

# Russian parliament passes anti-homosexual laws

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On June 11 the Russian parliament adopted—by 436 votes to nil, with one abstention—two civil rights laws, making it a punishable offence to openly practise homosexual relationships, defend homosexuals or “insult religious sentiments”.

Both laws have yet to be approved by the parliament’s upper chamber and signed by President Vladimir Putin. Putin has already publicly declared his support for both laws.

The two laws constitute an assault on basic democratic rights. They are part of a campaign by the Kremlin, which is increasingly responding to growing social unrest and political instability by appealing to nationalist sentiment and exploiting right-wing forces such as the Russian Orthodox Church.

The new anti-gay legislation provides for penalties of up to €100 (US\$135) for individuals and €23,000 (US\$30,000) for organisations that “promote non-traditional sexual relationships”. Defending the basic democratic right of social equality for homosexuals is therefore made illegal.

Foreigners are not exempt from the laws. Convicted of an offence under the new statutes, they face a fine of €2,300, as well as possible detention for up to 15 days and forced deportation. The distribution of “homosexual propaganda” has already been criminalised in several regions, including St. Petersburg, since last year.

More than 20 people protesting against the laws were arrested at a demonstration in front of the parliament in Moscow. The demonstrators were also violently assaulted by supporters of the Russian Orthodox Church, pelted with eggs and doused with urine, without drawing any intervention from the police.

Arguing for the anti-gay legislation before parliament, Yelena Mizulina, a co-author of the law,

declared: “Traditional sexual relationships are relationships between a man and a woman ... which is the basis for the preservation and advancement of the multi-ethnic Russian people. It is precisely these relationships that need special protection from the state”.

President Putin has also repeatedly criticised homosexuals for not contributing to population growth in Russia.

In recent years, the Kremlin has deliberately been encouraging reactionary prejudices and sentiments. According to surveys, the proportion of the population supporting the law increased from 40 to 47 percent last year. Homosexuals are often victims of violent attacks.

A recent survey revealed that 15 percent of the country’s lesbians and gay men had been physically assaulted in the past 10 months. By fomenting this reactionary mood, the Kremlin is building on the legacy of Stalinism, which for decades propagated “traditional family values” and national chauvinism as part of the political reaction to the October Revolution.

The second law passed by the parliament on Tuesday enables the Kremlin to continue blurring the boundaries between church and state. The law makes “insulting religious feelings” a punishable offence. Fines of up to €7,500 can be imposed and “desecration of religious temples” is punishable by up to five years in prison. The “public abuse” of icons and religious literature such as the Bible or the Koran can incur heavy fines.

The Kremlin is thereby siding with the court verdict against three singers of the feminist punk band, Pussy Riot, who were sentenced to several years in prison following a show trial last summer, because they had sung an anti-Putin “punk prayer” in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The Kremlin exploited the case to launch a massive nationalist and religious

propaganda campaign to divert attention from the economic and social crisis.

The two laws signal the Kremlin's further shift to the right and closer alignment with the Russian Orthodox Church, a refuge of ultra-nationalist and fascist tendencies.

The Russian Orthodox Church, whose leaders shamelessly enriched themselves during the restoration of capitalism, have played an important role in politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Church and state have moved closer together particularly under Putin's premiership. Confronted with mass protests from urban middle-class layers and growing social discontent, the Kremlin again last year significantly intensified its religious campaign in the press and fanned national tensions.

The Kremlin is currently enforcing brutal austerity measures against a largely impoverished population. More than a third of all universities and many medical facilities are being privatised or closed. Further pension cuts are also under discussion. This week, President Putin announced even more savage cuts and mass layoffs among state employees. These social attacks are bound to provoke opposition from the working population. The ruling elites are introducing repressive laws and the bolstering the authoritarian state in order to prepare for an open confrontation with the working class.

Under the duplicitous pretext of defending "democracy and human rights", the imperialist powers and the liberal opposition are using the authoritarian laws to put pressure on the Putin regime.

Michael McFaul, the US ambassador to Russia, condemned the anti-gay law that violates "the spirit of a democratic society". At the outset of the protest movement against Putin in December 2011, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama had stressed that the US regarded the defence of the rights of homosexuals as an essential part of the "struggle for human rights".

The German government's response to the legislation was particularly sharp. Instructed by Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, the German foreign office tightened travel restrictions for Russian citizens. Government spokesman Steffen Seibert said that Chancellor Angela Merkel expected a reversal of the law.

The campaign by imperialist powers is completely dishonest. They react brutally to any social opposition in their own countries, set up vast networks for monitoring the population, and ride roughshod over basic democratic rights such as the right to freedom of expression and privacy.

For years, they have been supporting the liberal opposition and pseudo-left forces in Russia, both of which maintain close links to the extreme right. Fascist forces also play an important role in the Western-backed opposition movement. In reality, the imperialist campaign in defence of "democracy and human rights" aims to increase pressure on the Putin regime, which is particularly opposed to the NATO powers' Middle East war plans against Syria and Iran.

It is the task of the working class to defend democratic rights as part of the struggle for a socialist programme, directed against the Putin regime and capitalism.



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