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It was in the early hours of the morning on Sept. 6 when Pastor Vasili Romanyuk's phone rang. A group of men backed by local police were demolishing his Holy Trinity Pentecostal Church, housed in a three-story building nestled in a Moscow suburb. As word spread, congregants arrived at the scene hoping to save the building, but their efforts were futile. By dawn the church was in ruins and some of its most valuable contents were missing.

An isolated incident? A misunderstanding? Analysts watching the current climate in the former Cold War country don't think so: "This destruction of the church is about as concrete of evidence as you can get that something very bad and very troubling is taking place," said Katrina Lantos Swett, chair of the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**. "This could not have happened without the backing, support, and implicit blessing of the police."

The incident is just one sign of deteriorating freedoms in Russia, and behind the scenes a cozy relationship between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church has raised more than a few eyebrows. As President Vladimir Putin digs into his third term, a number of Kremlin crackdowns involving vague interpretations of the country's extremism law and other human-rights abuses are troubling signs that the country has slipped into a familiar, repressive era.

“When you have unknown people backed by the police coming out at midnight to begin tearing down a church, you know something doesn’t smell right,” Lantos Swett told me.

Officials evicted Holy Trinity Church from its original building in 1995 and relocated the church to the eastern Moscow suburb. The congregation used its own funds to construct a new building and repeatedly battled officials over permits. The church demolition and its history reflect an emerging pattern: Authorities confiscate land from non-favored religious communities and force the congregation to relocate to a remote suburb, the religious leaders apply for permits that are subsequently denied, and officials confiscate (once again) or demolish the relocated congregation, citing lack of proper documentation.

Pastor Romanyuk and a small group of the church’s 550 congregants arrived on site around 3:30 a.m. as about 45 men claiming to be civil volunteers blocked them from the building and threw stones. “When I arrived, I just burst into tears,” 25-year-old Natalya Cherevichinik told The Moscow Times as she surveyed the destruction. “I couldn’t believe that something that had been built over several years could be destroyed in a few hours.”

Police arrived but did nothing to stop the razing. Furniture, instruments, computer equipment, and chalices for the Eucharist were among the items taken from the church.

Romanyuk has been fighting an uphill battle with the public prosecutor of Moscow's Eastern Administrative District. According to Forum 18, a Moscow-based news service covering religious liberty in the region, the prosecutor filed suit against the church in 2010, demanding it vacate the site despite the fact that the congregation was originally given permission to use the land.

City officials told Romanyuk last month that the church would be destroyed by Sept. 15, but delivered nothing official about what was to take place. "We didn't believe they would just do this," Romanyuk told Forum 18. According to a report in *The Moscow Times*, the city plans to build a giant sports complex on the land.

The pastor didn't let the crippled building halt worship plans. About 300 to 400 congregants gathered among the rubble for a two-hour church service the following Sunday, but police detained Romanyuk and took him to the police station after the service for questioning about the "illegal rally." Police said the detention order came from "above," according to one eyewitness.

A new law passed in the wake of anti-Putin demonstrations—over allegations of election rigging following Putin's return to the presidency last March—requires a permit for outdoor gatherings.

Other changes make it easier to target non-Orthodox churches. Authorities arrested and sentenced to two years in jail three women from a Russian punk band over anti-Kremlin activities, provoking an international outcry. The group performed an anti-Kremlin song at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and was charged with “hooliganism driven by religious hatred.”

The sentence sparked condemnation from a cadre of Hollywood stars, and on Sept. 12 Russian Prime Minister and former President Dmitry Medvedev came out in support of the group’s release. Medvedev clarified his apparent turn-around: The incident still makes him “nauseated” but the band’s six months in jail were “fully enough to make them think about what happened,” he said during a press conference.

But persecution of religious minorities has gone largely unnoticed. An extremism law passed in 2002 and cleverly disguised as a means to prevent religious violence has produced vague interpretations that target nonviolent religious minorities.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses and a Muslim sect that follow the teachings of Turkish theologian Said Nursi have been the primary targets. A court in 2007 banned 14 of Nursi’s commentaries of the Quran for their assertions of Islam’s “exclusivity.” Five followers served three-year prison terms for charges related to the banned books, according to Forum 18.

Groups that seek converts are labeled as threats to the country’s Russian Orthodox identity. In an ironic reverse from Communist rule, when Soviet leaders threatened to stamp out religion,

now church and state have joined forces to protect "Holy Russia." A number of priests have publicly declared their support for Putin, and Russia's foreign ministry claims that Western criticism of the punk rock band trial was proof that Moscow embodies "Christian values" long forgotten in the West. "One needs to remember that the first revolutionary was Satan," Dmitry Smirnov, a Russian Orthodox official, warned.

Lantos Swett says the disintegrating state of religious freedom in Russia can be placed in the broader spectrum of a Kremlin crackdown on human rights. She lists the mysterious deaths of more than 200 crusading journalists during the past seven years as further proof of deteriorating freedoms.

The international community lost some leverage when Russia became a member of the World Trade Organization in August, but the United States must continue to pressure Moscow to adhere to its international human-rights commitments, she says.

Lantos Swett, along with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, supports the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, a human-rights bill that would ban Russian officials involved in persecution from entering the United States and using U.S. financial institutions. The bill is named after a 37-year-old attorney and accountant who was imprisoned and beaten to death after uncovering a multimillion-dollar corruption scheme involving Russian tax and law enforcement officers. This legislation would deny visas to and freeze assets of Russian officials linked to human-rights abuses. It has cleared committees in the House and Senate, but the Obama administration has opposed it as a threat to better relations with Russia, and the Kremlin has vowed retaliation if it passes.

“On a range of issues and on a score of fronts Russia is going backwards and going backwards fast,” Lantos Swett warned. For Romanyuk and his now homeless congregation, Russia’s dark and repressive past is still very much their present.

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