

Pussy Riot Case Spurs Russia to Rethink 'Offending Religious Feeling' Laws

The Russian government asked parliament on Sunday to amend a bill that would set jail terms for "offending religious feeling"—a measure lawmakers proposed after last year's Pussy Riot protest at a Moscow cathedral.

In a statement issued on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the government suggested existing legislation, if altered, might suffice to protect faith communities and seemed to question the need for the bill; critics have said it may harm Jews, Muslims and others outside the Russian Orthodox Church that President Vladimir Putin has been anxious not to alienate.

One of the lawmakers who sponsored the bill, which was backed by Putin's party and allies, said the government's advice would be heeded. Yaroslav Nilov said a phrase seen to favor the Russian Orthodox Church would be removed and the legislation would protect all religions operating legally in Russia.

It was not clear what the next step in parliament would be.

Legislators submitted the bill after three women from the Pussy Riot punk collective were convicted for a protest last February inside Christ the Saviour cathedral, in which they urged the church to stop backing Putin. As proposed, it would introduce sentences of up to three years for insult to religion and five years for damage to religious property.

Two members of Pussy Riot are serving two-year prison sentences for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred" after a trial that drew international criticism.

Putin has harnessed the resurgent church to bolster his popularity. But he also courts voters from minorities, including the Muslims of Russia's restive southern fringes, and had urged parliament not to act hastily on the bill on religious feelings.

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