

2017

Recent Legislative Restrictions and Putin's Propaganda Machine: the Russian Government's Attack on Religious Freedom

Jason Grover

Follow this and additional works at: [http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/
international_immersion_program_papers](http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/international_immersion_program_papers)

Recommended Citation

Grover, Jason, "Recent Legislative Restrictions and Putin's Propaganda Machine: the Russian Government's Attack on Religious Freedom" (2017). *International Immersion Program Papers*. 46.
http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/international_immersion_program_papers/46

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Papers at Chicago Unbound. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Immersion Program Papers by an authorized administrator of Chicago Unbound. For more information, please contact unbound@law.uchicago.edu.

Jason Grover

**Recent Legislative Restrictions and
Putin's Propaganda Machine:
The Russian Government's Attack on
Religious Freedom**

University of Chicago Law School

Introduction

Anyone who has ever visited Moscow will recognize the towering frame of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. At a height of almost 350 feet, it is the tallest Orthodox Christian church in the world. An icon of central Moscow, the cathedral sits on the bank of the Moskva river, just south of Red Square and north of the monument to Peter the Great. This cathedral is more than just a symbol of Russian faith and history; its story is emblematic of the ongoing story of religious freedom in Russia. Construction on the original church was completed in 1862 and was celebrated with the world debut of Tchaikovsky's famous *1812 Overture*. However, the new national monument did not endure as long as originally expected. After the 1917 revolution, the newly established USSR's policy of state atheism won the day. In the first of several anti-religious campaigns throughout the life of the Soviet Union, Stalin determined the cathedral's site to be the perfect place for a different kind of monument, the Palace of the Soviets. Demolition of the church took place in December 1931, but progress on the palace slowed and eventually halted for good at the outbreak of World War II. Sixty years later, following the Soviet collapse, a new initiative proposed reconstruction of the church. Almost a million Muscovites donated money to the project, and the completed Cathedral was consecrated in 2000.

So goes the familiar narrative surrounding freedom of religion and expression in Russia. After decades of various levels of communist persecution, the chill finally thawed and a new democratic Russia embraced its religious roots and opened its doors to religious minorities. In its very broad strokes, this narrative has merit, and represents the general reality. The focus of this paper, however, will be on the next chapter in freedom of expression and religion in Russia.

Again, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was the center stage to an event that epitomizes a new era of religious liberty.

On February 12th, 2012 five members of the group “Pussy Riot,” a feminist protest punk rock group, staged a performance inside the Moscow cathedral before they were stopped by security officials. The Orthodox clergy labeled their actions as sacrilegious and two of the members were even convicted with hooliganism and sentenced to two years in prison. The group named their protest, “Mother God, Drive Putin Away,” and claimed that they sought to criticize Putin’s authoritarianism, the close ties between Russian Orthodoxy and the government, sexism, and anti-LGBT policy. The controversy surrounding the protest, trial, and sentencing gained considerable media exposure in the West, and fueled criticism from advocates of freedom of conscience and expression. Although perhaps coarse, the protest was also revealing. It shed light on what many see as a regressive momentum reshaping the landscape of religious freedom and expression in Russia. This wave is characterized by a strong authoritarian allegiance between Putin and Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and a tightening grip on non-conforming minorities or outside voices, especially those with ties to the West, all under the guise of protecting national security and culture from the so-called poisons of extremism, terrorism, and foreign influence. In many ways, Pussy Riot’s protest in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour stands as the symbolic impetus of a four-year backward slide that has seen the Russian government perpetuate what one expert calls, “systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom” that he feels merit Russia’s designation by the State Department as a Tier 1 CPC (country of particular concern).¹

¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, “Tier 2 Countries: Russia” at 198 (Annual Report: April 2016) available at <http://www.uscirf.gov/> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, I will briefly set the stage by discussing the status of religious freedom in the transition years after the fall of the Soviet Union and the years of Putin's first presidency. Second, I will explore four significant legislative efforts by the Russian government after Putin's reelection and their adverse impact on religious liberty. Finally, I will turn to an example of a different means of religious discrimination: state-encouraged media defamation. This case study will demonstrate how the recent legislative reforms go hand in hand with intense propaganda efforts to stifle non-conforming voices and bolster Putin's authoritarian control.

Setting the Stage

As indicated in the introductory narrative, the initial post-soviet period played host to a "boom of religiosity" that led to "unparalleled religious diversity" and religious interest in the country.² Foremost was a Orthodox revival that led to a sharp increase in ROC activity, but there was also a wide-spread hope for more absolute freedom of religion than the country had ever seen. The dream of total liberalization was never to be fully realized though. Crystallized in the 1997 Freedom of Conscience law were basic freedoms, but also hints of inequality, like inhibiting registration requirements, and subtly "xenophobic slogans" that labeled certain religions "non-traditional" and "sectarian."³ Other undesirable developments included requirements for minority religious groups to prove existence in the country for a period of at least fifteen years in order to receive official recognition, plus strict regulation on missionary

² Roman Lunkin, *The Future of Religious Freedom* at 157 (Oxford University Press 2015).

³ *Id.* at 158.

activities throughout most regions. Fortunately, things stabilized as religious minorities brought constitutional challenges and appealed the European Court of Human Rights. Discriminatory practices were largely held in check. Russia had started its new religious order, and although it was far from perfect, it was tolerable.

The new millennia brought a new president in Valdimir Putin, who in turn brought an authoritarian approach to religious freedom. In his first term Putin pushed for a host of limiting reforms. Although he was successful in deporting a record number of foreign preachers, his administrative efforts to restrict missionary activity, and provide complete state support for ROC influence in education and culture, ultimately came up short. Opposition to Putin's campaign was led by many intellectuals of society, even Nobel Laureate scientists, who criticized the President for policies that treated "other religious denominations with contempt."⁴ Roman Lunkin summarized that, after almost a decade in office, "despite Putin's efforts, authorities ultimately failed to fully curb religious freedom in Russia. The law on missionary work was not adopted, and the Russian Orthodox Church did not become the official state church. As well, no serious restrictions at the legislative level were imposed on the rights of religious minorities."⁵ At the end of almost a decade in power, many considered Putin's authoritarian tactics to have failed, a bullet had been dodged, at least for the time being.

The Medvedv presidency saw "no severe diminution of religious freedom," but a continued resilience of Orthodox Christianity's "prominent place in mass media and political life."⁶ Frustratingly, monoreligious policy does not reflect the religious make-up of society. Although around 80 million Russians identify themselves as people of Orthodox faith, in reality

⁴ *Id.* at 166.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* at 174

only 10 -15 percent, at most, of those are active participants or “traditional believers.”⁷ Therefore, support of the ROC and discrimination "against the rights of other believers appears to be both innately contradictory and counterproductive.”⁸ Still, despite these inconsistencies, evaluations of of Russia before the start of Putin’s second term were relatively optimistic. The norm of religious freedom was on the rise and rigid pro-orthodoxy seemed on the verge of eroding. Since 2012 however, the rhetoric has flipped. Regression in the past 5 years has led Mikhail Odintsov, "who until recently was responsible for the protection of religious rights in the Russian Federal Ombudsman’s office,” to note, "In religious policy, we are drawing close to the norms of the Soviet Union.”⁹ Putin’s aggressive return to power has initiated a host of challenges to religious liberty at an alarming rate. Though perhaps cleverly packaged in order to avoid attracting too much international tension, recent policies smell of old authoritarian measures of suppression. I will now explore four specific policies implemented since 2012 and discuss their potential negative impact on religious freedom in Russia.

Four Legislative Limits

- 1. 2012 Foreign Agent Law** (Officially: *On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent*)

⁷ *Id.* at 175.

⁸ *Id.* at 176.

⁹ Elizabeth Clark, “Russia’s New Anti-Missionary Law in Context” (Religious Freedom Institute: Cornerstone Blog, 4/30/2016) available at <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/8/30/russias-new-anti-missionary-law-in-context> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

In July 2012, United Russia party leaders signed into law a bill that requires all NGOs receiving any sort of foreign funding and engage in "political activity" to officially register as "foreign agents." Although the term is not necessarily degrading in English, often simply understood as a lobbyist, the Russian translation, 'ИностраннЫй АгЕНт,' connotes espionage or foreign infiltration, and was the equivalent of 'spy' in the Soviet vernacular. Registered organizations must indicate that all written or oral statements were given by a "foreign agent." Human Rights Watch recently reported that, "to date, Russia's Justice Ministry has designated 158 groups as "foreign agents," courts have levied staggering fines on many groups for failing to comply with the law, and about 30 groups have shut down rather than wear the "foreign agent" label.¹⁰ Organizations targeted include groups that work on human rights, the environment, LGBT issues, and health issues, groups that do polling about social issues."¹¹ In its 2015 Helsinki Final Declaration, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly called upon the Russian Federation "to end its attempts to stigmatize and discredit civil society groups by labelling them 'foreign agents.'"¹²

However, rather than revoking the order, Putin signed a follow up to the law in 2015 that expanded prosecutorial authority to extrajudicially ban "undesirable" foreign or international organizations" that they allege "threaten state security, public order, or health."¹³ Unfortunately,

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups" (The Battle Chronicle) available at <https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly, "Chapter III: Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions: Article 111" (2015 Helsinki Final Declaration) available at <https://www.oscepa.org/documents/all-documents/annual-sessions/2015-helsinki/declaration-3/2977-2015-helsinki-declaration-eng/file> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

¹³ USCIRF, at 192.

efforts to challenge these laws in the constitutional court have proved unsuccessful. Although all the implications remain to be seen, some "religious groups fear that it could also apply to religious bodies."¹⁴ Even if not directly impacted, religious liberty and freedom of expression will only suffer if the efforts of other human rights advocacy groups are impeded by this government action. The very NGO's being labeled as suspicious foreign agents are the groups most influential in providing the understanding and advocacy to protect marginalized groups and individuals. The more ambiguous discretion given to state officials to demonize and harass civil rights groups, the harder it will be to achieve transparency and awareness. Hurdles like the foreign agent law make it extremely difficult for civil rights and fundamental freedoms to hold their ground against government interest.

2. 2013 Blasphemy Law (Officially: *Amending Article 148 of the Criminal Code Russian Federation and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Aimed at Countering Insult of Religious Beliefs and Feelings of Citizens*)

In the wake of the "Pussy Riot" controversy, parliament amended its criminal code in order to extend punishment (serious fines and up to three years in prison) to those found to "offend religious feeling." The blasphemy law is problematic on several grounds. First, it is an obvious restriction on freedom of expression. Dr. Agnes Callamard, executive director of Article 19, an organization dedicated to promoting these freedoms, explained, "this law is yet another addition to the arsenal of new legislation in Russia that can be used to single out and target

¹⁴ *Id.*

public dissenters, allowing the government to frame repression through legal provisions.”¹⁵ A concerning case is that of Victor Krasnov, who was "charged in Stavropol for allegedly publicly insulting Orthodox believers in 2014 by supporting atheism in social media.”¹⁶ Genuine religious liberty depends on the freedom to express both religious and non-religious sentiments. This example might also demonstrate the second problematic element of the law. By all accounts enforcement is only directed at expressions that might offend “traditional” religious belief. Slanted application of the law towards Orthodox beliefs is a clear sign that it in fact offends equal protection of religions instead of protecting it. Protecting religious institutions and individuals from discrimination or defamation is admirable, ROC favoritism that stifles free speech is perverse. Lastly, the obvious vague nature of the language, “religious feeling” opens the door to abuse in discretion. The ambiguity simply gives license to prejudice of non-traditional sentiments.

3. 2015 Amendments to Anti-extremism law

Various forms of anti-extremism law from the Russian federal law and the criminal code are yet another weapon in state-sponsored discrimination against religious minorities. Overly broad definitions and harsh punishments are used to target certain individuals and groups. In particular, a February 2015 ruling from the Constitutional Court mandated that “propaganda of

¹⁵ Article 19, “Russia: Pussy Riot inspired blasphemy law threat to free expression” (STATEMENT, 7/1/13) available at <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/37143/en/russia:-pussy-riot-inspired-blasphemy-law-threat-to-free-expression> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

¹⁶ USCIRF, at 193.

the superiority of one's own religion" is considered extremist.¹⁷ It determined that it would not violate freedom of speech, conscience, or religion to ban any text containing such "propaganda" or convict individuals for disseminating those texts. This interpretation gives any Russian court power to declare a print or web-based text extremist, ensuring that it will be placed on the Ministry of Justice's black list and subsequently banned throughout the country. This is no longer a rare occurrence, "as of February 2016, that list reportedly totaled 3,291 items."¹⁸ A Library of Congress report indicates that "Many undesirable religious groups have been prosecuted for propagating superiority based on religious identity, even though such propaganda appears to be common to many religious preachers."¹⁹ Classifying a text as extremist simply because it claims religious superiority is obviously deeply flawed. Many religions, if not most, include claims of exclusive truth. Ironically, pravoslavie (православие), the name of the Russian branch of eastern orthodox christianity, literally translates to 'correct belief'. Of course, Putin's administration worked around this glaring inconsistency by amending "the extremism law to prohibit the banning of the four sacred texts of the 'traditional' religions: the Bible, the Qur'an, the Jewish Torah, and the Tibetan Buddhist Kanjur."²⁰ As has become the theme, "Russian law enforcement agencies have been targeting religious groups outside the Orthodox community for 'extremism,'" and it is "common practice to use article 282 of the Criminal Code against authors who criticize the Russian Orthodox Church or Russian national and religious policy."²¹ Among the most intensely targeted religious movements include: Tablighi Jamaat (non-political global

¹⁷ *Id.* at 192.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ The Law Library of Congress, "Legal Provisions on Fighting Extremism: Russia" available at https://www.loc.gov/law/help/fighting-extremism/russia.php#_ftn130 (last accessed April 24, 2017).

²⁰ USCIRF, at 192.

²¹ The Law Library of Congress, "Legal Provisions on Fighting Extremism: Russia."

Sunni Islamic missionary movement that rejects the use of violence), Followers of Said Nursi (the Turkish theologian), other Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Scientology, and Yehowist-Ilyinites. Many of these restrictions are objectionable, if not unconscionable. For example, it is hard to imagine legitimate reasons for confiscating thousands of copies of the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Translation of the Bible (a text only marginally dissimilar to something like the King James Version). No wonder the USCIRF is urging the Russian government to "amend its extremism law in line with international human rights standards, such as adding criteria on the advocacy or use of violence, and to ensure that the law is not used against members of peaceful religious groups or disfavored communities."²²

4. 2016 Yarovaya Law (officially: Russian federal bills 374-FZ and 375-FZ)

Last July, two months after it was introduced, only a few days after its second reading, without public input, and in the face of formidable popular opposition, two bills amending a standing counter-terrorism law passed the Duma and were signed by President Putin. Dubbed the Yarovaya law, after one of its main proponents, Irina Yarovaya, the bills, despite masquerading as national security measures, brought into effect serious consequences for data privacy and religious freedom in Russia. The provisions relating to religious liberty centered around several new anti-evangelism doctrines. The day after the law was signed, it was promptly condemned by the USCIRF in a press release. The USCIRF summarized the policy implications of the law in this way, "The anti-terrorism measures would, among other provisions, amend the 1997 Russian religion law by redefining "missionary activities" as religious practices that take place outside of

²² USCIRF, at 196.

state-sanctioned sites. The new law thus would ban preaching, praying, proselytizing, and disseminating religious materials outside of these officially-designated sites, and authorize fines of up to \$15,000 for these activities conducted in private residences or distributed through mass print, broadcast or online media. Foreign missionaries also must prove they were invited by state-registered religious groups and must operate only in regions where their sponsoring organizations are registered; those found in violation face deportation and major fines.”²³

Notably, and also predictably, none of these increased restrictions seem to negatively impact the operations of the ROC. For many experts on religious freedom, this development is the most serious and disheartening to date. Restrictions on what religious individuals may say, "even in the confines of their own homes" crosses a line that casts a Soviet shadow over Russia.²⁴

Although, the self-proclaimed purpose of the restrictions is to fight terrorism and extremism, the impact of the law will probably be felt most by evangelicals and other non-orthodox Christian groups. Eric Patterson points out that the restrictions “are not really focused on violent Islamists or other terrorist actors.”²⁵ Rather, the new legislation fits in a larger context, targeting foreign-funded and western/liberal-minded groups or individuals in order to protect the cultural and spiritual heritage of the country. Whatever the motivations, the legislation could cause serious collateral damage. Although relatively new, “several individuals in various regions have already

²³ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, “RUSSIA: USCIRF Condemns Enactment of Anti-Terrorism Laws” (Newsroom, 7/8/16) available at <http://www.uscirtf.gov/news-room/press-releases/russia-uscirtf-condemns-enactment-anti-terrorism-laws> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

²⁴ Elizabeth Clark, “Russia’s New Anti-Missionary Law in Context.”

²⁵ Eric Patterson, “Russia Restricts Religious Liberty...Again” (Religious Freedom Institute: Cornerstone Blog 9/2/2016) available at <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/8/30/new-curbs-on-religious-freedom-cast-soviet-shadow-over-russia?rq=russia> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

been prosecuted under the law, and the precedents suggest that the law will be interpreted broadly. A Ghanaian citizen was convicted August 1 for performing baptisms in a rented sanatorium swimming pool, even though he claimed we was not trying to involve new members. A U.S. independent Baptist preacher was fined August 14th for holding a worship service in his home because he allegedly advertised it on the bulletin board of nearby apartment buildings.”²⁶ The Baptist preacher’s conviction was held up in court, but he is seeking to bring his case to the European Court of Human Rights. If literally enforced, the Yarovaya provisions could lead to seemingly absurd consequences. Igor Yanshin, a Russian lawyer who filed a petition in opposition to the law that gained 40,000 signatures, quipped, “traveling by train and want to tell a neighbor about God? Forget it! After all, you do not have/have forgotten/have not received the relevant documents, and you could spend the rest of the trip in the nearest police station. Want to repost a beautiful picture with a quote from a preacher on VKontakte? Think twice! Double-check the validity of the authorizing document! Sent a message to a friend with an invitation to a service? Wait for the police to visit!”²⁷ This strict of enforcement might be unrealistic, but not impossible. Religious groups who do not have approved premises face the bigger challenge of finding a place to preach and worship. Geraldine Fagan predicts that, rather than comply, many will sooner go underground – just as in Soviet times.”²⁸

²⁶ Elizabeth Clark, “Russia’s New Anti-Missionary Law in Context.”

²⁷ Article 19, “Russia: Pussy Riot inspired blasphemy law threat to free expression” (STATEMENT, 7/1/13) available at <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/37143/en/russia:-pussy-riot-inspired-blasphemy-law-threat-to-free-expression> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

²⁸ Geraldine Fagan, “New Curbs On Religious Freedom Cast Soviet Shadow Over Russia” (Religious Freedom Institute: Cornerstone Blog, 9/1/2016) available at <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/9/2/russia-restricts-religious-libertyagain> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

Case Study

In addition to the legal hurdles Putin's administration has used to curb the influence and freedom of religious minorities, dissenters, and civil rights advocacy groups, Putin has employed state-sponsored (or at least heavily influenced) media groups to do his dirty work. In recent months and years, NTV and news channels have become notorious for a barrage of aggressive investigative journalism raids against NGOs, religious groups, outspoken individuals / political opponents, and others. In many ways, it is the perfect one-two punch, debilitating legal requirements coupled with a media onslaught aimed at discrediting, humiliating or even demonizing the Kremlin's next target. This powerful tactic is highly effective and goes a long way in explaining why the Russian government has been so effective in controlling the narrative surrounding Ukraine and the West while still maintaining popular support. I will now turn to a concrete example of this tactic in action in order to demonstrate how exploitation of the perception of a religious minority can help the Russian state accomplish the broader goals discussed above.

First in February and then in March of 2015, the St. Petersburg based news channel "Pyatij Kanal" released documentary broadcasts about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Both reports were approximately 15 minutes long and were featured on Channel 5's Sunday evening program "Glavnoe" (The Essentials). Entitled "Behind the Mask of Piety" the reports depicted the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a mysterious American cult acting as an extension of the U.S. military seeking to infiltrate Russia and brainwash its citizens. Though riddled with an almost comical number of conspiracy theories, exaggerations and even blatant lies, the reports are also eerily believable. The calculated manipulation of half-truths and the professional presentation could easily sway the uninformed. The average Russian viewer

garners at least a little suspicion and at worst open hostility towards anything associated with Mormons. In an effort to combat the attack from Channel 5, the LDS church published an open letter on its Russian newsroom site. The letter accused the program of being “deliberately offensive” and “urge[d] the leadership of the Channel Five to publish a retraction of the gross defamation committed in the episodes” (“Open Letter to Channel 5” 1-2). Unfortunately, the demands seem to have gone unnoticed.

Seeing the broadcasts as a part of a broader trend within Russian mass media reveals that rather than being the campaign of fiercely embittered anti-Mormon journalists, the broadcasts were just another assault in the endless barrage of Putin’s propaganda against the West and the newly established government in Kiev. As what many see as a rich, American church with a misunderstood past, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was simply too easy of a target. It joined a long line of innocent and unsuspecting victims that have been slandered in order to fuel the fire of propaganda continually stoked by the Kremlin. Anything more than a casual viewing establishes that the politically charged broadcast was more than your average anti-Mormon documentary about theological oddities, its target transcends the LDS church and, with the rest of the state-promoted media in Russia, takes aim at the meddling Americans and extremists in Ukraine. In order to enable its access to non-Russian speakers and provide a more detailed analysis, I translated both the February 1st broadcast and the LDS church’s open letter to Channel 5 into English. In the remainder of this paper, I will first outline the basic goals and motivations of what Vice News has dubbed “Putin’s propaganda machine” and then, drawing on specific instances from the report, illustrate how the broadcast “Behind the Mask of Piety” is directed at achieving those very same purposes.

The idea of propaganda is undoubtedly not a new phenomenon in Russia. Although many remember the legacy of Soviet propaganda, the resurgence of state-controlled media seems to have gone unnoticed by many, thanks to the superficial guise of democracy in today's Russia. However, some experts seem to think that Putin's "weaponization of propaganda"²⁹ even rivals that of the U.S.S.R. Lev Gudkov, the director of the Levada Centre, Russia's most well-respected polling organization, called it "worse than anything I witnessed in the Soviet Union"³⁰ and NATO's General Philip Breedlove, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, has called it "the most amazing information war blitzkrieg known in history."³¹ Not only has the Kremlin taken control of the main television channels in Russia, "it has deployed an information army inside television, radio and newspapers throughout Europe."³² Putin forces any independent news sources that oppose him under, and through a task force of his own Internet trolls, has a complete stranglehold on the media. The efforts of the Russian government are sophisticated and they are working. Polls in Russia indicate that Putin's approval ratings are high, and the trust in and approval of the EU and USA among Russians have plummeted. The central idea of the propaganda effort revolves around the issues in Ukraine. A BBC report deftly summarized Putin's message on Ukraine, "The violence in eastern Ukraine is all Kiev's fault, Ukraine is

²⁹ James Coyle, "The US Should Do More to Counter Putin's Propoganda" available at <http://www.newsweek.com/us-should-do-more-counter-putins-propaganda-345987> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

³⁰ Bridget Kendall, "Russian propaganda machine 'worse than Soviet Union'" available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27713847> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

³¹ John Fund, "Inside the Putin Propaganda Machine" available at <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/395709/inside-putin-propaganda-machine-john-fund> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

³² Chris McGreal, "Vladimir Putin's 'misinformation' offensive prompts US to deploy its cold war propaganda tools" (The Guardian) available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/25/us-set-to-revive-propaganda-war-as-putin-pr-machine-undermines-baltic-states> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

crawling with Russia-hating neo-Nazis and fascists, and it's the US government which is fueling the crisis behind the scenes, while Russia tries to act as peacemaker.”³³ In order to achieve this goal, the Kremlin is not afraid to twist, spin and fabricate. For example, sites like StopFake.org have cataloged the top 100 lies from the Russian media about Ukraine.³⁴ General Breedlove explained that, “whether it’s inventing atrocities by the ‘fascist’ pro-Western government of Ukraine or denying responsibility for the downing of a Malaysian passenger plane, Putin’s use of the media has many Western observers in awe.”³⁵ As illustrated in the broadcast about the LDS Church and other reports, Putin and the Russian media have proved that they will go to extreme measures to perpetuate the message of the propaganda. In essence, that message relies on three central goals: first, depict those responsible for the 2014 Maidan Revolution as untrustworthy, extreme and delusional; second, link America to the revolution and accuse them of instigating and supporting the fighting in Eastern Ukraine; and third, create suspicion of Western (esp. American) meddling/spying in Russia.

The overall message of the broadcast from Channel 5 aligns exactly with these very motivations. The following points from the broadcast serve to accomplish the three goals of Putin’s propaganda outlined above:

1. Discrediting the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution

One of the central aims of Putin’s control over the media has been to depict those involved in the Kiev revolution as extremists and fascists. Although this particular broadcast does not speak of fascists, it associates the revolutionaries with something even worse –

³³ Bridget Kendall, “Russian propaganda machine 'worse than Soviet Union.'”

³⁴ Julia Davis, “Russia’s top 100 lies about Ukraine” available at <http://www.stopfake.org/en/russia-s-top-100-lies-about-ukraine/> (last accessed April 24, 2017).

³⁵ John Fund, “Inside the Putin Propaganda Machine.”

Mormons. The report highlights a man named Niki Vasili Ljubarec. Although reliable details are difficult to track down, Ljubarec is a Ukrainian man who apparently spent some time in Utah studying and was eventually baptized a member of the LDS church in the early nineties. Although it is unclear whether Ljubarec is still associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the broadcast simply describes him as a Mormon who hypocritically “preached the peaceful ideas of Smith”³⁶ while organizing rallies in Ukraine. The intent seems to be to show that the organizers of the protests were deceptive members of a sect directly involved in promoting violence. Immediately after the description of Mr. Ljubarec, an “expert correspondent” explains that Mormons will “carry out any command from above without excuse.”³⁷ By portraying Mormons as programmed robots and then linking them to the leaders of the rallies, the broadcast subtly vilifies the revolutionaries.

2. Link America to the revolution and fighting in Eastern Ukraine.

In addition to the part of the broadcast concerning Mr. Ljubarec, the broadcast seeks to accomplish this goal by first, equating Mormon with the US Military and then insinuating that Mormon leader, Elder Jorg Klebingat was promoted from his position of leadership in Kiev after successfully helping incite the revolution. Throughout the entire broadcast, comments are made to try and connect Mormons to the American government; however, none are more ridiculous than the claim that both Bush presidents and practically all the military commanders of the United States are Mormons.³⁸ The accusations about Elder Klebingat are slightly more vague, but equally as ridiculous. The broadcast proceeds to point out that, according to experts, Elder

³⁶ Pjatyi Kanal (Channel Five), “Behind the Mask of Piety” (Glavnoe 2/1/15) English transcript at line 36.

³⁷ “Behind the Mask of Piety” at line 43.

³⁸ “Behind the Mask of Piety” at line 69.

Klebingat's rise in power was "no coincidence" and that, "colorful revolutions" like that in Kiev "are all funded on the money of special services" and that "they are all trying to, in one way or another, use the leverage of religious organizations to help put in power whichever regime they need."³⁹ The viewer comes away with the impression that the revolution in Kiev was an elaborate scheme funded by America and carried out by an army of Mormon missionaries.

3. Create suspicion of Western (esp. American) meddling/spying in Russia.

This point is the natural progression of the previous claims. The Putin propaganda continually emphasizes that if America has its way, what happened to Kiev will happen to Russia. This broadcast is no different. With the repeated speculation about Mormon missionaries trying to use "gypsy hypnosis"⁴⁰ on soldiers or trespassing on government property based on orders "someone has long dictated to the missionaries from the west,"⁴¹ the report asserts that the Mormons are a facet of the American espionage effort. Furthermore, the broadcast enumerates a list of Church owned property that is coincidentally very close to different Russian government buildings. This trend might have some merit, except for the fact that, as anyone who has visited Russia knows, almost everything is very close to a government building.

It is clear that it is the intent of the program to leave the viewer with the following general impression: Mormons are American exceptionalists with strange and mysterious beliefs; their adherents were among the extremist leaders in the Kiev revolution; and their missionaries are tasked by the US Special Services with stealing secret strategic information and bringing about a similar revolution in Russia.

³⁹ "Behind the Mask of Piety" at line 26-28.

⁴⁰ "Behind the Mask of Piety" at line 50.

⁴¹ "Behind the Mask of Piety" at line 67.

Conclusion

Much has changed since the demolition of the original Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 1931, yet in many ways, challenges to religious freedom have come full circle in Russia. For now, the outlook is bleak. Unless Putin reverses course in both legislative and media-control tactics, what USCIRF chair, Thomas J. Reese, called the "Russian government's war against human rights and religious freedom" will continue to hold back individual liberties, promote discriminatory treatment, and adversely impact societal health in Russia.⁴²

⁴² Eric Patterson, "Russia Restricts Religious Liberty...Again" (Religious Freedom Institute: Cornerstone Blog 9/2/2016) available at <https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/8/30/new-curbs-on-religious-freedom-cast-soviet-shadow-over-russia?rq=russia> (last accessed April 24, 2017).