

## For Your Information

December 20, 2012 | By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

**Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has passed a succession of anti-human rights laws curtailing freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Parliament might even pass a proposed blasphemy law that clearly would violate religious freedom. President Obama must speak out.**

*The following op-ed appeared in the [Christian Science Monitor](#) on December 20, 2012.*

This year has featured grim news of serious human rights restrictions imposed by Moscow on Russian society, including religious groups. At their next discussion, President Obama should convey these concerns to Vladimir Putin, reiterating to Russia's president the need to adhere to universal human rights and religious freedom standards if relations are to progress between our two countries.

When I was in Moscow in late September as chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, I heard these worries voiced frequently. In my meetings with 30 individuals representing civil society, journalism, and human rights and religious freedom, all feared that Russia was on the cusp of a new cold war on civil society.

Since Mr. Putin's return to the presidency, Russia has passed a succession of laws curtailing freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Parliament might even pass a proposed blasphemy law that clearly would violate freedom of religion or belief.

The new restrictions began in June 2012 when Putin signed a law which included a 100-fold increase – more than the average Russian's annual salary – in fines for unauthorized protests.

In July, Putin signed legislation requiring foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in "political activity" to register as "foreign agents" or face massive fines or two-year jail terms for their leaders. Essentially, this declares a group to be a highly suspicious outsider organization. Yet many of Russia's most vital human rights NGOs rely on some outside financial support.

Also in July, Russia's parliament adopted laws increasing control over the Internet and re-criminalizing certain kinds of libel.

In November, Putin signed a treason law on the day he told the Presidential Human Rights Council that he might revise it. It broadens the definition of high treason to include acts against “constitutional order, sovereignty, and territorial and state integrity,” potentially making participation in political protests and international organizations punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

All of this came on top of acts against pro-democratic US entities, such as closing the US Agency for International Development and denying certain radio frequencies to Radio Liberty.

Recently, Russia’s parliament began considering the criminalizing of blasphemy. A current bill would levy fines and penalties for “offenses against religion and religious sentiment” and “offending religious feelings of citizens.”

Those found to have engaged in “public insults to the faith and humiliation during liturgical services” could be fined up to 300,000 rubles (\$10,000), ordered to perform 200 hours of community service, or sentenced to three-year prison terms. For “the desecration and destruction of religious objects, places of worship and pilgrimage,” penalties could include up to five years in jail. Putin has since called for postponing the bill’s consideration until next spring.

Supporters insist that religion, particularly Russian Orthodoxy, needs protection against critics who, they claim, seek to destabilize Russia by undermining its religious traditions. Yet a blasphemy law not only would violate the individual rights of freedom of religion and expression,

but could exacerbate tensions by stifling the peaceful exchange of ideas and opinions.

Were the blasphemy bill to pass, Russians could bring suit against fellow citizens whom they allege have “insulted their religious sentiments.” For instance, Russian Orthodox believers who view Apple’s logo as glorifying Adam and Eve’s original sin in the Bible also could prosecute Apple executives.

Russia already punishes people for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” Under this criminal category, two of the three women detained in the notorious Pussy Riot punk band case were handed two-year prison sentences for performing a “punk prayer” in February at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.

Clearly, a blasphemy law could push Russia’s religious freedom conditions from the proverbial frying pan into the fire.

Even without this proposal, Russia maintains a blatant double standard on religious freedom. While favoring the Moscow patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, it targets Muslims and other groups. Its actions range from sweeping bans on Islamic materials to labeling religious minorities such as Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses “totalitarian cults,” as well as discriminating systematically against Russia’s evangelical Protestant minority.

Russia's course unmistakably threatens democracy, but also stability, potentially pitting the Moscow patriarchate against Russia's 25 million Muslim citizens. For the sake of both freedom and stability, it's time to remind Russia's president that, for the United States, human rights matter, and it's time to condemn this year's eclipse of those rights in Putin's Russia.

*Katrina Lantos Swett is Chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).*

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, please contact Samantha Schnitzer at (202) 786-0613 or [sschnitzer@uscirf.gov](mailto:sschnitzer@uscirf.gov).