

Putin's Call to Put Holy Books Beyond Reach of Courts Opens Can of Worms, Shtepa Says

Culture

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“It is indicative,” Shtepa says, “that Orthodox clericalists are concerned with practically the same thing that Muslim fundamentalists are. The two equally dislike European freedoms and are supporters of the introduction of a certain ‘correct’ dress code, especially for women. The Muslims are more radical in their demands, and the impression is that the Orthodox are following them.”

By Paul Goble* for “Window on Eurasia”: Vladimir Putin’s call to put Holy Books beyond the reach of Russian courts was clearly intended to solve the political problem created by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov’s objections to the decision of a court in the Russian Far East finding verses from the Koran to be “extremist.” But Putin’s move not only highlights Russia’s moves away from a secular state toward an Orthodox-Muslim one but also calls into question the entire logic of Russian legislation that allows for courts and other officials to ban anything they object at any particular time to as extremist. Vadim Shtepa, a leading Russian regionalist writer, calls attention to all these problems and more in a commentary on the Spektr.press portal (spektr.press/pravoslavno-islamskoe-gosudarstvo/). His words should give pause to all those who think that what Putin has proposed will solve the problem rather than cause even more difficulties for Russia in the future. Four days ago, he writes, Putin “proposed to make an exception from the law “On Countering Extremist Activity” for “the Bible, the Koran and other holy writings.” By so doing, the Kremlin leader “of a *de jure* secular state shows himself prepared to put religious teaching above the legislation of the country.” Such a move, Shtepa continues, “fits in beautifully with the logic of recent times and only confirms the clerical evolution of the current Russian authorities.” Of course, Putin’s move came in response to Kadyrov’s complaints, although others have challenged religious texts, including the Bible. (See sib.fm/news/2015/09/16/zhitel-novosibirska-poprosil-prokuraturu-proverit-bibliju). And of course, “Chechnya is a unique subject of the Russian Federation, in which much more is permitted than elsewhere.” Indeed, it is “obvious that there was a secret pact between the Kremlin and the Kadyrov administration after the second Chechen war,” one in which “in exchange for colossal subsidies from the Kremlin ‘Allah,’ the Chechen leadership began to position itself as enthusiastic patriots of Russia and its protects by threatening activists of the opposition.” But even that accord might have not been enough to push Putin to act had it not been for the support Kadyrov’s position received from the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, who speaks for Patriarch Kirill, called for ending court cases against “holy texts” (newsru.com/religy/11sep2015/chaplin_hl_schriften.html). Chaplin even added that in his view and apparently that of many in the official hierarchy, “the Russian Constitution of 1993 was ‘illegitimate’ because ‘it was adopted without the active public participation of Orthodox people and also of traditional Muslims” (politsovet.ru/49717-v-rpc-zayavili-o-nelegitimnosti-konstitucii-rossii.html). “Thus,”

Shtepa writes, "in Russia a definite rapprochement of the positions of Orthodox and Muslim conservatives if not their complete coming together has taken place" That trend was on view even earlier given the similar statements the Moscow Patriarchate and the leaders of traditional Muslims in Russia made about what should be permitted in society. From one perspective, this shouldn't surprise anyone. Five years ago, Putin asserted that "Orthodoxy is closer to Islam than it is to Catholicism" (islamnews.ru/news-28541.html). "Now," Shtepa says, "it is precisely the president who stands in defense of religious texts against the law," something that that view and the ideas of Eurasianism support. According to the regionalist writer, "the moratorium against criticism of 'holy texts' proposed by Kadyrov and Chaplin and supported by President Putin will mean the actual liquidation of secular statehood," because it will place them above the law and thus "destroy the very institute of civic law on which contemporary civilization is based." Kadyrov and Chaplin limit these holy texts to the Koran and Bible respectively, "but any religious community can have its own 'holy writings' and it also will insist that they are 'beyond the reach of the law.'" But that will prove impossible to sustain, as Putin has acknowledged by adding the texts of Buddhists and Hindus already. The only way to "return the situation to a rational dimension is a principled and consistent insistence on the constitutional principles of a secular state," from which Putin and his friends have now departed, having failed to recognize that their support of "traditional religions" undermines this possibility. "It is indicative," he says, "that Orthodox clericalists are concerned with practically the same thing that Muslim fundamentalists are. The two equally dislike European freedoms and are supporters of the introduction of a certain 'correct' dress code, especially for women. The Muslims are more radical in their demands, and the impression is that the Orthodox are following them." Several years ago, Ravil Gaynutdin, the head of the Council of Muftis of Russia (SMR), suggested that the Koran should be recognized as "the third Testament," after the Old and New (regions.ru/news/2097731/). Under the protection of the Putinist state, that "rapprochement" appears to be happening. And if things proceed any further, "one anti-utopian anecdote could be as follows: 'In 1927, Russia said: 'there is no god.' Now, it needs to be added, 'except Allah.'" "

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*The commentary above is from Paul Goble's "Window on Eurasia" series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com