and can be used aggressively. In this light, the episode with Jesus Christ Superstar is representative. The administration of the Rostov Philharmonic backed down immediately, without any attempt to save face or revenues when confronted by a simple letter, unsupported by actual law, a court decision, any official Church statement or any letter from the state attorney. The unsubstantiated nature of the complaint, and the world famous status of the musical, combined to prevent the ban this time. But the episode nevertheless demonstrates how Russia is at a dangerous tipping point, with a majority of Russians supportive of a new wave of prohibitive laws. Watch this space!

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