

Blaming the Ukraine Invasion on ... the Gays?

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How the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, a Putin enabler, spins the war.

In the past ten days, plenty of rationalizations have been offered for Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine—everything from “Russia needs a buffer state to keep NATO at a distance” ([just about every Kremlin apologist](#)) to “Russia is trying to ‘denazify’ Ukraine” (just about no one [except Putin](#) and [his minions](#)). But in a Sunday sermon, Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, offered a startling new [explanation](#) that is sure to resonate with the Sohrab Ahmari wing of the modern American right: It was to save Eastern Ukraine from the gays.

The patriarch—who, it should be noted, began his clerical career in the Soviet era when the church was a loyal handmaiden to the atheistic state and who was [reportedly](#) a KGB agent, like the rest of the church hierarchy—summed up the situation as follows:

For eight years, there have been efforts to destroy what exists in the Donbas. What exists in the Donbas is a rejection, a principled rejection of the so-called values that are now being offered by those who lay claim to global domination. Today, there is a certain test for loyalty to that power, a certain pass into that “happy” world, the world of excessive consumption, the world of illusory freedom. Do you know what that test is? It's very simple but also horrific: it's a gay parade. The demand to hold a gay parade is in fact a test for loyalty to that powerful world, and we know that if people or countries resist this demand, they are excluded from that world and treated as alien.

Alternatively, one could say that “what exists in the Donbas” is an enclave ruled by armed gangs of separatists controlled by shadowy people with likely ties to the FSB, the Russian state security service. Freedom is nonexistent even by the standards of Putin's Russia (Freedom House gives Eastern Donbas a “[freedom rating](#)” of 4 out of 100, [ahead](#) of only North Korea, Syria, Tibet, Turkmenistan, and South Sudan. Human Rights Watch has reported that the Moscow-backed “armed groups” that rule the region frequently [detain](#) people on bogus charges of espionage or treason and that detainees, including pregnant women, have been “held incommunicado, in appalling conditions,” denied medical care, and in some cases tortured. Surely even religious believers who frown on gay pride parades should agree that kidnapping and torturing people is worse.

During his fifteen-minute sermon on the Eastern Orthodox holiday known as Forgiveness Sunday (the last day before Lent), the patriarch did not say a word about fellow Christians under fire in Ukraine outside Eastern Donbas. He did, however, [return](#) more than once to the evil of gay parades and to his claim that holding such parades was a requirement for membership in the “club” of powerful countries. The patriarch also asserted that resistance to such demands is “suppressed by force,” which amounts to “forcible imposition of a sin condemned by divine law” and which means that the war for Ukraine is “not a physical but a metaphysical struggle.” (Ironically, the patriarch used the forbidden word “war” rather than the prescribed “special operation”; but, unlike media outlets critical of the government, he is not in danger of getting canceled by Roskomnadzor, Russia's media oversight agency.)

The patriarch's insistence that the war in Ukraine is all about gay parades reminded me of a brilliant Russian-language poem someone shared with me on Twitter the other day, written by Russian-Ukrainian poet Artem Polezhaka in late 2013 and titled "[Reportage](#)." The poem hilariously spoofs state-owned Russian television's hysterical reporting on the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv: the reporter breathlessly recounts the increasingly grotesque horrors he supposedly witnesses—a mélange that features neo-Nazis, jihadists, looters, cannibals, and Jews who "drink Christian babies' blood by the bucket"—but keeps coming back to gay orgies.

It made me think, too, of fairly common claims by pro-Kremlin conservatives in the United States that the *real* reason the libs hate Putin and Putin's Russia is the homophobia. Most recently, this argument was trotted out by political commentator Richard Hanania in a [Substack post](#) which argued that liberal elites in America had viewed the Putin regime with relative indifference until 2013, when Russia "[passed a law](#) banning gay propaganda towards minors" (in reality, restricting any gay-themed content in any place where minors could see it, including public events promoting gay rights), and Putin began his transformation into a Hollywood villain.

Were some Western progressives more incensed by Russia's "gay propaganda" law than by the brutal suppression of peaceful protests, the crushing of the independent media, the election-rigging, and the rest of the Putin regime's systematic assault on civil liberties? No doubt. But the Putin-loving "trads," in Russia or in America—be it Patriarch Kirill, [Pat Buchanan](#), [Steve Bannon](#) (who recently [praised](#) Putin on his podcast for not being "woke" and pointed out that "they don't have the Pride flags" in Russia), or Hanania—are at least as obsessed with the idea of the Putin regime as the nemesis of LGBT rights.

The real irony, perhaps, is that post-Euromaidan Ukraine was not exactly San Francisco. The country still bans same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, and only about [one in five people](#) (similar to the numbers in Russia) believes that homosexuality should be accepted by society. However, for all its problems, Ukraine is sufficiently hospitable to free expression that thousands of people have been able to [march](#) under rainbow flags year to year—in contrast to Russia, where attempts to hold such events have ended in [violence](#) from both police and anti-gay vigilantes.

One can debate whether the American liberals and progressives who have decisively won the culture war on gay rights are too intolerant toward people who still subscribe to traditional sexual morality, such as Christian bakers and florists who refuse to provide services for same-sex weddings. But the willingness of quite a few traditionalists to see brutal anti-gay repression as the silver lining of an authoritarian regime rather dramatically illustrates the ugliness at the heart of the "trad" mindset. And Patriarch Kirill's obscene wartime sermon shows us one place where this path leads: the place where the dreaded "gay parade" is a greater evil than a war of aggression.

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