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7 Pokémon in the Church: The Case of Ruslan Sokolovskiy and the Limits of Religious Performance in Contemporary Russia

Protests against the Russian Orthodox Church are a recurrent phenomenon in the present-day Russian Federation. In most cases, they are triggered by the various connections existing between said Church on the one hand, and Russian political and business structures on the other hand. These protests frequently receive media attention, especially in social media that remain to a large degree under state control. In some instances, however, these protests assume the form of religious blasphemy aimed either at Church-State relations, at the Orthodox Church or at Christianity as such (the Russian media usually identify Christianity with Orthodoxy).

Blasphemy in Russian public life and other forms of anti-church protests are thus generally political in nature. A prime example of this bias is the performance of Pussy Riot in 2012 which, despite being superficially blasphemous (the participants parodied an Orthodox prayer in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour), was mostly aimed at Russian President Vladimir Putin's political system.[1] Additionally, the repression that the participants in the protest faced, despite charges being formally based on the law regarding the offence of feelings of religious believers, were politically inspired. This fact seems to have eluded numerous politicians and celebrities engaged in the defence of Pussy Riot. Similarly, protests that took place in the city of Yekaterinburg in 2019 against the construction of a church and building complex replacing the existing park had a political nature – their mass character convincing regional and federal authorities to suspend building work. For despite the anti-church rhetoric, the protests were directed at the close connections between local officials and Russian oligarchs (some of these fabulously rich representatives of business were to fund

1 Aleksey Chadayev, *Putin: Nashi tsennosti* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2018), 160; Anya Bernstein, "An Inadvertent Sacrifice: Body Politics and Sovereign Power in the Pussy Riot Affair," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 1 (2013); Dmitry Uzlaner and Kristina Stoeckl, "From Pussy Riot's 'Punk Prayer' to Matilda: Orthodox Believers, Critique, and Religious Freedom in Russia," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 34, no. 3 (2019).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110713091-009

the new church).[2] Such links, which pervade Russian social life, are met by the public with ever increasing opposition.

In recent years Russia has witnessed a protest that had the character of public blasphemy but was, different from the aforementioned cases, devoid of any political dimension: the 2016 performance in which blogger Ruslan Sokolovskiy played the Japanese game "Pokémon Go" by searching for Pokémon within the building of the Church 'On Blood' ('na Krovi', full name: Temple-Monument on the Blood in Honour of All the Saints who Shone in the Russian Land) in Yekaterinburg, prompting accusations that he had offended the feelings of religious believers. The following pages analyse the context and consequences of Sokolovskiy's intervention. It shows that the blogger deliberately committed an act of public blasphemy, that is, he intentionally violated a sacred space, introducing secular elements to it that were aimed at desacralising that very space. Yet whilst Sokolovskiy clearly was a perpetrator of symbolic violence, he was also a victim who had to face the full wrath of the law. In fact, the legal and social consequences the blogger faced point to a broader pattern in contemporary Russia, namely, the extensive protection of religious feelings awarded to believers. Existing laws do not provide equal rights to believers and non-believers, nor do they protect non-believers from discrimination.

The Legal, Social and Political Context of Ruslan Sokolovskiy's Case

The position of Ruslan Sokolovskiy's case in Russian public debate is closely connected to the various legal changes that have taken place in the Russian Federation since the fall of the Soviet Union. This transformation has also affected the place of religion in public life. Russia has undergone, in this respect, an enormous evolution since the late 1980s. Although in the last years of the Soviet Union, under the rule of Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the influence of perestroika and the first signs of democratisation in public life meant that the situation of religious communities began to change, the State still officially maintained an atheist ideological stance.[3] A significant number of church buildings belonging to the

2 "Konflikt iz-za khrama v Yekaterinburge. Chto vazhno znat'," accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.rbc.ru/society/16/05/2019/5cdd41899a79477f7e641d6d.

3 Roman B. Osokin and Vladimir G. Kokorev, "Printsip spravedlivosti i ravenstva kak kriteriy otsenki i sovershenstvovaniya stat'i 148 UK RF 'Narusheniye prava na svobodu sovesti i veroispo-

Orthodox, Catholic and various Protestant Churches dating back to the pre-Bolshevik era, were demolished (the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow is a case in point), closed down or restructured to serve other purposes: storehouses, theatres, sports centres or offices. Occasionally, church buildings housed so-called museums of atheism whose aim it was to ridicule religion.[4]

Yet although the Soviet Union long remained an official atheist state, the open persecution of churches, especially of the Russian Orthodox Church, finished well before its collapse. The last wave of anti-religious actions, which included closing down parishes and churches, took place under Nikita S. Khrushchev in the late 1950 and early 1960s; under his successor, Leonid I. Brezhnev, Soviet authorities began to accept some very limited activity by the Russian Orthodox Church.[5] Important was that the Church, on its part, pledged to refrain from supporting any opposition movement aimed to undermine the governing Communist Party. There were only few political dissidents associated with the Russian Orthodox Church (Gleb Yakunin, Lev Regel'son or Aleksander Men are examples) and they mostly operated in the last period of the Soviet Union, in the atmosphere of a democratic awakening of 'glasnost' and perestroika.[6]

The laws that had been introduced following the Bolshevik Revolution had always officially guaranteed freedom of religious expression.[7] The constitution of the Soviet Union, as well as the constitutions of the various union republics, also guaranteed citizens the right to practice their religion without interference. In practice, however, this freedom was extremely limited. During the Stalinist period, representatives of the clergy, monks and lay activists connected to the Church were subjected to repression and terror.[8] This repression lasted until the collapse of the Nazi-Soviet alliance and the attack of Nazi Germany on the

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vedaniy'," *Filosofiya Prava* 4 (2017): 112; Lee Trepanier, *Political Symbols in Russian History: Church, State, and the Quest for Order and Justice* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 140.

4 Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (2004): 42.

5 Aleksiy Marchenko, *Religioznaya politika sovetskogo gosudarstva v gody pravleniya N. S. Khrushcheva i yeye vliyaniye na tserkovnuyu zhizn' v SSSR* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Krutitskogo podvor'ya, 2010); Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 3.

6 Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 52–57.

7 Alexander Ponomariov, *The Visible Religion: The Russian Orthodox Church and Her Relations With State and Society in Post-Soviet Canon Law (1992–2015)* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017), 120.

8 Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church*, 45–47; Trepanier, *Political Symbols in Russian History*, 144–145.

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).[9] Even during later years, the Church and its representatives were subject to various restrictions. In particular, the ability of young people to engage in church life was severely limited.[10] Although a liberalisation of anti-religious policy was already visible during the rule of Gorbachev – the clearest signs being the organisation of the thousandth anniversary of the baptism of the Rus' in 1988 and Gorbachev's meeting with Pope John Paul II in 1989 – religious freedom was not restored until the final days of the USSR.[11]

In October 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, the highest legislative body of the USSR, passed a law on freedom of conscience and religious organisations and then – in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic – a law on religious freedom that significantly expanded the scope of public activities in which Churches were allowed to engage.[12] After the fall of the USSR, this law was modified and superseded by further legislation guaranteeing religious organisations the freedom to operate in public. The constitution of 1993 even officially introduced religious freedom in the Russian Federation. According to article 28, "Everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, including the right to profess individually or together with others any religion or to profess no religion at all, to freely choose, possess and disseminate religious and other views and act according to them."[13] At the same time, article 14 stated that "The Russian Federation is a secular state. No religion may be established as a state or obligatory one." The article furthermore stated that all religious organisations should be separated from the State and treated equally before the law. In other words, no faith community could claim a position of privilege.

As the State's relations with the Churches in Russia began to change, it became important for civil authorities to reconstruct or return church buildings and monasteries that had previously been demolished or used for other purposes. This process continues until the present day and has invited much controversy

9 Ponomariov, *The Visible Religion*, 125–127.

10 Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia," 40–41.

11 For the baptism anniversary see, Ponomariov, *The Visible Religion*, 132–134.

12 For the October 1990 law see e.g. Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy after Communism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 56–57. The subsequent law on freedom of religion is discussed in Sergey M. Vorob'yev, "Konstitutsionno-pravovyye osnovy deyatel'nosti religioznykh organizatsiy v ugolovnoispolnitel'noy sisteme Rossii," *Ugolovno-ispolnitel'noye pravo* 1 (2016): 32–33.

13 "The Constitution of the Russian Federation," accessed February 1, 2020, http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.html; Vladimir G. Kokorev and Ivan A. Zaytsev, "Osobennosti ugolovno-pravovoy okhrany prava na svobodu sovesti i veroispovedaniy v Rossiyskoy Federatsii kak svetskom gosudarstve," *Vestnik ekonomicheskoy bezopasnosti* 1 (2017): 65.

from the public, seeing that many of the buildings thus returned are often used by cultural, academic or educational institutions keen to keep their possessions.[14] An act of restitution of great symbolic meaning was the 1999 restoration as a place of religious worship of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, the same building that, in 2012, witnessed the (political) protest by Pussy Riot.[15] Such symbolic gestures were followed by legal changes taking place during the last years of Boris N. Yeltsin's presidency as well as the first years of Vladimir V. Putin's rule. They are occasionally considered to amount to a deviation from the constitutional principle of separation of Church and State, and to defy the ideological neutrality of the State. It is particularly important to point here to the special legal recognition enjoyed by the so-called traditional religions of Russia that is aimed at defending the societal position of Orthodoxy in the face of the growth registered by Protestant communities.[16]

Besides legal regulations, the years of Putin's rule also brought a series of decisions that are perhaps less known but are equally significant for Church-State relations in modern Russia. Between 2002 and 2006, for instance, the principles of Orthodox religious culture were included as an optional subject on the curriculum of state schools.[17] In 2015, theology was recognised as an academic discipline, which required the State to acknowledge academic degrees in theology.[18] Two years later, the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned from the Russian Federation on account of them being accused of extremism.[19] Also in 2017, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' was included in a list of government officials whose property holdings are kept secret.[20] The Russian Orthodox Church has

14 See, e. g., Dmitry Uzlaner, "The End of the Pro-Orthodox Consensus: Religion as a New Cleavage in Russian Society," in *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Eastern Europe: On Multiple Secularisms and Entanglements*, ed. Tobias Koellner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Tobias Köllner, "On the Restitution of Property and the Making of 'Authentic' Landscapes in Contemporary Russia," *Europe–Asia Studies* 70, no. 7 (2018).

15 Zoe Knox, "The Symphonic Ideal: The Moscow Patriarchate's Post-Soviet Leadership," *Europe–Asia Studies* 55, no. 4 (2003): 586.

16 Fagan, *Believing in Russia*, 66 – 68 and 131 – 133.

17 Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church,* 46; Kristina Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 101; Andrey Kurayev, *Podniat' Rossiyu s kolen: Zapiski pravoslavnogo missionera* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2014), 50 – 55.

18 "Teologiya stala nauchnoy spetsial'nost'ju v Rossii," accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.interfax.ru/russia/419811.

19 "Verkhovnyy sud podtverdil zapret 'Svideteley Iegovy'," accessed February 1, 2020, https://ria.ru/20170718/1498660129.html.

20 "Gosduma razreshila zasekretit' imushchestvo vysshikh chinovnikov, patriarkha i ikh rodstvennikov," accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.mk.ru/politics/2017/06/21/gosduma-razreshila-zasekretit-imushhestvo-vysshikh-chinovnikov-patriarkha-i-ikh-rodstvennikov.html.

also come to play a significant role with regard to the army. Military chaplains have been active in the Russian army for years.[21] The construction of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, which was consecrated on June 14, 2020, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the USSR's victory over Nazi Germany, was also symbolic.[22] Moreover, although the Russian Orthodox Church cannot be financed directly from the state budget, it is a beneficiary of the presidential grant system aimed at supporting cultural and educational activities.[23]

Finally, it is worth mentioning that religious issues have also emerged in recent debates on constitutional reform. On January 20, 2020, President Putin presented a draft amendment to the State Duma, the lower house of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation.[24] In the course of discussions on possible constitutional changes, Valentina Tereshkova, the first female astronaut ever and presently a member of the State Duma, presented on March 10, 2020 a proposal according to which the adoption of changes to the constitution will start the counting of the president's term of office anew.[25] In practice, this means that Putin can exercise power until 2036. Of greater interest to us is that during this constitutional debate, among others Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus', the highest ecclesiastic of the Russian Orthodox Church, suggested that a reference to God be introduced into the Russian constitution.[26] In other words, the constitutionally guaranteed separation of Church and State as well as of the State's ideological neutrality were thus to be abandoned.[27] Even though in the final version of the constitution – adopted after a so-called nationwide vote that was held from June 25 to July 1, 2020 – the secular character of the State (article 14) and freedom of conscience (article 28) were maintained, a new article 67.1 for the first time mentioned faith in God as part of Russian heritage and iden-

21 Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church*, 57–58.

22 "Glavnyy khram Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii," accessed July 1, 2020, https://hram.mil.ru/.

23 Knox, "The Symphonic Ideal," 589; Nikolay Mitrokhin, *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov': Sovremennoye sostoyaniye i aktual'nyye problemy* (Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2006), 278–279.

24 "Chto Vladimir Putin predlozhil izmenit' v Konstitutsii," accessed April 1, 2020, http://duma.gov.ru/news/47556/.

25 "Valentina Tereshkova predlozhila rassmotret' vopros o snyatii ogranicheniy po chislu prezidentskikh srokov," accessed April 1, 2020, http://duma.gov.ru/news/47995/.

26 "Patriarkh Kirill predlozhil upomyanut' Boga v Konstitutsii," accessed February 1, 2020, https://ria.ru/20200202/1564152511.html.

27 "VRNS predlozhil popravki v preambulu Konstitutsii Rossii," accessed February 1, 2020, https://ria.ru/20200126/1563901253.html.

tity.[28] The constitutional debate, and especially the introduction of article 67.1, show that the legal position of the Russian Orthodox Church in society has a unique character, going beyond the principles of freedom of conscience and religion guaranteed to all citizens. This has also impacted the way in which official authority has responded to Ruslan Sokolovskiy's performance in Yekaterinburg's Church On Blood as well as to other cases of (alleged) blasphemy.

Public Blasphemy in Russia: Legal and Canonical Aspects

Even though Russian law does not explicitly define blasphemy (*bogokhul'stvo*), it is possible to find in the provisions of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation a general definition of blasphemy. Article 148 concerns violations of the right to freedom of conscience and religion in public space. The original version of this article, included in the Criminal Code adopted in 1996, was very general, decreeing that it was forbidden to obstruct the activity of religious organisations or the performance of religious rites.[29] The 2013 amendment significantly expanded the article – some believe as a result of the provocative actions by Pussy Riot during the previous year – introducing a new concept to the criminal code, namely, "offending the religious feelings of believers".[30] The law provides for the possibility to impose fines, forced labour or imprisonment for "public actions that show disrespect for society and are committed with the purpose of offending the religious feelings of believers." The same law decrees that if such actions occur in places of worship, the penalty shall be increased. Moreover, the Criminal Code forbids interfering with the activities of religious organisations

28 "Konstitutsiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii," accessed July 10, 2020, http://kremlin.ru/acts/constitution.

29 "The Criminal Code of the Russian Federation," accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.imolin.org/doc/amlid/Russian_Federation_Criminal_Code.pdf.

30 Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 100 – 101. For the alleged role of Pussy Riot in changing article 148 see V.A. Novikov, "Ugolovno-pravovaya okhrana prava na svobodu sovesti i veroispovedaniy," *Vestnik Moskovskogo Finansovo-Yuridicheskogo Universiteta* 3 (2015): 194; Zoya Ye. Chernyshkova, Yevgeniya V. Ivanova and Olesya V. Kuznetsova, "Religiovedcheskaya ekspertiza: Analiz deystviy, napravlennykh na oskorbleniye religioznykh chuvstv veruyushchikh," *Istoricheskiye, filosofskiye, politicheskiye i yuridicheskiye nauki, kul'turologiya i iskusstvovedeniye. Voprosy teorii i praktiki* 3, no. 2 (2017): 202.

or with religious worship without legal justification.[31] Surprisingly, however, the law does not define what "religious feelings" are, nor does it indicate how they can be offended.[32] This means that, on the basis of article 148, any person publicly declaring their atheism and opposition to the activities of the Church can be convicted. Besides, although the title of said article explicitly refers to the protection of freedom of conscience, it does not provide any such protection for non-religious people.[33]

In addition to the provisions included in the Criminal Code, the Russian Orthodox Church has also expressed its own position on public blasphemy.[34] On February 4, 2011, the Bishops' Council adopted a document entitled 'The Russian Orthodox Church's Approach to Wilful Public Blasphemy and Slander against the Church.'[35] It repeats the Orthodox standpoint on human dignity and freedom, but also claims that freedom should never "be used to blaspheme God or to talk slanderously about His Church and people." The document furthermore contains a definition of blasphemy, which it defines as "an outrageous or disrespectful action, statement, or intention about God or a sacred thing" as well as "an expression of the desire to outrage or profane the Creator" that involves "sacrilege, profanity, and defilement of things sacred." As such, blasphemy "is one of the gravest moral crimes." The document indicates "a low level of one's religious culture and lack of knowledge about religious life and deficiency of spiritual experience" as the main causes for the utterance of public blasphemy.

In the context of Sokolovskiy's case, the aforementioned remarks concerning the distinction between blasphemy and religious freedom are important. Criti-

31 "Ugolovnyy Kodeks Rossiyskoy Federatsii," accessed February 1, 2020, http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody&nd=102041891.

32 Arseniy A. Bimbinov and Vyacheslav N. Voronin, "Ugolovnaya otvetstvennost' za narucheniye prava na svobodu sovesti i veroispovedaniy po zakonodatel'stvu Rossii i Germanii," *Lex Russica* 11 (2017): 114; Novikov, "Ugolovno-pravovaya okhrana," 196; Tat'yana Ye. Ivanova, "Otdel'nyye problemy ustanovleniya i realizatsii ugolovnoy otvetstvennosti za publichnyye deystviya, vyrazhayushchiye yavnoye neuvazheniye k obshchestvu, sovershennyye v tselyakh oskorbleniya religioznykh chuvstv veruyushchikh," *Sotsial'no-politicheskiye nauki* 2 (2017): 140–141.

33 Osokin and Kokorev, "Printsip spravedlivosti," 112–113; Kokorev and Zaytsev, "Osobennosti ugolovno-pravovoy okhrany," 66; Aleksandr Verkhovskiy, "Problemy realizatsii svobody sovesti v Rossii v 2015 godu," accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2016/03/d34099/#_ftn1.

34 Ponomariov, *The Visible Religion*, 186–191.

35 "The Russian Orthodox Church's Approach to Wilful Public Blasphemy and Slander against the Church," accessed February 1, 2020, https://mospat.ru/en/documents/otnoshenie-russkojj-pravoslavnojj-cerkvi-k-namerennomu-publichnomu-bogokhulstvu-i-klevete-v-adres-cerkvi/.

cism of religion and believers cannot, in and of itself, be a reason for the accusation of blasphemy. Yet this criticism must be respectful, honest and factual. As a result, blasphemy is seen as a form of criticism levied at religion or the faithful that is carried out without the respect considered to be necessary for a dialogue on differing worldviews. Blasphemy is deemed to be unfair and lacking a factual basis. By analogy, the Church's statement suggests that the faithful cannot be indifferent to acts of public blasphemy. The best way to oppose blasphemy is through the Christian example of living according to the teachings of Christ, with believers encouraged to explain the principles of Christian doctrine and worship. At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church recognises that in the event of deliberate and intentional public blasphemy, the faithful have the right to seek the help of state authorities and invoke the law.

Ruslan Sokolovskiy's Performance and Its Consequences

The case of Ruslan Sokolovskiy (born as Ruslan Gofiullovich Saybabtalov) began with a video blog that he broadcasted on YouTube on August 11, 2016. The video showed him "hunting Pokémon" in the Church On Blood in Yekaterinburg. According to Sokolovskiy's subsequent statements, this was a reaction to warnings expressed on public television that playing the game of Pokémon Go, which was hugely popular at the time, in sacred places such as churches can lead to legal consequences. The recording posted by Sokolovskiy also includes anti-religious phrases that believers perceived to be blasphemies. For example, the blogger called Jesus Christ "an exceptionally rare Pokémon"; to add insult to injury, he claimed to have failed to find him in said church.[36] After posting his video on YouTube, Sokolovskiy provided an explanation for his actions, which he supplied with anti-religious and anti-church statements that led to increased interest from the Russian media. By late August, articles on his performance began to appear on channels with a nationwide coverage.

Based on article 148 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, an investigation against Ruslan Sokolovskiy was launched that prompted his arrest on September 2, 2016. The charges levied against him were now expanded. To the accusation of "actions expressing an overt disrespect for society and made

36 "Blogera Ruslana Sokolovskogo prigovorili k uslovnomu sroku za lovlyu pokemonov v khrame. Glavnoye," accessed February 1, 2020, https://meduza.io/feature/2017/05/11/prigovor-ruslanu-sokolovskomu-za-lovlyu-pokemonov-v-hrame-glavnoe.

to offend the religious feelings of believers" (article 148) was added the accusation of activities "inciting hatred or hostility and the humiliation of human dignity" (article 282). Besides, the equipment used by Sokolovskiy to record his performance, which was discovered during a police search, led to him being accused of "the illegal use of special technical means intended for the secret acquisition of information" (article 138.1).[37]

The actions undertaken against Sokolovskiy met with protests from individual representatives of Russian cultural and political life.[38] More important for the Russian political context was, however, the involvement of Amnesty International, which labelled the video blogger a 'prisoner of conscience' – this without properly analysing Sokolovskiy's case and assuming (incorrectly) that in Russia every accusation with a connection to religion is illegal and politically motivated.[39] Engagement from international human rights organisations is perceived in Russia as an additional burden for the prevalent political discourse.[40] A second point of interest is that the authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church did not undertake any official actions in relation to Sokolovskiy's case, although unofficially they urged caution against overestimating the significance of his blasphemy as this would give him more airtime.[41]

During the trial in the first instance, Sokolovskiy did not admit to the accusations brought against him. At the same time, he emphasised his atheism and his negative assessment of religion in general, including what he considered to be the aggressively harmful role of religion in social life. He also described himself as cosmopolitan and libertarian as well as declared that, despite his negative assessment of religion *sui generis*, he had not intended to offend the feelings of individual believers. Despite these statements, the court sentence, announced on May 11, 2017, found Sokolovskiy guilty and sentenced him to three-and-a-half years imprisonment with three years conditional suspension. In addition, he

37 Tat'yana Ye. Ivanova, "Sootnosheniye publichnykh deystviy, oskorblyayushchikh religioznyye chuvstva veruyushchikh s prestupleniyami ekstremistskoy napravlennosti," *Probely v rossiyskom zakonodatel'stve* 4 (2017): 200 – 201.

38 Inna V. Zaikina, Alina V. Pozdnyak and Mariya M. Sladkova, "Oskorbleniye religioznykh chuvstv veruyushchikh: analiz sudebnoy praktiki," in *Rossiya i mir: razvitiye tsivilizatsiy. Fenomen razvitiya radikal'nykh politicheskikh dvizheniy v Yevrope*, ed. Vladimir V. Zhirinovskiy et al. (Moscow: Institut mirovykh tsivilizatsiy, 2018), 560 – 561.

39 "Urgent Action: Jailed for Playing Pokémon Go in Church," accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4647772016ENGLISH.pdf.

40 Valeriy Korovin, "Ne Zapadu uchit' Rossiyu soblyudeniyu prav cheloveka," accessed July 1, 2020, http://izborsk.md/ne-zapadu-uchit-rossiyu-soblyudeniyu-prav-cheloveka/.

41 "RPTs prizvala ne rassmatryvat' delo Sokolovskogo kak 'delo tserkvi protiv blogera'," accessed February 1, 2020, https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4245737.

was obliged to remove from YouTube all videos with content offensive to the feelings of believers. Finally, he was banned from speaking in public.[42]

Sokolovskiy's defence appealed against the sentence. This led to the partial mitigation of the charges brought against him, reducing his sentence to two years and three months of suspended imprisonment. The ban on participation in public events was sustained. The defence appealed against this verdict to the European Court of Human Rights, which took until January 2020 to announce that it would accept Sokolovskiy's case for consideration.[43] This acknowledgement is remarkable because President Putin has in the past repeatedly expressed doubts as to the validity of the rulings of international tribunals in cases concerning Russia and its citizens. In fact, the constitutional reform of 2020 points to the superiority of Russian law over the verdicts issued by international tribunals.[44] According to article 79 of the Criminal Code, the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, including a possible ruling in the Sokolovskiy's case, will not have any legal effects in Russia if considered to be contrary to the constitutional order of the Russian Federation.[45]

The eventual sentence has had far-reaching implications for Ruslan Sokolovskiy. Among others he was, in 2017, included in a list of people allegedly involved in extremist and terrorist activities.[46] Whilst this decision limited his ability to carry out political activities or make money, it has also subjected him to increased control by the police and security officials. In view of the personal consequences he has faced as a result of his "Pokémon hunting," Sokolovskiy has publicly declared his willingness to renounce Russian citizenship and possibly even emigrate.[47] Thus far, he has not yet pursued this course of action.

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42 "Delo pokemonov: bloger poluchil 3,5 goda uslovno za oskorbleniye chuvstv veruyushchikh," accessed February 1, 2020, https://russian.rt.com/russia/article/388420-sokolovskii-bloger-pokemony-prigovor.

43 "ESPCh rassmotrit delo Sokolovskogo o nakazanii za rolik o lovle pokemonov," , accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.kasparov.ru/material.php?id=5E32BCF2C631D.

44 "Prezident poobeshchal Konstitutsii prioritet pered mezhdunarodnym pravom," accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2020/01/15/820701-prezident-poobeschal.

45 "Konstitutsiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii."

46 "Bloger Sokolovskiy vnesen v perechen' terroristov i ekstremistov," accessed February 1, 2020, https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/4414442.

47 "Bloger Ruslan Sokolovskiy nameren otkazat'sya ot grazhdanstva Rossii i emigrirovat'," accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.znak.com/2018-02-09/bloger_ruslan_sokolovskiy_nameren_otkazatsya_ot_grazhdanstva_rossii_i_emigrirovat.

Sokolovskiy's Blasphemous Performance: A Case of Symbolic Violence?

Contemporary debate in Russia about the place of religion in public life and the legal protection enjoyed both by the Orthodox Church and individual believers has turned increasingly toxic. Both sides of the ideological divide resort to provocation, acts of symbolic violence and mutual accusations, which are occasionally expressed in a language that could be referred to as hate speech.[48] Such vicious language is part of a much broader pattern of symbolic violence that pits opponents and supporters of church culture against each other. On the one hand, opponents of the increasing influence held by the Russian Orthodox Church on social life often perceive the allocation of public space for the building of new churches as a form of violence. Attempts by the Church to regain the buildings formerly housing churches and monasteries, which are now used by cultural, academic and educational institutions, are interpreted along similar lines. On the other hand, believers see actions opposing the construction or restoration of churches, as well as the restitution of buildings appropriated by the Soviet authorities, as a form of aggression aimed at tearing away the right of believers to profess their faith in public. They interpret these protests as a way of supporting previous injustices, especially the enforced desacralisation and repurposing of numerous church buildings that occurred in the Soviet Union era.

The interpretation of Sokolovskiy's performative action in the Church On Blood, subsequent public reactions and the resulting consequences can be explained through the same prism. Still, it is important to realise that while analysing the events in Yekaterinburg, it is impossible to distinguish between the blogger in his role as perpetrator and as victim of a form of violence that is primarily symbolic and social. Seen from the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church and its faithful, Sokolovskiy has caused offence by professing blasphemies that hurt religious feelings to the point they become a form of experienced violence. Nonetheless, in reality it remains doubtful whether symbolic violence was part of Sokolovskiy's original plan or whether he reformulated his actions in this direction after receiving considerable media attention. From the perspective of church critics, however, Sokolovskiy is the victim of a legal and political system that protects the feelings of believers while not providing similar protection to non-religious people.

48 See, e. g., Aleksandr Nevzorov, *Otstavka Gospoda Boga: Zachem Rossii pravoslaviye?* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2015).

Sokolovskiy as a Perpetrator

If one accepts the anti-religious interpretation that Sokolovskiy assigned to his actions within the broader context of public debate on the role of religion and the Russian Orthodox Church in public life, it is possible to distinguish two forms of symbolic violence that are both connected to the nature of the space (i. e. the location) in which his performance took place. First, it is of great importance to note that Sokolovskiy's hunt for Pokémon was performed in the Church On Blood in Yekaterinburg. This church was built between 2000 and 2003 on the site of the so-called Ipatiev House. This was the house where Tsar Nikolai II and his family were imprisoned between April 28 and July 17, 1918, and where the Bolsheviks murdered them. Today the church is the centre of a cult dedicated to Tsar Nikolai who, together with Tsarina Alexandra and their children, the Russian Orthodox Church proclaimed in 2000 as a saint and 'passion-bearer' (*strastoterpets*) or martyr.[49]

The Church On Blood therefore serves to commemorate an episode of extreme violence in Russian history that began with the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 (or October according to the calendar used in Russia at the time). The murder of the Romanov family was a symbolic act. Not only did it signify a break with the imperial past and the beginning of a new political reality, but it questioned this past and rendered it useless. The bloody act of regicide was a symbol of the broader violence sweeping through revolutionary Russia. Also, the Russian Orthodox Church, which had been one of the Russian state structures resulting from the reforms initiated by Peter the Great in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to the February Revolution of 1917, quickly became a victim of violence too.[50] The persecution of the Church returned not only in the closure of numerous churches and monasteries but also in the murder of bishops, priests, monks and lay believers involved in church life.

It is likely that Sokolovskiy did not intend to invoke, much less approve, the anti-religious and blasphemous acts characteristic of early Bolshevism. Certainly, he did not express any sympathies in this direction in his public statements. Moreover, it is very problematic in Russia today to link communism with atheism; the Communist Party of the Russian Federation has frequently declared its readiness to cooperate with the Russian Orthodox Church and generally re-

49 Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church*, 128.
50 Ponomariov, *The Visible Religion*, 115.

jects anticlericalism.[51] Despite these nuances, it is impossible to ignore the symbolic significance implied in Sokolovskiy's decision to stage his performance in the Church On Blood – which is after all a religious building reserved to commemorate not only the bloody end of the last tsar and his family, but also to remind the visitor of the persecutions the Church suffered during the Soviet period. For this reason, Sokolovskiy is often accused of historical ignorance and insensitivity to the sufferings of believers.

Sokolovskiy's actions were not an attempt to revive Bolshevik anticlericalism. Instead, they were interpreted as a critique of the presence of religion in contemporary Russian public life and a form of blasphemy. The latter connects to the fact that the performance was seen to ridicule the memory of, and fate suffered by, Tsar Nikolai II and the victims of Bolshevik rule, in particular that of the believers murdered or subjected to persecution for their faith. Seen against the broader backdrop of (re)constructing Russian national identity and collective memory, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sokolovskiy's actions are interpreted as questioning the nature of this identity. One which is built on the ties existing between the Russian Orthodox Church and the State – ties that symbolise the history of the Russian Empire and are increasingly influential in contemporary Russia.

Reactions to Sokolovskiy's published hunt for Pokémon have also pointed to another dimension of the symbolic violence he committed. They focus on the blogger's intrusion of a sacred space, namely a church, that is protected from everyday secular use and symbolises the supernatural. Important in this respect is that the Orthodox interpretation of sacred space is different from the one familiarised by other Christian Churches. In Western Christianity, and especially since the mid-twentieth century, the notion of a sacred space that is protected from secular use and holds divine presence has been slowly disappearing. Church space is no longer protected from usage for secular purposes. Liturgical reforms and changes regarding church furnishings (including the limitation or even suppression of religious art) have in some respect aligned the sacred space traditionally represented by contemporary Christian churches with other types of public space. In Russian Orthodoxy, the church space has a different and unique character, as evidenced by the division created between the church interior and its theological meaning. Somewhat superficially, it can be said that the primary task of an Orthodox church is not to act as meeting place for a religious commu-

51 On the positive attitude of the leader of the KPRF, Gennadiy Zyuganov, towards religion and the Church, see, e. g., "Gennadiy Zyuganov ob otnoshenii kommunistov k Tserkvi," accessed February 1, 2020, http://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2018/10/20/gennadij_zyuganov_ob_otnoshenii_kommunistov_k_cerkvi/.

nity but instead to function as an "excluded space" and a "heaven on Earth" (especially in the context of divine liturgy). It is a place for God's unique presence, a reminder of the supernatural and the destiny of human life.[52] For this reason, Orthodox church buildings do not allow non-religious activities. This explains, in turn, the degree of symbolic violence perpetrated by Sokolovskiy. He treated an Orthodox church like any other public space suitable for the search of Pokémon. In this way, he consciously questioned the sacred character of church space and with that the nature of Orthodox teachings.

Sokolovskiy as a Victim

The complexity of contemporary Russian ideological debate makes it impossible to consider anti-church and anti-religious protest in a unilateral way. This also holds true for Sokolovskiy's case. While being a perpetrator of symbolic violence through hurting the feelings of Orthodox believers, he also was a victim of a form of violence that was both systemic and individual. The former returns in the fact that in contemporary Russia people belonging to state-recognised religious communities enjoy a higher degree of legal protection than that enjoyed by people who declare themselves to be non-religious. As mentioned before, Russian legislation contains special provisions to protect the feelings of believers according to which publicly insulting these feelings is a crime that is punishable. By contrast, the feelings of non-religious people are not protected in any way. An insult to the ideas of non-religious people cannot, therefore, be a basis for them to assert their rights in court.

This brings us back to Sokolovskiy's case. An intriguing aspect of it is that no political, social or religious organisation has supported the charges levied against him. His trials were based on a public prosecution in relation to the violation of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation; the witnesses were not people with a known link to the political domain.[53] In that sense, Sokolovskiy's case was far more problematic for the Russian authorities than might seem to be the case at first glance.

In the Russian media, there have been attempts to link Ruslan Sokolovskiy to militant Islam and to present him as a "Muslim blogger" who tried to insult

52 See, e.g., Illarion Alfeyev, *Pravoslaviye* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Sretenskogo monastyrya, 2009), vol. 2.

53 "'Sokolovsky! Nichego svyatogo'. Prigovor Verkh-Isetskogo rayonnogo suda Ekaterinburga," accessed February 1, 2020, https://zona.media/article/2017/05/17/sokolovsky-prigivor.

and provoke Russian Christians.[54] Ethnic and religious tensions are increasing in Russia, so the issue of the blogger's ethnicity is not a trivial matter. Critics of Sokolovskiy (who was born Saybabtalov) have pointed out that by changing his name, he has appropriated the Russian Slavic identity and culture in a way he is not entitled to do. Press voices have also emphasised that as an ethnic non-Russian he has no right to profane a place that is for historical and religious reasons particularly important to Russians. Such accusations are entirely unfounded; the ethnic aspect did not play a role in Sokolovskiy's public activities and he has repeatedly described himself as an atheist. Moreover, such allegations have not been supported by any major political group, not even by influential conservative and nationalist movements. Even so, conservative circles such as the Izborsk Club have argued that Sokolovskiy intended to provoke and intensify the religious and social conflicts that threaten Russia's internal stability.[55] At the same time, influential activists of the nationalist Right, such as Mikhail Delyagin, have criticised the decision to charge Sokolovskiy for fear this would harm the Orthodox Church and undermine its presence in Russian social life.[56]

As a result, Sokolovskiy's case has revived a debate on the nature of Russian national identity and its public presence. In a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society, which contemporary Russia is, this identity cannot be solely based on one ethnic or religious factor. This is also the reason why President Putin, while appreciating the social role of the Russian Orthodox Church, has never suggested Orthodoxy as a foundation of national ideology. Instead, he has pointed to patriotism as the "Russian idea" par excellence. Official identity policy emphasises this axiological element. Russia is supposed to be a country of traditional 'spiritual' values, which are to be protected through respect towards 'traditional' religions. Sokolovskiy's act, which was an intrusion into a sacred space, can therefore be interpreted as a rejection of an official policy meant to hold together a multi-ethnic society. That the blogger nevertheless received a much milder verdict than Russian courts have issued for other blasphemous protests is probably due to the complex religious and social context of the case as well as the fact that it lacks an overt political meaning.

54 Irina Kosterina, "Versiya: musul'manskiy bloger Sokolovskiy-Saybabtalov lovil pokemonov v Khrame-na-Krovi, chtoby sprovotsirovat' khristian," accessed July 1, 2020, https://www.ural.kp.ru/daily/26570/3585980/.

55 Ruslan S. Ostashko, "Nuzhno li sazhat' lovtsa Pokenomov Sokolovskogo," accessed February 1, 2020, http://izborsk.md/nuzhno-li-sazhat-lovtsa-pokemonov-sokolovskogo/.

56 Mikhail Delyagin, "V pravitel'stve vser'yez zagovorili o vvedenii posobiya po bednosti," accessed February 1, 2020, https://izborsk-club.ru/10935.

Finally, what is interesting, and disturbing, is that Sokolovskiy's trial has revealed that Russian legislation does not contain a precise definition of what is considered to be an "insult to religious feelings." During the trial, the blogger's defence tried to question the argument that his performance constituted a crime as defined in the Russian Criminal Code. In a sense, they were successful because the witnesses were unable to provide a convincing explanation for how Sokolovskiy had offended their religious feelings. Nonetheless, the absence of a legal definition allowed the court to interpret the blogger's account, which he later posted on the internet, as a confirmation of the fact that he himself had admitted to having committed a crime. The result was twofold. On the one hand, when compared to other sentences passed by Russian courts, Sokolovskiy's sentence was lenient.[57] On the other hand, and this is more important, the sentence confirmed that in Russia today an anti-religious performance may face repression by the State, even if it cannot be proven that the action offends the feelings of believers. This sentence can be perceived as proof that for political and ideological reasons in contemporary Russia the situation of people who publicly manifest their religiosity is different from those professing their lack of faith in a deity.

The Importance of Sokolovskiy's Case

An act of public blasphemy, the case of Ruslan Sokolovskiy is of great importance for contemporary Russian social life and points to a specific direction in which Church-State relations have developed under President Vladimir Putin. As mentioned before, the unique character of Sokolovskiy's blasphemy lies in the fact that it was originally devoid of political features. Contrary to numerous other acts of opposition against the increasing role of the Russian Orthodox Church in public life, the performance had a strictly anti-religious and provocative character. It is probable that the representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate appreciated this difference, which is why Sokolovskiy's performance did not meet with official protests on the part of church authorities. The second element setting this case apart is even more important. Accusations addressed to Sokolovskiy, supported by court sentences, have not received much public support.

57 In the controversial case of the 'Network' (*Set'*) organisation, in January 2020, a Russian court sentenced seven men accused of participating in a terrorist group, despite the lack of evidence, to high penalties: from 6 to 18 years in prison. See, e. g., Ivan Papov, "Delo 'Seti': pochemu rossiyskiye sudy ne veryat zhalobam na pytki," accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/13/02/2020/5e4526d89a79473c3ed1ed51.

One explanation for this absence is that the increasing involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in the implementation of official policy has been accompanied by a loss in public authority that the Church traditionally enjoyed as a religious organisation. This, in turn, has led Russian sociologists to speculate that the Church is less and less protected in public life against social criticism or open opposition.[58] The convictions handed to Sokolovskiy should not mislead us here, as in Putin's Russia court acquittals are extremely rare.[59] Yet comparing the suspended sentences received by Sokolovskiy with the prison sentences currently handed out for oppositional activities, shows that the Russian justice system did not deploy its full repressive power against the blogger.[60] This would not have been possible without the approval of the authorities.

Sokolovskiy's blasphemous performance and its consequences thus point not only to the oppressive character of Russian legislation and the unequal treatment of believers and non-believers, but also to the vulnerable position of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian society. Ongoing events show this well. The unconditional support that Patriarch Kirill has given to Russia's war against Ukraine suggests that in the political system headed by Vladimir Putin the Church has lost its independence, thus becoming a tool for the endorsement of official policies, especially in regard of its ideological influence on Russian society.[61] At the same time, and as a result of this political alignment, the Church has lost the authority it enjoyed during the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This does not mean that Russia has witnessed a process of secularisation or modernisation comparable to that registered in Western societies since the second half of the twentieth century. Rather it shows that under

58 Uzlaner, "The End of the Pro-Orthodox Consensus."

59 Anna Ivushkina, "Defitsit opravdaniya: na tysyachu sudov v RF prikhoditsya odin nievinovnyy," accessed March 14, 2022, https://iz.ru/794022/anna-ivushkina/defitcit-opravdaniia-na-tysiachu-sudov-v-rf-prikhoditsia-odin-nevinovnyi.

60 Interestingly, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation also finds that the suspended sentences – and not the acquittals – testify to the leniency of the Russian penitentiary system. See: "Mify Femidy: V 2019 godu tol'ko 29 protsentov osuzhdennykh poluchili real'nyye sroki licheniya svobody," accessed March 14, 2022, http://www.supcourt.ru/press_center/mass_media/29212/.

61 E. g., "Patriarshaya propoved' v Nedelyu syropostnuyu posle Liturgii v Khrame Khrista Spasitelya," accessed March 14, 2022, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html; "Patriarshaya propoved' v sredu pervoy sedmitsy Velikogo posta posle Liturgii Prezhdeosvyashchennykh Darov v Khrame Khrista Spasitelya," accessed March 14, 2022, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5907484.html; "Poslaniye Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla i.o. general'nogo sekretarya Vsemirnogo soveta tserkvey v svyazi s sobytiyami na Ukraine," accessed March 14, 2022, http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5907942.html.

Putin Russia has seen the Church's position in public life become akin to the one it enjoyed from the time of Peter the Great until the February Revolution in 1917 – a position in which the Church forms an integral element of state policy. In short, while losing its authority as a social entity autonomous from the State, the Church is becoming increasingly dependent on state support for the activities it deploys.

This evolution also involves the problem of violence, without which Sokolovskiy's case cannot be properly interpreted. This violence has, as indicated, two dimensions. First, Sokolovskiy became a perpetrator of symbolic violence, with respect to which we can distinguish two elements. The first was breaching the sacred space of an Orthodox church building; the second was the symbolic desecration of the place where the last tsar and his family were murdered by the Bolsheviks. It is significant that while in the first days and weeks after reports began to appear on Sokolovskiy's performance these two issues were heavily debated in the media, they were increasingly marginalised from public discourse as opposition against his punishment intensified. In the context of ongoing attempts to rehabilitate Russia's imperial past, this silence regarding the desecration of the place commemorating the royal family's imprisonment and death is particularly intriguing. It can be claimed that in view of the challenges facing contemporary Russia, it ultimately depends on the political interests of the authorities to decide what can be considered an act of symbolic violence. It was the authorities' change of mind that ensured how, in time, Sokolovskiy's performance ceased being seen as an act of symbolic violence committed against sacred space and the memory of the royal family.

Whilst Sokolovskiy was a perpetrator of violence, he was also its victim, both as a result of xenophobic and racist statements as well as in the form of judicial sanctions that prevented him from carrying out his public and economic activities, including maintaining himself as a video blogger. Thus, whilst Sokolovskiy's case has revealed the ethnic and racial problems facing contemporary multi-ethnic Russian society, at times leading to discrimination and even open conflict, it also shows that the judicial system is basically a system of repression and oppression. Its objective is not to defend the constitutional rights of individual citizens but to respond to the political demands of state authorities and to silence people who think independently and demonstrate a critical attitude to the socio-political reality of contemporary Russian society.

Conclusions

The performance of Ruslan Sokolovskiy met with outrage in Russian society. Religious circles perceived his action as an aggression directed at believers – an offence increased by the fact that the blogger's search for Pokémon was staged in the Church On Blood, a place vested with symbolic meaning. At the same time, liberal oppositional circles perceived the consequences that Sokolovskiy had to face as a direct result of the close cooperation between political authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church, a connection that goes against the religious and ideological neutrality of the State as guaranteed by the constitution of the Russian Federation. In light of the ideological conflicts in Russia, it also mattered that the cause of Sokolovskiy was supported by Amnesty International, which the Russian political establishment considers to be an organisation promoting a Western lifestyle and opposing traditional Christian values. As a result, Sokolovskiy's case has become a feature in an anti-Western propaganda campaign.

The analysis of Sokolovskiy's case leads to a number of conclusions. First, this is a case of unambiguous public blasphemy, which is seen as an intentional violation of sacred space, introducing secular "pop culture" elements that aim at desacralising a space of which usage for secular purposes is, in accordance with Orthodox theology, forbidden. Both Sokolovskiy's critics, mostly people connected to the Russian Orthodox Church, and his supporters, who are connected to the circles advocating the restriction of the Church's presence in public life, have interpreted his aim in this way. Secondly, the actions of the Russian internet blogger did not have a private character, nor did they aim to express a private opinion regarding the place of religion and the Church in contemporary Russian public life. The publication of the video on the internet along with Sokolovskiy's comments indicated his desire to engineer a public discussion, in particular to question the presence of religion in the public domain and the existence of legislation that protects the feelings of believers only.

Thirdly, the symbolic violence perpetrated by Sokolovskiy contained an aspect that the blogger himself probably never theorised. This was caused by the decision to stage his anti-religious performance in a church built to commemorate the death of Tsar Nikolai II and his family and, in a broader sense, to remember the persecution of believers during the Soviet period. Indeed, Sokolovskiy's action was read as an expression of insensitivity towards the atrocities committed by the Bolsheviks and the humiliation of the memory of the Tsar's family and all other victims of the Bolshevik terror. Finally, his trial, which revealed the versatility of the concept of "insulting the feelings of believers" as it is included in Russian criminal law, has shown that Sokolovskiy is not just a perpetrator but

also a victim of violence. Presented as a person mocking Bolshevik brutalities, he met with both criminal sanction and public condemnation.

Sokolovskiy's case has shown two more general issues characteristic of the contemporary social and religious landscape in Russia. On the one hand, legal protection of the feelings of believers is not matched by a similar protection of non-religious worldviews, this despite the constitution guaranteeing the secular and non-ideological character of the State. This means that while public adherence to what Russian law defines as "traditional religions" is subject to legal protection, expressing loyalty to anti-religious views, if accompanied by criticism of the Church and its relations with the State, can invite judicial prosecution. On the other hand, the controversies surrounding Sokolovskiy's actions have shown that the social significance of Russian Orthodoxy is higher than its strictly religious importance, as his actions were also condemned by people without a strong attachment to the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church is often considered as an institution that guarantees the preservation and continued existence of Russian culture and identity, regardless of people's specific beliefs. Attacking the Church, especially in cases where the attack transgresses ideological discussions and manifests itself in the form of blasphemy, is interpreted as an attack on Russian history, tradition, social order and values. This distinguishes the response that insults of religious believers enact in the case of the Russian Federation from the reactions to similar events registered in many Western countries.

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