TRAPPED AND TARGETED:
THE REALITY FOR LGBTQ PEOPLE IN RUSSIA

Igor Kotler

Russia has a long history of institutionalized homophobia. Under the Soviet regime, homosexuality was criminalized and used as a tool to persecute both LGBTQ individuals and political opponents, removing them from society and placing them in prisons and labor camps under fabricated, "shameful" charges.

Historically, homosexuality was a criminal offense under the laws of the Russian Empire. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, although the Communists decriminalized homosexuality, they continued to classify it as a disease. However, this decriminalization was not uniform across the Soviet Union. In the Islamic republics of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as in the Christian-majority republic of Georgia, homosexuality remained a criminal offense.

In 1934, Stalin's government reinstated the criminalization of homosexuality nationwide. The infamous Article 121 imposed prison sentences of up to five years for same-sex relations. Homosexuals were heavily stigmatized by both the authorities and the public, forcing many to hide their identities as much as possible. The second edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* reflected this widespread condemnation, stating: "The origin of [homosexuality] is linked to everyday social conditions; for the overwhelming majority of people indulging in [homosexuality], these perversions stop as soon as the person finds himself in a favorable social environment.... In Soviet society, with its healthy norms, [homosexuality] as a sexual perversion is considered shameful and criminal. Soviet criminal legislation regards [homosexuality] as punishable, except in cases where it is a manifestation of a severe psychiatric disorder."[1]

The following thirty years did not change the attitude toward homosexuals in the Soviet Union. The *Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary* published in 1984 repeats old accusations: "Homosexuality is a sort of sexual subversion; sexual attractiveness to persons of the same

[1] Gomoseksualizm, 1952, p. 35.

gender."[2] Both gays and lesbians became victims of homophobia. Dr. Igor Kon, a leading Russian sociologist, points out: "Public attitudes about lesbians have been just as obdurate as those about gay men. Lesbians have been exposed to ridicule, persecution, expulsion from university, termination of employment, and threats to take custody of their children away from them."[3]

Thousands of homosexuals were imprisoned under the Soviet regime. Their fate in camps and prisons was tragic – they belonged to the lowest caste in the hierarchy of inmates and experienced harassment from their jailers and fellow inmates. Those who managed to hide lived in constant fear of being exposed and persecuted.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, homosexuality was officially decriminalized in Russia in 1993, but with the rise of nationalism, the attitude toward gays took a new turn. In addition to widespread discrimination, homosexuals became victims of violent attacks in modern Russia. Gay bashing came from different circles of Russian society. Ardent nationalists, like Cossacks, skinheads, members of the Russian National Unity, Pamyat Society, National Bolsheviks, and other groups, were on the forefront of the offensive. The Russian Orthodox Church followed suit. The Church's position always was openly antigay, and, being almost a state religion, the Russian Orthodoxy profoundly influenced millions of Russians. Christian movements, such as the United Orthodox Youth, violently opposed and waged "a holy war" against members of the gay and lesbian community. Mikhail Nalimov, a member of the United Orthodox Church, believed that "the aim of the gay movement is to destabilize the country and society and we will not let this happen."[4]

The result of such a stance toward homosexuals manifests in endless abuse of individuals with a "non-traditional" sexual orientation. Laima Gaydar, a lesbian activist, wrote about the situation with homosexuals in Russia: But homosexuals and lesbians are continuing to be discriminated and to undergo inhuman treatment; they are fired from their jobs, dismissed from educational institutions and evicted from their homes. They can be

[2]Sovetskii entsiklopedicheskii slovar', 3rd edition. Moscow, 1984, p. 320.
[3] Igor Kon. Soviet Homophobia. 1998 http://www.gay.ru/english/history/kon/soviet.htm
[4] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8050068.stm

beaten in public places or tortured. She also noted how lesbians (as well as gays) could be "treated" forcibly in hospitals for their "disease."[5]

Masha Gessen, a prominent Russian journalist, interviewed young lesbians between 1991 and 1993. They testified that as soon as their homosexuality was revealed they were diagnosed and hospitalized for two to three months, and forced treatment with mind-altering medication followed. After their release from the psychiatric hospital, the lesbian patients were to remain registered with a local psychiatric ambulatory clinic.[6]

Dr. Kon notes, "Still today, with rare exceptions, Russian sexopathologists and psychiatrists, even those who supported the decriminalization of homosexuality, regard it as a disease and reproduce in their writings the many absurdities and negative stereotypes prevalent in the mass consciousness."[7]

In 2002, Russian Duma deputy Gennady Raykov proposed to reinstate the criminalization of homosexuality in Russia. He was supported by a significant group of 57 deputies and a large number of ordinary citizens. According to some reports within five minutes [after the announcement of the bill], more than 1,300 Moscovites phoned the radio station Ekho Moskvy to express their support for the proposition to introduce criminal responsibility for homosexuality (as the explanatory note to the bill reads, in order to consolidate public morals, institute of family and health of citizens of Russia).[8]

Russian society, traditionally being very conservative regarding homosexuals, tacitly or implicitly supports antigay sentiments and actions. For example, in the early morning of May 1, 2006, the gay Renaissance event club in Moscow was attacked by members of the Russian National Unity and the parishioners of the Saint Nikola Cathedral. Several scores of Russian Orthodox people, many older women with icons and crosses, beat up a young female worker of the club. The crowd shouted, "Russia without pidors (pejorative for homosexuals in

[5] Laima Gaydar. International Law and Situation with Homosexuals and Lesbians in Russia. 2001. http://www.feminist.org.ua/library/rights/rights3.php
[6] Igor Kon. Soviet Homophobia. 1998 http://www.gay.ru/english/history/kon/soviet.htm
[7] Igor Kon. Soviet Homophobia. 1998 http://www.gay.ru/english/history/kon/soviet.htm
[8] Criminal Responsibility for Homosexuals: on Friday, April 26, Radicals Dressed in Prison Clothes with Pink Triangles Sewed on, will Give to the Leader of "People's Deputy" Faction Nazist Germany's Flag as a Present. April 24, 2002. http://www.radikaly.ru/news-369.html

Russian)!" "Glory to Russia!" "Pidors out!" and "Christ help us!" Another gay club, Three Monkeys, was also attacked on the same day.

Another disturbing attack was on the gays and lesbians who gathered for a gay parade in Moscow on May 27, 2006. From the very beginning, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov opposed the idea of having the parade. He deployed about 1,000 police officers to disperse the parade. His effort was supported by dozens of nationalists and Orthodox activists who attacked gays and lesbians. The antigay activists mercilessly beat the participants of the parade under the watch of the police. Then, the police intervened and arrested more than 100 gays and lesbians. Among those who were beaten and detained were prominent guests, like German MP Volker Beck, Oscar Wilde's grandson, and representatives of the Paris' mayor.[9]

Russian police are notorious for their use of torture and other inhumane methods against detainees and demonstrators. LGBTQ individuals, particularly gay men, are often unable or unwilling to seek help from law enforcement due to the risk of public exposure and blackmail. The following are excerpts from a letter by gay activist Valery Klimov from Nizhny Tagil in Sverdlovsk Oblast:"More than one hundred gay men, none of whom had any prior issues with the law, were detained by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Their only 'crime' was being known as gay. Under blackmail and threats, they were forced to provide fingerprints and were filmed. Many were pressured to cooperate with authorities and act as informants. Mr. Nikelberg, a representative of the Tagil Ministry of Internal Affairs, stated on local television that in the near future, another 400 homosexuals would be detained in order to 'identify potential maniacs and killers among them.'" It is no secret in Moscow that dozens of informants—Judas figures—work for the KGB (now FSB) and the police, betraying members of their own community. Does this not resemble the purges of 1937?[10]

The situation for gay individuals in Russian prisons has always been catastrophic. The following letter illustrates the harsh realities they face behind bars: "That's all, I was raped, or

[9] Dark times for gays in Russia. May 27, 2006. http://www.metafilter.com/mefi/51891; Peter Tatchell. Moscow's Gay Pride Violently Suppressed: Activists set on by fascist gangs. UK Gay News. Activists set on by fascist gangs. May 26, 2006, http://www.ukgaynews.org.uk/Archive/2006may/2703.htm

[10] 1937 was the year when Stalin's regime unleashed a massive campaign against so-called "enemies of the people" which resulted in hundreds of thousands innocent people being executed or sent to labor camps with lengthy sentences.

as they call it, I was 'put down.' I was raped by almost everyone in the barrack. You know, there are no women in prison. Therefore, inmates satisfy their sexual instincts in any possible way. If there is no 'rooster' (common wife) in the cell (barrack), they will try to screw a newcomer. Every night they will screw him and force him to work during the day." This is prison.[11] But in everyday life, gays are not treated any better. The Moscow gay club Chance was raided by masked police with submachine guns who brutally beat everybody, spilling blood everywhere, and arrested some people afterwards. It seemed to the victims that the police were under the influence of drugs or alcohol, because their behavior was ostensibly not normal. Here are the testimonies of some victims: "On that day 11 persons (including me) were taken to the 70th Police Station. We were locked in an isolation cell, and could not relieve ourselves as well as did not get any food or water."

"I was about to leave when I heard screams. I did not have a chance to move, and then I was hit in the back and fell. Someone grabbed my head and hit it against the wall. People in uniform were asking me whether I wanted more. I kept my silence. Someone was lying on the floor and a gun was put to his head."

"They beat and threatened us all the time. They took us to a room, lined us up against the wall and ordered us to put our hands behind our heads. In this position we were held for about four hours. All the time masked people were going around us, hitting us in the back, neck and kidneys. They insulted us. They pressed us psychologically."

When one guy had no more strength to stand against the wall and fell, they ran to him and kicked him five-six times. I cannot forget it."

"I [female witness] saw that somebody was defaced, and one policeman yelled that he should not be taken to the police."

"I [female witness] heard one policeman answering the question of where we were taken, replied, "We are cleaning the town from you, scum, gays and lesbians; we

[11] Russia: The Dictatorship of the Homophobes? GayToday, May 2000, http://www.gaytoday.com/garchive/viewpoint/061200vi.htm

are taking you to the fields to shoot you." You can imagine what people on the bus felt."

"Someone screamed, "The regime has changed and you, scum, should be put in a furnace and burned. I [female witness] heard it."

"Police put in my pocket a pill and one of them said that I have to admit [to having drugs]. He said if I admit, I would get "only" three years in prison. I denied everything and continued saying that the tablet was planted. I was put in a cell without light; it was difficult to breathe. I spent 12 hours there."

Nobody wanted to complain to the Attorney's Office, "They have collective guarantee there! Nobody can guarantee to you that they would not put you in prison by your own complaint."[12]

The attacks in Moscow showed the level of hatred and mistreatment homosexuals experienced in Russia in the 2000s. Their well-being and life were often in danger, and this danger was growing with the growth of Russian nationalism.

In 2006, the gay parade was banned by the Moscow authorities, and the people who attempted to protest the ban found themselves on the receiving end of brutality both from a gay-bashing mob and from the police.[13] The attacks on gays during the 2007 gay parade in Moscow revealed how strong the hatred was. At the parade, which drew many people despite lacking city approval, western marchers—including Volker Beck, a member of Germany's parliament, and Richard Fairbass, the singer of the British band Right Said Fred, along with numerous participants—were beaten by skinheads and members of religious groups. "I was almost knocked unconscious," said gay activist and former British parliamentarian Peter Tatchell. "The Moscow police," he continued, "stood by and allowed this assault to happen.

[12] Russia: The Dictatorship of the Homophobes? GayToday, May 2000. http://www.gaytoday.com/garchive/viewpoint/061200vi.htm
[13] Cathy Young. Anti-Gay Russia. Why is a former Communist country so homophobic? Reason online, June 8, 2007. http://www.reason.com/news/show/120638.html

Then I was arrested, while my attackers walked free." A police spokesman declined to comment on Tatchell's allegations.[14]

The details of the attack on the gays are revealing. Riot police used violence to break up a gay rights demonstration in Moscow and arrested several European parliamentarians. In particular, a group of gay rights activists came under attack from neo-Nazi thugs when they tried to present a petition asking Moscow's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, to lift the ban on the gay pride parade. Witnesses said riot police watched as far-right skinheads chanting "death to homosexuals" beat up several activists.

The police failed to arrest the skinheads but detained several of the Europeans—including the German MP Volker Beck, a member of the Green party, and the Italian MEP Marco Capatto. Riot police threw Mr. Capatto into a police van. "Why don't you protect us?" he shouted.

"It was absolutely shocking," gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell told *The Guardian*. "The police stood there while people knocked me to the ground and kicked me. Four or five neo-Nazis attacked me. The police watched. At a certain point the police then arrested me and let my neo-Nazi attackers walk free."

Religious Orthodox protesters and skinheads hurled eggs and stones—injuring Mr. Tatchell in the eye. They also attacked Richard Fairbrass, the gay singer from the pop group Right Said Fred.

"When we were in the police van and the police taunted us," Mr. Tatchell said after his release. "They said, 'Are you a member of the sexual minority?' We said yes. They said, 'We are going to have some fun with you at the police station.' What happened here shows the flawed and failed nature of Russia's transition to democracy. There is no right to protest in Moscow."[15]

---

[14]Alostair Gee. In Russia, Gays and Lesbians Struggle Against Widespread Hostility. U.S. News and World Report, May 29, 2008. http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/world/2008/05/29/in-russia-gays-and-lesbians-struggle-against-widespread-hostility.html?PageNr=2

[15]Luke Harding. Gay activists beaten and arrested in Russia. The Guardian, May 28, 2007. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/may/28/russia.gayrights

In May 2008, gay and lesbians in Moscow managed to hold a gay parade, but they succeeded only because it was done almost in secret, i.e., they marched in the early morning while it was officially announced to start around 2 p.m. Nationalists who gathered for antigay action were disappointed by missing an opportunity to harass gays, but still beat up one of the human rights activists.[16]

As it was said earlier, homosexuals have been attacked attacked by many groups in Russian society, including Russian Orthodox believers. Thus, members of the Union of Orthodox Standard-Bearers saw themselves as crusaders leading a modern-day inquisition, and they considered few as heretical as homosexuals. In May 2007, they were part of a hymn-chanting and egg-throwing mob that broke up Moscow's gay parade.

"It's forbidden to propagandize any sin, such as homosexuality or murder," says Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich, the head of the group. "I personally think homosexuals need to be treated by doctors."

He is not alone in his opinion among Russians. The ex-mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov, called gay parades "satanic" and vowed not to permit them. And, in a 2007 survey by state pollster VTsIOM of 1,600 Russians, 56 per cent of respondents said they thought homosexuality was unacceptable behavior, and almost a quarter thought it should be criminalized.

The *U.S. News and World Report* documented: Some doctors support the idea of the abnormality of homosexuality. Thus, in one of Russia's top-selling papers, *Argumenty I Fakty*, a doctor wrote: "There's no biological reason for gays to act so shockingly, but they do have a lack of self-restraint."

The Russian government does not maintain official statistics on homophobic attacks, but human rights activists report that such incidents are widespread. Nikolai Alexeyev, the organizer of the gay parade, helped two men claim asylum in Spain after they were attacked.

Alexeyev, a boyish-looking thirty year old at that time was partly motivated by his own experiences of homophobia. He left Moscow State University in 2001, before finishing

[16] Sexual Minorities Managed to Hold a Parade in Moscow. Novosti, June 1, 2006. http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lastnews/2008/06/01/n_1225989.shtml

his degree, after professors in the faculty of government administration would not let him write a thesis on homosexuality. He took the university to court, where he said documents described his sexual orientation as "inadequate." He also took Russia's chief mufti to court after the Muslim leader said gays who participated in the parade should be beaten. Court documents in that case called homosexuals a "deviant social group," Alexeyev claimed. Both cases were rejected.[17]

On December 14, 2008, a group of neo-Nazi skinheads attacked a gay couple in Novosibirsk. According to one of the victims, the skinheads openly stated that they were skinheads and that they killed gay people. "Further skinheads showed a big metal chain which they used to "beat gays and non-Russians," the victim said.[18] Skinheads later caught up with the couple and brutally attacked them using this metal weapon. The victims needed medical assistance afterwards. Hoping to find justice and protection, the victims complained to the police who were not only unwilling to help but also abusive to the victims: "They detained us till 6 a.m. Police officers did not treat us seriously. They did not want the fact that the attackers were skinheads and that we were attacked on the grounds of hatred to be mentioned in the police report. They issued a forensic examination order only two days later only because I demanded them to as the bruises and hematomas on my face and head were healing. Today I am going to register beating marks, though an investigator has not been put on my case yet," the victim said.[19]

In November 2009, Oleg Mitvol, Prefect of Northern Administrative District of Moscow, notorious for his homophobic statements, launched an inquisition style campaign against members of the LGBTQ community of Moscow by raiding one of the Moscow gay

[17]Alostair Gee. In Russia, Gays and Lesbians Struggle Against Widespread Hostility. U.S. News and World Report, May 29, 2008. http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/world/2008/05/29/in-russia-gays-and-lesbians-struggle-against-widespread-hostility.html?PageNr=2

[18] Нападение на представителей секс-меньшинств в Новосибирске (Attack on Sexual Minorities in Novosibirsk), SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, December 2008. http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/news/racism-nationalism/2008/12/d14860/

[19] Нападение на представителей секс-меньшинств в Новосибирске (Attack on Sexual Minorities in Novosibirsk), SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, December 2008, http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/news/racism-nationalism/2008/12/d14860/

clubs, which, according to Mr. Mitvol, "…lead to moral degradation of citizens and become the source of troubles should be closed."[20]

In October 2009, the UN Committee on Human Rights criticized Russia for mistreatment of gay and lesbian people saying they face "systematic discrimination" by the government and expressed its concern about "acts of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) persons, including reports of harassment by the police and incidents of people being assaulted or killed on account of their sexual orientation."[21]

In January 2010, Yury Luzhkov, stated that he would not allow a gay rights parade in the city and any unsanctioned efforts would face police power. "A gay parade... cannot be called anything but a Satanic act," said Luzhkov at an education conference. "We haven't permitted such a parade and we won't permit it in the future... It's high time that we stop propagating nonsense discussions about human rights, and bring to bear on them the full force and justice of the law." The city's Orthodox Church and far right groups have also vowed to disrupt any parades. "It's the same old medieval homophobic rhetoric," said gay rights activist Nikolai Alexeyev.[22]

In June 2010, homosexuals attempted to carry out a gay parade in St Petersburg. The participants protested against homophobia in Russia. In response, the police arrested several members of the demonstration.[23]

A July 2010 survey[24] conducted by the Levada Analytical Center, a nongovernmental research organization based in Moscow, revealed that the homophobic moods had increased in Russia since the last 2005 survey. The survey identified that 74 percent of the respondents believed that members of sexual minorities were "morally dissolute or mentally defective

[20]Российская ЛГБТ-сеть обратилась в Генпрокуратуру с жалобой на Митволя (Russian LGBT network complained to the Prosecutor General office about Mitvol), Russian LGBT Network, August 2009, http://lgbtnet.ru/news/detail.php?ID=4409

[21] U.N. Human Rights Committee blasts Russia's treatment of gays, Pride Source, May 2009, http://www.pridesource.com/article.html?article=38588

[22] Yuri Luzhkov, Mayor of Moscow, Calls Gay Parade "Satanic," HuffPost Social News, January 25, 2010. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/25/yury-luzhkov-mayor-of-mos_n_435717.html

[23]Милиция задержала несколько участников гей-парада в Петербурге (Police Detained Several Participants Of Gay Parade in Petersburg). NewsRu.com, June 26, 2010. http://www.newsru.com/russia/26jun2010/pot.html

[24] 1600 Russians aged 18 and older in 130 cities and 45 regions participated in the survey.

persons;" 24 percent recommended that gay and lesbian people require psychological assistance, while 39 percent of the respondents believed that homosexuals had to be forcefully treated and isolated from the rest of the society.[25]

The situation in 2011, around the attempted gay pride parade, demonstrated that homophobia still was rampaging Russian society. The words of psychiatrist Mikhail Vasiliev are highly revealing. On one hand, he blamed Russian authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church for fueling homophobia. On the other hand, he compared homosexuals to a "sick child with otherwise healthy parents who needs to be treated, controlled, and sometimes spanked."[26]

In May 2011, authorities violently suppressed the Moscow gay pride parade, using excessive physical force and enabling Russian nationalists to engage in homophobic attacks. Gayrussia.eu reported that OMON (special police force) officers cordoned off Aleksandrovskiy Sad, Red Square, and the square in front of Moscow City Hall, where the pride events were scheduled to take place. As participants approached Aleksandrovskiy Sad, police used brutal force to detain them. Authorities also arrested those gathered in front of City Hall, including Anna Komarova, a member of the Moscow Gay Pride Parade Organization Committee, as well as American activists Daniel Choi, Andy Thayer, and Louis-Georges Tin, chairman of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO) Committee. In total, police detained 18 participants, including three foreign nationals. Dan Choi later reported via Twitter that he had been injured and placed in solitary confinement.[27]

The crackdown generated a wave of approvals from various political and social circles. It is remarkable that the Russian opposition and the United Russia ruling party agreed on the matter of sexual minorities, who they believe that (gay) people are not entitled to the

[25] 74 процента россиян признали геев психически неполноценными, (74 % Russians believe that gays people are mentally defective persons), http://vesti.kz/ru_society/60382/

[26]Врач-психиатр Михаил Васильев обвиняет церковь и государство в пропаганде гомофобии (Psychiatrist Mikhail Vasiliev blames the Church and the State for Propaganda of Homophobia) GayRussia, June 2011, http://www.gayrussia.eu/russia/1823

[27] Московский гей-прайд 2011: Хроника событий (The 2011 Russian Gay Parade: Timeline), GayRussia, May 2011. http://www.gayrussia.eu/russia/1719/

freedom of assembly.[28] Boris Reznik, member of the United Russia Party and a member of Russian State Duma, voiced the opinion of the Russian authorities regarding the LGBTQ in Russia saying that "homosexuals should not invade social space" and that those who do not like it should go to another state and live there.[29] Furthermore, Sergey Markov, Chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee on Non-Governmental and Religious Organizations, insisted in his interview to a Ukrainian news agency that homosexuality is not a norm but a pervasion and that there is treatment for it. A representative of the Russian Orthodox Church thanked the Moscow authorities for having cracked down on the gay pride parade and expressed his hope that "the authorities would continue listening to the opinion of their own people, the majority of whom do not accept the propaganda of homosexuality."[30]

In November 2011, the Saint Petersburg City Duma introduced a law against the "propaganda of homosexuality." It was supported by the vast majority of the deputies with only one no vote and one abstention. The deputies from the ruling United Russia and the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party were behind the law. United Russia announced that it was ready to promote this law on a national level. LGBTQ activists who protested against the law were attacked and beaten by "young men in sport uniforms," which, in the Russian context, mean undercover police.[31]

In March 2012, the Governor of Saint Petersburg Georgiy Poltavchenko signed a notorious law banning propaganda of homosexuality and pedophilia. Under the new law, individuals would be fined 5,000 Rubles (about 156 US Dollars), while fines for legal entities would range from 250,000 Rubles to 500,000 Rubles (7,812 US Dollars to 15,625 US

[28] Организатор «Стратегии-31» в Тюмени убежден, что свобода собраний не для геев (Organizer of the Strategy-31 in Tyumen is convinced that freedom of assembly is not for gay people), GayRussia, June 2011. http://www.gayrussia.eu/russia/1764/

[29] Депутат Борис Резник советует открытым гомосексуалам убираться из России (Boris Reznik, a member of the parliament, advises open homosexuals to get out of Russia), GayRussia, June 2011. http://www.gayrussia.eu/russia/1783/

[30] Представитель РПЦ благодарит московские власти за разгон гей-прайда (Representative of Russian Orthodox Church thanks the Moscow authorities for crackdown on gay pride parade), GayRussia, May 2011. http://www.gayrussia.eu/russia/1730/

[31] В Петербурге избили гей-активистов, протестовавших против запрета пропаганды гомосексуализма (In Petersburg Gay Activists Protesting Against The Ban On Homosexual Propaganda Were Beaten). Novosti. Gazeta. Ru, November 11, 2011. http://www.gazeta.ru/news/blogs/2011/11/21/n_2104410.shtml

Dollars) for public actions promoting sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgenderism among minors.[32]

In May 2012, the LGBTQ community attempted to organize a gay pride parade in Moscow, but the authorities cracked down on the participants, which had resulted in the arrest of about forty persons, including Nikolay Alekxeyev, one of the leaders of the LGBTQ community.[33]

In June 2012, after an opposition rally, a group of persons wearing masks attacked activists of the Ravnopravie (Equality) LGBTQ organization. According to Yuriy Gavrikov, the leader of the organization, police knew that the group of unknown persons in masks were following the activists. When the activists asked the police officers for help, they said with scorn on their faces that they could not provide personal security.[34]



Police detain a gay rights activist during a protest outside the State Duma in Moscow. Photograph: Andrey Smirnov/AFP/Getty Images[35]

[32] Губернатор Северной столицы подписал "гомофобный" закон (Governor of Nothern Capital Signed Homophobic Law) RBK, March 2012. http://top.rbc.ru/society/11/03/2012/641148.shtml

[33] Попытка устроить в Москве гей-парад обернулась задержаниями (Attempt to Organize a Gay Pride Parade in Moscow Resulted in Detentions), RBK, May 2012. http://top.rbc.ru/politics/27/05/2012/652272.shtml

[34] Драка националистов и геев после акции оппозиции в Петербурге может обернуться уголовным делом (Clash between Nationalists and Gays after an Opposition Rally in Saint Petersburg May Lead to a Criminal Case), GayRussia, June 2012. http://www.gayrussia.eu/russia/4441/?phrase_id=428044

[35] Russian gay rights activists detained as MPs vote for 'propaganda' bill. Associated Press in Moscow, guardian.co.uk, Friday 25 January. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/25/russian-gay-activists-detained-propaganda-bill

In January 2013, Russia's State Duma, the lower house of parliament, voted 388-1-1 for the law that made public events and the dissemination of information on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, or LGBTQ, community to minors punishable by fines of up to $16,000. During the hearings in the Duma, gay rights campaigners protested outside of the parliament and were attacked by militant Russian Orthodox activists. Police detained 20 individuals, mostly gay activists, the true victims of homophobes, and some Orthodox attackers. A few days prior to this event, at a similar rally, Russian Orthodox activists violently assaulted LGBTQ campaigners, who had gathered to kiss each other in protest against the planned legislation.[36]

The "gay propaganda" law, adopted by Russia in 2013, was condemned as discriminatory by the European Court of Human Rights in 2017. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has also denounced the law because it "encourages the stigmatization of and discrimination" of LGBTQ people. However, instead of repealing the law, the Russian government uses it to silence LGBTQ activists, suppress peaceful protests, and censor online expression.

Following the adoption of the so-called antigay law, the LGBTQ community in Russia expressed their increasing concern as the new legislation made it more dangerous and more difficult to speak about their sexual orientation openly. In addition, the new legislation served as an unofficial approval of actions of homophobic radicals, who attack people not only for being gay but also everyone, whom they suspect to be gay.[37]

According to the annual report published by the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, during the year of 2013, the violence against sexual minorities and those, who were taken for being a sexual minority, has reached an ominous scale. Twenty-five people became victims of beatings, while two were killed. The report also states that most of the victims were participants in the protests against the law banning "propaganda of homosexuality." Most of

[36] Russian gay rights activists detained as MPs vote for 'propaganda' bill. Associated Press in Moscow, guardian.co.uk, January 25, 2013. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/25/russian-gay-activists-detained-propaganda-bill

[37] Как живется гомосексуалистам в России после антигейского закона (How homosexuals are doing in Russia after adoption of antigay law), October 2013. http://news.bigmir.net/world/767402-Kak-zhivetsja-gomoseksualistam-v-Rossii-posle-antigejskogo-zakona

the participants of the protests were either detained by police or were subjected to violence at the hands of various homophobic groups, including neo-Nazis, Orthodox Christian radicals, Cossacks and others.

In particular, on November 3, 2013, a group of unknown persons wearing masks attacked LGBTQ activists, who gathered for a tea party in the office of one of the non-governmental organizations located in Fontanka, Saint Petersburg. One of the most gruesome incidents was the murder of Vladislav Tornovoy in May 2013 in Volgograd. He was killed on suspicion of being gay.[38] In May 2014, in Moscow, a group of aggressive young people attacked the participants at an LGBTQ event, Raduzhnyi Miting (Rainbow Rally), near Oktyabrskaya Subway Station. The attackers threw eggs and stones at the participants. The police at the scene did not detain the attackers. Instead, they detained four female participants, who had beards drawn on their faces in support of Conchita Wurst, winner of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest.[39]

Meanwhile, the intolerance of LGBTQ people in Russia continued to increase. In November-December 2014, the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted a poll with the results showing that two out of three Russians believed that LGBTQ people should not be accepted in society and that 51 percent of Russians did not want to have a homosexual as a neighbor, which was 13 percent more compared to the results of 2012.[40]

Attacks on LGBTQ individuals have confirmed the deeply rooted homophobic sentiment in Russian society. For example, on May 17, 2015, during an anti-homophobia event in Khabarovsk, unknown assailants attacked a group of LGBTQ activists, spraying them with pepper spray and physically assaulting one of the activists, Alexandr Ermoshkin.

---

[38] Праворадикал расправил плечи. Ксенофобия и радикальный национализм и противодействие им в 2013 году в России (Right Radical Squared His Shoulders: Xenophobia and Radical Nationalism and Countermeasures against them in 2013 in Russia), SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, February 2014. http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/2014/02/d29004/

[39] Нападение на участников акции ЛГБТ (Attack on the participant in the LGBT rally), SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, June 2014. http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/news/racism-nationalism/2014/06/d29636/

[40] Public Opinion in Russia: Russian's Attitudes on Foreign Affairs and Social Issues. Russians Appear Less Tolerant of LGBT People than Two Years Ago, and a Majority Do Not Accept LGBT People. http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/HTML%20Reports/public-opinion-in-russia-russians-attitudes-on-foreign-affairs-and-social-issues0401-6253.aspx

He was struck on the back of the head, resulting in a concussion.[41] Another example, on June 16, 2016, a gang of soccer fans attacked the Mono gay club in Yekaterinburg and shot its patrons with automatic guns. The patrons rushed into the club and the fans severely beat up those who stayed outside. The police, who arrived on the scene, did not attempt to catch the attackers.[42] In June 2018, a gay couple from France was attacked and brutally beaten and robbed in St Petersburg. [43]

During a social experiment on July 12, 2015, a gay couple from Moscow walked down the streets holding hands and videotaping themselves with a hidden camera. They uploaded on www.youtube.com the record of the passersby pointing fingers at them, calling them antigay slurs, and demanding them to leave Russia, while the most aggressive men even assaulted the couple, provoking a brawl.[44]

In November 2015, Dmitriy Kiselyov, general director of the Russia Today state information agency, and well known as the Kremlin's official TV commentator, who regularly appeared on live TV shows on the Russia1, the main government TV channel, stated during a live TV show: “I believe that merely fining gays for propaganda of homosexuality among minors is not enough. They must be permanently banned as donors of blood, sperm, and their hearts, in case of a car accident, must be buried in the ground or burned as unusable for the continuation of someone else's life.” His words were greeted with a round of applause from an audience that included representatives of the Russian government, the Orthodox Church, and ordinary Russians.[45] Kiselyov openly promoted hatred towards the United Sates and the LGBTQ community. Due to his extreme antigay views, he was placed on the international sanctions list in 2014.

---

[41] В Хабаровсе совершено нападение на ЛГБТ-активиста. (An LGBT-activist was attacked in Khabarovsk). Радио Свобода. May 17, 2015.
[42] В Екатеринбурге избили и обстреляли из пневматики посетителей гей-клуба. (Gay Club Patrons were Beaten and Shot with Pneumatic Guns in Yekaterinburg). Vzglyad News Agency. June 16, 2016. http://vz.ru/news/2016/6/16/816410.html
[43] Cyd Zeigler.Gay couple brutally attacked at World Cup in Russia. SB Nation: Outsports.com, June 14, 2018. https://www.outsports.com/2018/6/14/17464374/gay-world-cup-russia-attack
[44] Избиение гомосексуалистов в Росси. Reaction to Gays in Russia Social Experiment. https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=wgm3lb9JUU0
[45] Киселев: сердца геев надо зарывать в землю! Или сжигать! (Kiselyov: Hearts of Gays Must Be Buried In Ground! Or Burnt!) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKsXCIQHccQ

In 2017, the government of Moscow declined the application to hold a gay-pride in Moscow and banned the rally in support of the European Court of Human Right's decision to deem the Russia's Gay Propaganda Law discriminatory.[46]

Russian LGBTQ individuals have never had the legal right to marry, and same-sex unions performed abroad are not recognized by the Russian government. Yevgeny Voitsekhovsky and Pavel Stotsko, a Russian gay couple married in January 2018 in Denmark, were threatened after their attempt to register their marriage in Moscow. Vitaly Milonov, a Russian MP and the author of the Gay Propaganda Law, said their marriage was not legal and called them "stinking goats." After receiving multiple death threats, the couple fled the country.[47]

Transgender individuals have also faced attacks in Russia. The Yekaterinburg Court ruled to remove two adopted children from a mother of five who had undergone breast amputation surgery and maintained a transgender blog. Under Russian law, transsexualism is classified as a mental disorder and falls under the restrictions of the "Homosexuality Propaganda" law, subjecting transgender individuals to legal persecution and discrimination.[48]

Homophobic groups successfully disrupted an LGBTQ conference in Moscow in November 2018. According to Human Rights Watch, a well-known Russian LGBTQ support organization was forced to cancel its annual Inclusive Family Conference after receiving homophobic threats and suffering a violent attack involving pepper spray.

The fifth annual LGBTQIAPP+ Family Conference was scheduled for November 9-11, 2018, to provide a platform for LGBTQ families to share their experiences and support family structures that do not conform to Russia's rigid definition of "traditional family values." The event was organized by Resource LGBTQIA Moscow, the same group whose

[46] Власти столицы запретили гей-парад в Москве и митинг в поддержку решения ЕСПЧ (The Government of Moscow Banned a Gay-Pride in Moscow and the Rally to Support the ECHR's Decision). Rosbalt New Agency. June 22, 2017. http://www.rosbalt.ru/moscow/2017/06/22/1625250.html

[47] Gay Married Couple Flee Russia after Receiving Death Threats. The Guardian. January 29, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/29/gay-married-couple-flee-russia-after-receiving-death-threats

48 На Урале суд отказался вернуть детей женщине-транссексуалу, удалившей себе грудь (The Court in Ural Refused to Return Children to a Female Transgender with Amputated Breasts). Vkurse.Ru News Agency. September 21, 2017. http://v-kurse.ru/news/life/na_urale_sud_otkazalsya_vernut_detey_zhenshchine_transseksualu_udalivshey_sebe_grud_4986054/

volunteers had been attacked at the 2017 conference. In the days leading up to the event, Yulia Malygina, director of Resource LGBTQIA Moscow, began receiving anonymous text messages and phone calls filled with homophobic threats. Simultaneously, hate speech targeting the conference was being widely circulated on VKontakte (VK), a Russian social media platform.

On the morning of November 9, the conference venue address—kept secret for security reasons—was leaked on VK and rapidly spread among homophobic groups. By noon, the venue started receiving threatening calls and online messages demanding the event's cancellation. When organizers and volunteers arrived at 3 p.m., the management, fearing for the safety of other ongoing events, withdrew its support and refused to host the conference. Later that evening, as a group of five or six volunteers left a nearby shop, an assailant sprayed them with pepper spray, injuring two, who required hospitalization. Despite the attack, when the police arrived 40 minutes later, they refused to take action, claiming jurisdictional issues. After several more hours, another precinct took two volunteers to file a complaint, but no meaningful investigation followed. Although the conference was partially held via an online stream and briefly resumed at a new location, the address was leaked again, forcing organizers to cancel the remaining sessions to protect participants from further violence.[49]

In certain regions, particularly in Chechnya, the government has carried out brutal crackdowns on LGBTQ individuals. In January 2019, Chechen authorities reportedly killed two LGBTQ people and detained forty others. According to *The Guardian*, the deaths were caused by police torture, marking another wave of violent persecution against LGBTQ individuals in the region.

These reports mirror those from 2017, when hundreds of gay men in Chechnya were rounded up, subjected to beatings and electric shocks in secret detention centers, sparking international condemnation and sanctions. The renewed crackdown began in late December 2018, according to the Russian LGBTQ Network, after police detained an administrator of an online LGBTQ group on VKontakte, Russia's largest social network. Authorities then used

[49] Russia: LGBT Conference Attacked, Disrupted, Two Volunteers Injured. Human Rights Watch, November 20, 2018. https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/20/russia-lgbt-conference-attacked-disrupted

the contacts from his phone to track down and detain others. Both men and women were among those arrested, said Igor Kochetkov, the program director for the Russian LGBTQ Network. Detainees were held in a jail in the town of Argun, had their documents confiscated to prevent them from leaving the region, and were threatened with violence against their families to keep them silent.

"The persecution of men and women suspected of homosexuality never ceased," Kochetkov stated. "The only thing that has changed is its scale." Survivors have recounted the extreme brutality inflicted by Chechen law enforcement. One young man reported being beaten with metal rods, subjected to electric shocks, and verbally assaulted because of his sexual orientation. Three young men were allegedly killed during that crackdown. Another survivor, Maksim Lapunov, described being beaten with batons while a plastic bag was pulled over his head. He was the first to file a formal complaint with Russia's Investigative Committee, but no criminal case has been opened in response to the reports.[50]

In January 2019, an extremist group calling itself the Union of Homophobes in Russia, the CIS, Syria, and Iran announced an organized "hunting season" for LGBTQ individuals, offering monetary rewards for acts of violence against them. According to *News.ru*, an online announcement sought recruits to participate in "gay hunting" (*geykhanterstvo*), specifically targeting young, physically fit individuals with combat skills who were "aggressive against LGBTQ people." The group promised payments of up to 300,000 rubles for attacking members of the LGBTQ community.

The announcement, published on a specialized website on January 19, 2019, claimed to be an informational resource for the *Union of Homophobes* and had reportedly been active since 2014. It outlined tasks for participants, including identifying LGBTQ individuals, disrupting LGBTQ events, attacking gay clubs, and even abducting individuals to transport them to Chechnya. The site explicitly stated that "almost anything can be done except murder" and featured a photograph of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who has been accused of orchestrating violent crackdowns against LGBTQ people in Chechnya. Those

[50] Chechnya: two dead and dozens held in LGBT purge, say activists. The Guardian, January 14, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/14/chechnya-two-dead-and-dozens-held-in-lgbt-purge-reports

interested in participating were encouraged to submit resumes via email. The group offered a "test assignment," for which successful applicants would receive a payment of 10,000 rubles, with the promise of increasing payouts for future attacks. The announcement underscored the alarming levels of state-sanctioned and vigilante-driven homophobia in Russia, further endangering LGBTQ individuals who already face systemic persecution and violence.

"Hunting for gays" was planned to start in the following regions: Stavropol Territory, Chechnya, Dagestan, Samara Oblast, Sverdlovskaya Oblast, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Udmurtia, Chelyabinsk Oblast, Perm Oblast, Saratov Oblast and Orenburg Oblast. In the future, it is also planned to open hunting in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, Yaroslavl, Tula, Voronezh, Nizhny Novgorod, Ulyanovsk, Volgograd, Ryazan, Penza, Novy Urengoy, Omsk and Novosibirsk.[51]

Meanwhile, the persecution of LGBTQ individuals in Chechnya continued unabated. In April 2019, reports emerged of fresh arrests targeting LGBTQ people in the region. According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, this marked the third consecutive year of anti-LGBTQ crackdowns in the predominantly Muslim republic. A 2017 investigative report had already exposed the detention and torture of over 100 gay men by Chechen authorities.

Between December 2018 and April 2019, at least 23 men were detained on suspicion of being gay, according to Igor Kochetkov, head of the Russian LGBTQ Network. HRW documented chilling testimonies from survivors, revealing that at least three detainees were tortured with electric shocks, while one was raped with a stick. During interrogations, police reportedly confiscated their cellphones and forced them, under torture, to disclose the names of other LGBTQ individuals they knew.

HRW interviewed four survivors of the crackdown in February and March 2019, after they managed to flee Chechnya. They recounted harrowing experiences of abuse and torture in detention, stating that they had met at least five other detainees who were also targeted

[51] Jeremy Makdir. Russians were offered a gay hunt for a reward - reports News.ru. Change.org, January 20, 2019. https://www.change.org/p/help-very-urgently-help-save-gays-and-lesbians-from-chechnya-and-russia-the-persecution-and-killing-of-lgbt-people-in-chechnya-and-russia-must-stop/u/23908329

because of their presumed homosexuality. These testimonies provided further evidence of the brutal and systematic nature of Chechnya's ongoing campaign against LGBTQ individuals.[52]

Any protest by the LGBTQ community has been met with repression. On May 17, 2019, approximately ten LGBTQ activists attempted to hold a demonstration in St. Petersburg to mark the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. However, police swiftly intervened, arresting four activists and effectively shutting down the rally.



Russian riot police detained gay rights activist during World Day Against Homophobia and Transophobia in Saint Petersburg on May 17, 2019.
https://www.france24.com/en/20190517-four-arrests-russian-lgbt-protest

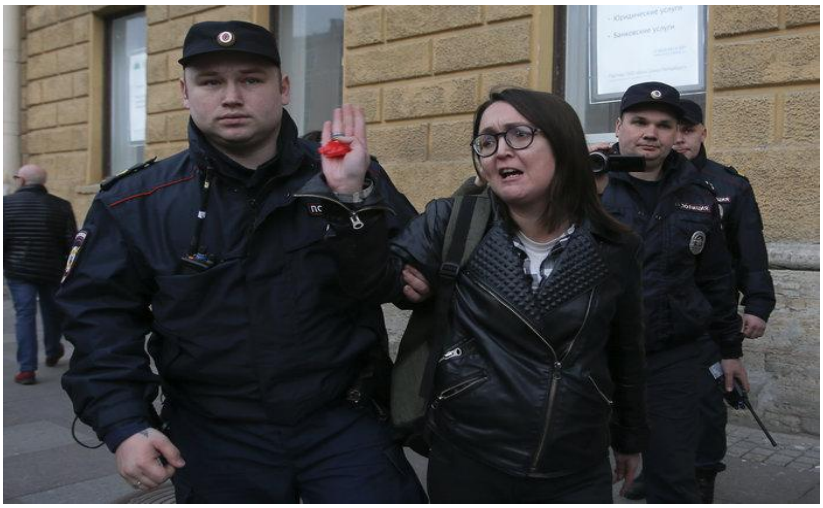
France 24 reported: We want to draw attention to the problems of the LGBTQ community. They are clamping down on us and don't allow us to defend our rights," one of the group told AFP. Moscow city hall had on Wednesday rejected four requests for demonstrations, including a gay-pride march, made by Nikolai Alexeyev, a gay community leader in Russia who said the city authorities had rejected such rallies for 14 years. Last November, the European Court of Human Rights rebuked Moscow for a ban on holding LGBTQ assemblies as a violation of human rights and freedom of assembly. Russia has taken a conservative line on sexual minorities and homosexuality was deemed a crime until 1993 and as a mental illness until 1999. Moscow also has since 2013 punished with fines and prison terms anything authorities deem gay "propaganda" anywhere children might see it.

[52] New Anti-Gay Abuses Hit Russia's Chechnya – HRW. The Moscow Times, May 8, 2019. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/08/new-anti-gay-abuses-hit-russias-chechnya-hrw-a65530

There have furthermore been several reported cases over the past two years of gay people being jailed or killed in the Russian republic of Chechnya.[53]

LGBTQ individuals have been victims of homophobic violence not only in Chechnya but across Russia, including in its so-called "cultural capital," St. Petersburg. LGBTQ rights activist Yelena Grigoryeva was brutally murdered there on July 21, 2019. Her body was found in the bushes near her home, bearing multiple stab wounds, according to the Russian news website Fontanka.

Grigoryeva was not only an advocate for LGBTQ rights but also a vocal participant in anti-war and pro-democracy demonstrations. She actively opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea and fought for broader human rights causes. Before her murder, she had received numerous death threats, activist Dinar Idrisov wrote on Facebook, noting that she had recently been a victim of violence and was "regularly threatened with murder." Grigoryeva was also listed on a homophobic website that encouraged visitors to track down and attack LGBTQ individuals, according to Idrisov and local photojournalist George Markov.



Yelena Grigoryeva was found near her home in St. Petersburg on July 21, 2019 with multiple stab wounds and signs of strangulation, activists said on social media. Anton Vaganov/Reuters

[53] Four arrests in Russian LGBT protest. France 24, May 17, 2019. https://www.france24.com/en/20190517-four-arrests-russian-lgbt-protest

Before her death, Grigoryeva had filed multiple reports with the police, but “none of them concerned possible threats to her life,” according to Russian Interior Ministry in the region, in a statement cited by the Interfax news agency. “The reports concerned various domestic conflicts involving the victims' acquaintances,” the ministry said, adding that the police reviewed them according to legal procedures.[54]

On August 3, 2019, police in St. Petersburg blocked an LGBTQ march, preventing activists from demonstrating. Authorities detained at least 11 LGBTQ activists, with three individuals requiring medical attention and being taken away in an ambulance.[55] Citing the law against so-called "propaganda of homosexuality," the regime once again demonstrated its hostility toward the LGBTQ movement, using legal repression to silence and intimidate activists.



Law enforcement officers block participants at an LGBT rally in Saint Petersburg on August 2, 2019. Photo: Reuters

[54] Sasha Ingber. Russian LGBT Activist Is Found Dead; Friends Say She Was Threatened. NPR, July 23, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/07/23/744420960/russian-lgbt-activist-is-found-dead-friends-say-she-was-threatened; Agence France-Presse. Murder, ‘gay hunters’ strike terror in Russia's LGBT community. South China Morning Post, August 6, 2019. https://www.scmp.com/news/world/russia-central-asia/article/3021697/murder-gay-hunters-strike-terror-russias-lgbt

[55] LGBT Activists Detained at St. Petersburg Pride Event. *The Moscow Times*, August 5, 2019. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/05/lgbt-activists-detained-at-st-petersburg-pride-event-a66716

The Russian authorities silence the LGBTQ community's voices. The court in Saint Petersburg has ruled that two popular LGBTQ networking sites be blocked for disseminating "anti-family values," including a major online group with nearly 200,000 members. The court in Saint Petersburg announced the decision against the groups on VK, a Russian platform similar to Facebook. "An inspection showed they contain information available to the public, including children, which negates family values, propagates non-traditional sexual relations and promotes disrespectful attitudes towards parents," the court statement said.[56]

In November 2019, Russian feminist and LGBTQ activist Yulia Tsvetkova was put under house arrest on bogus charges of distributing pornography, and faces new charges of allegedly violating Russia's "gay propaganda" law. In the new charges, police claim Tsvetkova, 26, violated the country's notorious "gay propaganda" law by posting her drawing on social media, depicting two same-sex couples with children and the caption "Family is where love is. Support LGBT+ families!" In a January 2020 interview, Tsvetkova said she made the drawing in 2019 in support of a same-sex couple with two adopted children who had to flee Russia after being targeted by authorities.

In December 2019, a court in Komsomolsk-on-Amur fined Tsvetkova 50,000 rubles (US $800) for violation of the "gay propaganda" law over LGBTQ-friendly and feminist posts in two social media groups which she administers. Among other things, the judge was unfazed by the fact that both groups had "18+" age markers even though Russia's "gay propaganda" ban only concerns "propagating non-traditional sexual relations" to children.

Tsvetkova came under police scrutiny in 2019 after a homophobic agitator Timur Bulatov, who in his view leads a "moral jihad" against LGBTQ people, filed written complaints against her. Bulatov is particularly known for identifying allegedly LGBTQ teachers, outing them to school principals, and demanding their dismissal to guard children against "gay propaganda." In 2016, he boasted that 65 teachers lost their jobs as a result of his

[56] Russian Court Blocks Major LGBT Online Groups. Agence France-Presse, October 3, 2019. https://www.voanews.com/europe/russian-court-blocks-major-lgbt-online-groups

complaints. Bulatov's attacks on Tsvetkova forced her to close a youth theater project last spring over security concerns.[57]



Illustration reading, "Family is where love is. Support LGBT+ families."
© 2019 Yulia Tsvetkova

Even though Russia decriminalized homosexuality in 1993, it remains a deeply homophobic society. Rampant violence against gays has been on a steady rise since 2013, when Russia passed a law banning gay "propaganda" among minors. "They [homophobes] enjoy a feeling of impunity," said Vitaly Bespalov, editor at a gay online portal and one of the targets of the homophobes. "They know they will face nothing for it."[58] In fact, LGBTQ members are targeted on a regular basis.[59] President Putin's proposal of a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage[60] fueled more hatred toward the LGBTQ community in Russia. In fact, Putin's proposal was accepted by the Duma, a rubber stamp Russian parliament.

[57] Nicola Habersetzer. Russian LGBT Activist Under House Arrest is Facing New Charges. Human Rights Watch, January 22, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/22/russian-lgbt-activist-under-house-arrest-facing-new-charges#
[58] Agence France-Presse. Murder, 'gay hunters' strike terror in Russia's LGBT community. South China Morning Post, August 6, 2019. https://www.scmp.com/news/world/russia-central-asia/article/3021697/murder-gay-hunters-strike-terror-russias-lgbt
[59] Arion Potts. "I get death threats every day" – evolving queer rights in Russia. Joy, January 2, 2020. https://joy.org.au/theinformer/2020/01/02/i-get-death-threats-every-day-evolving-queer-rights-in-russia/
[60] Andrew E. Kramer. Putin Proposes Constitutional Ban on Gay Marriage. The New York Times, March 3, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/world/europe/putin-proposes-constitutional-ban-on-gay-marriage.html

Many Russians express open hatred towards LGBTQ members. Nearly 1 in 5 of them want to "eliminate" gay and lesbian people from society, according to a survey, a finding that has incited fear and anger among LGBTQ activists in the country. "There is this feeling you are targeted, and that 18 percent believe I should be eliminated is just awful," said Svetlana Zakharova, an out lesbian living in St Petersburg. "It was very emotional." The survey, published by the Levada Center also found that 32 percent of respondents wanted to "isolate" gay men and lesbians from society, compared to 9 percent who wanted to "assist" them.[61]

As the Freedom House pointed out: "From anti-LGBTQ legislation to Chechen atrocities, the Kremlin uses state-sponsored homophobia as a part of its strategy to maintain power and influence at the expense of its own citizens fundamental rights."[62]

The ruling party in Russia has pushed to ban "polyamory and bisexuality propaganda" as part of a broader effort to impose homophobic policies and uphold what the Kremlin frames as "traditional values." This campaign—alongside a national referendum that enshrined a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage—reflects a growing trend of conservative and explicitly anti-LGBTQ rhetoric. It exemplifies state-driven "politicized homophobia," which not only erodes democratic principles and human rights but also reshapes how these ideals are understood and applied by policymakers both within Russia and internationally.

The implementation of the "gay propaganda" law has resulted in an increase in anti-LGBTQ violence and restrictions on LGBTQ projects and initiatives—from a ban on Pride events to the inability of LGBTQ organizations to register in the country. Further repression has occurred in 2021, including prosecutors' demands to ban journalists from publishing articles discussing "nontraditional" sexual relations. Russian prosecutors have repeatedly filed lawsuits with Roskomnadzor, the federal executive body responsible for overseeing the media, demanding the blocking of local LGBTQ organizations' websites.

[61] Elizabeth Kuhr. 1 in 5 Russians want gays and lesbians 'eliminated,' survey finds. NBCNews, April 24, 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/1-5-russians-want-gays-lesbians-eliminated-survey-finds-n1191851
[62] Elene Kurtanidze. Dismantling LGBT+ rights as a means of control in Russia. Freedom House, April 30, 2021. https://freedomhouse.org/article/dismantling-lgbt-rights-means-control-russia?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Russian law enforcement officials have routinely refused to investigate assaults and acts of violence against LGBTQ individuals and activists, effectively disregarding citizens' fundamental right to safety as guaranteed by the Russian constitution. In one case, police in Murmansk declined to pursue an investigation into online death threats against an LGBTQ activist, claiming that a social media post by the activist was intended to "provoke a negative assessment of persons with traditional views." Similarly, officials failed to act on a young bisexual woman's report that her family had subjected her to violent "conversion therapy" in Chechnya. Additionally, the Russian LGBT Network—a leading LGBTQ rights organization—has reported that the FSB has overstepped its legal authority by attempting to identify so-called "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations" online, despite this falling outside the agency's official mandate.

The continuing state-sponsored atrocities and persecutions committed in Chechnya have gained international attention, but silence envelopes the government of Russia. Despite the Russian government's inaction over the years, *Novaya Gazeta* journalists and the Russian LGBT Network revealed new evidence and testimonies of extrajudicial killings committed by Chechen security forces, reflecting the Chechen government's impunity and flagrant disrespect for human rights, as well as the threats and dangers faced by LGBTQ people in the region.[63]

LGBTQ-rights campaigners and hate-crime researchers have reported a notable uptick in violence and harassment against gays and lesbians, often from conservative activists or those espousing Orthodox Christian beliefs.[64]

In February 2022, Russia's Justice Ministry filed a lawsuit to dissolve the Sphere Foundation, the legal entity behind the Russian LGBT Network, claiming its activities were incompatible with so-called "traditional values." The ministry alleged that Sphere's work undermined state policy aimed at preserving and expanding the nation's "human capital," and

[63] Elene Kurtanidze. Dismantling LGBT+ rights as a means of control in Russia. Freedom House, April 20, 2021. https://freedomhouse.org/article/dismantling-lgbt-rights-means-control-russia
[64] Tony Wesolowsky. A Performance By Russian Cadets Shocks An Audience, And Adds To Fears About Rising Homophobia. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, September 1, 2021. https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-cadets-rising-homophobia/31438974.html

accused the organization of promoting “LGBTQ views,” engaging with minors, and seeking to reform Russian federal laws—specifically targeting the discriminatory “gay propaganda” legislation. The lawsuit argued that any nonprofit whose activities conflict with “fundamental family values enshrined in the Russian constitution” poses a threat to public order and the rule of law.

In this case, the authorities openly revealed their political and anti-rights agenda from the outset. After years of targeting LGBTQ activists through “foreign agent” designations and the “gay propaganda” law, the government escalated its efforts by calling for the complete closure of the organization under the pretext of defending traditional values. Ideally, courts should not support this form of politically motivated, homophobic censorship, which clearly violates Russia’s international human rights obligations — but that is not what happened.[65]

The war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, further emboldened the Russian regime in its crackdown on LGBTQ people. Russian lawmakers moved to intensify existing restrictions by proposing an expansion of the ban on the so-called “promotion of non-traditional sexual relationships” from minors to adults. “We propose to extend the ban on such propaganda universally, regardless of the audience’s age — whether offline, in the media, on the internet, on social networks, or in online cinemas,” announced Alexander Khinshtein, head of the State Duma’s information committee, via his Telegram channel. Parliamentary Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin added that, with Russia's withdrawal from the Council of Europe following its invasion of Ukraine, the country was now free to impose broader bans on the promotion of what it labels “non-traditional values.”[66]

In November 2022, Russia’s lower house of parliament unanimously voted to expand its ban on so-called “gay propaganda.” Under the revised legislation, any positive representation or discussion of homosexuality—including in books, films, and online content—is illegal and subject to severe penalties. The law was dubbed the “Answer to

[65] Tanya Lokshina. Russian Government Seeks Closure of LGBT Rights Group. Human Rights Watch, February 9, 2022. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/09/russian-government-seeks-closure-lgbt-rights-group#
[66] Russian lawmakers propose extending 'gay propaganda' law to all adults. Reuters, July 11, 2022. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-lawmakers-propose-extending-gay-propaganda-law-all-adults-2022-07-11/

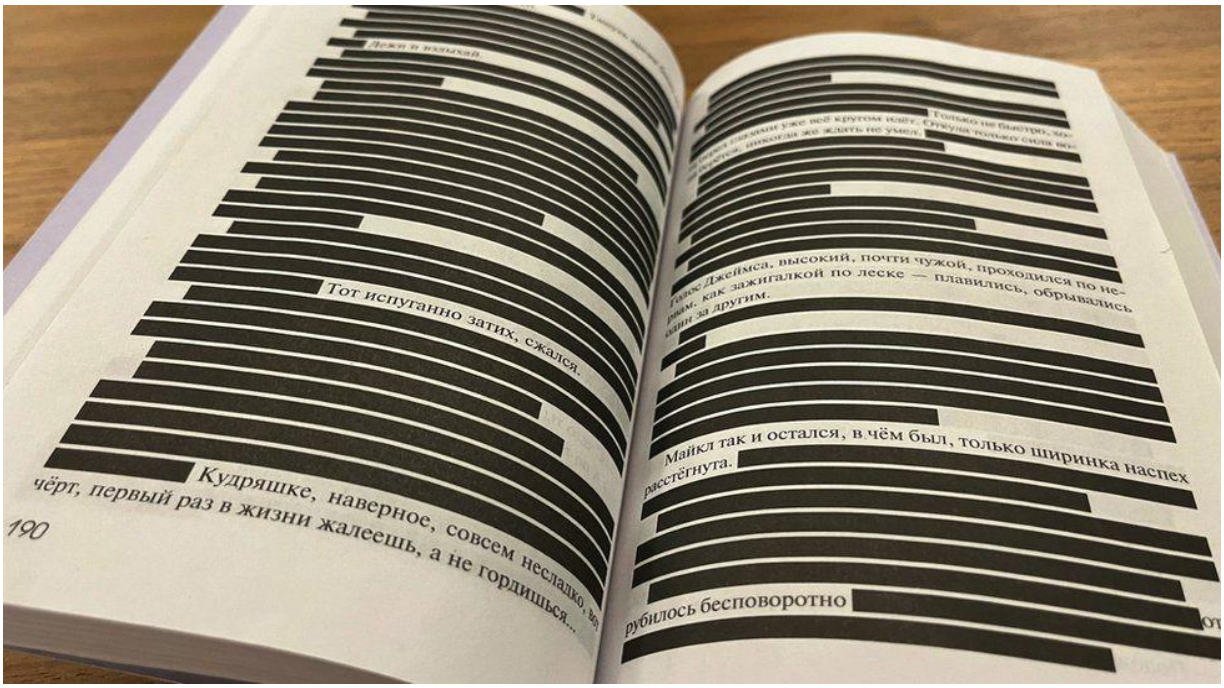
Blinken" act, following criticism from U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who called it a "blow to freedom of expression." Activists condemned the move as yet another step in the systematic repression of Russia's LGBTQ community. The bill passed with overwhelming support—397 votes in favor and none against, with no abstentions.

Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, who introduced the "Answer to Blinken" label in parliament, claimed the legislation would shield Russia from what he described as the "darkness" of Western LGBTQ values. President Vladimir Putin has consistently made anti-LGBTQ rhetoric a central pillar of his political narrative. In a speech shortly before the law's adoption, he accused the West of "moving towards open Satanism," citing the advancement of gay and transgender rights in Europe as evidence. Human rights advocates and LGBTQ organizations warned that the law effectively criminalizes any public reference to or visibility of LGBTQ people.

Kseniya Mikhailova, from the Russian LGBTQ support group Vykhod (which translates as "coming out"), noted that the original law passed nine years earlier had already sparked a wave of violence against the community. With this expansion, she warned, a "tsunami" of aggression is likely, as the new legislation has sent the dangerous message that the state condones violence against LGBTQ individuals.[67]

LGBTQ activist Piotr Voskresensky described the connection to the war in Ukraine as "obvious." Speaking from his apartment in central St. Petersburg, he showed a BBC correspondent the remnants of what had been Russia's first LGBTQ museum. He opened the exhibition to the public in September 2022, but was forced to shut it down following the passage of the new anti-LGBTQ law. According to Voskresensky, the legislation was a deliberate move by the Kremlin to distract the public from military failures in Ukraine. "The war is lost, the economy is destroyed, and the authorities need to show people what they have risked their lives for," said Voskresensky. "And the best idea they have is to find a new scapegoat - LGBTQ people."[68]

[67] Jasmine Andersson. Russia passes 'Answer to Blinken' gay propaganda law. BBC, November 24, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63747732
[68] Will Vernon. Russia: Putin's Kremlin targets LGBT in new crackdown. BBC, January 23, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64345693



The book Shattered, about the romance between two men, has been heavily redacted in Russia. Will Vernon. Russia: Putin's Kremlin targets LGBT in new crackdown. BBC, January 23, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64345693

In November 2023, Russia's Supreme Court officially banned the so-called "LGBT movement," further intensifying the country's crackdown on expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity. Since then, two Russian courts have issued the first convictions under this designation, having labeled the "international LGBT social movement" as an extremist organization.[69]

Information about violence against LGBTQ people in Russia remains scarce, but some documented cases offer insight into the scale and severity of the problem. In May 2024, a report by the LGBTI organizations Coming Out and the Sphere Foundation revealed a sharp increase in homophobic and transphobic attitudes across the country. According to the findings, over 43% of LGBTI individuals reported experiencing violence or pressure related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Of those surveyed, 8% had endured physical

[69] Russia makes first convictions for 'LGBT extremism' following ban. NBC News, February 1, 2024. https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/russia-makes-first-convictions-lgbt-extremism-ban-rcna136753

violence—a number that rose to 12% among trans respondents—while 24% received threats of physical harm. Additionally, 14% reported being blackmailed or extorted, often through threats to leak personal information or images.

Throughout 2024, at least 18 police raids were carried out at gay clubs and queer events across multiple Russian cities, according to an LGBTI-focused Telegram news channel. These operations were often violent and appeared aimed at degrading, intimidating, and prosecuting attendees under accusations of spreading "LGBT propaganda" or participating in "extremist" activity. In several instances, venues targeted by the raids were forced to shut down. In March 2024, two students in Minusinsk were verbally and physically assaulted by a teenage boy who questioned their appearance. In April, a gay man in Yekaterinburg was beaten and robbed after being lured to a fake date. In July, police officers in Ufa assaulted a migrant trans sex worker, stole 100,000 rubles from her, and later had her deported—although the officers involved were dismissed.

Over the course of the year, Coming Out received four anonymous reports of homophobic violence from different regions, including incidents of domestic abuse, an attack by a stranger on public transport, and further cases of police brutality. Meanwhile, the Russian LGBT Network documented several cases of entrapment involving "fake dates" targeting underage boys. In these cases, perpetrators secretly filmed sexual encounters and used the footage to blackmail the victims for money.[70]

LGBTQ individuals in Russia are now facing long-term prison sentences as a result of an intensifying, state-driven anti-gay campaign. According to the independent news outlet *Mediazona*, a court in Siberia has issued the first prison sentence under Russia's ban on the so-called "international LGBT movement."

On January 30, 2025, the Yaysky District Court in the Kemerovo Oblast convicted an unnamed individual of "LGBT extremism" and sentenced him to six years in a maximum-security prison. The individual was already serving an 18-year sentence for child sexual

[70] Russia. Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex People. Covering the Period of January to December 2024. ILGA Europe. https://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2025/02/Annual-Review-2025-Russia.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

abuse; the court combined the sentences, resulting in a total of 15 years in prison. State media, citing the regional office of the Federal Security Service (FSB), reported that the person had allegedly recruited Russian citizens into the activities of the banned "international LGBT movement" while serving their previous sentence.[71]

In its ongoing crusade against so-called "Western ideology," including "gay propaganda," the Russian regime continues to demonstrate a disregard for the well-being of its own citizens. On April 3, 2025, authorities designated the Elton John AIDS Foundation (EJAF) as an "undesirable" organization, effectively banning its operations in the country. Despite EJAF's internationally recognized work in HIV prevention and treatment, it is now prohibited from conducting any activities in Russia.

The Russian Prosecutor General's Office accused the foundation of primarily promoting "non-traditional sexual relations," Western family models, and gender transition—allegations that starkly contrast with EJAF's stated mission to combat the global AIDS epidemic. In its statement, the Prosecutor General also claimed that the foundation harbors a "negative attitude" toward countries that "preserve traditional spiritual and moral values," and accused it of participating in efforts to "discredit Russia" in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The authorities further asserted that EJAF had partnered with Russian nonprofit organizations previously designated as "foreign agents," using this association to justify the foundation's expulsion from the country.[72]

Clearly, the conditions of LGBTQ people in Russia, which is living through an upsurge of Russian nationalism, and the process of the strengthening of an already strongly authoritarian regime have been deteriorating, which has highly increased chances of individual sexual minorities of being subjected to mistreatment. The declaration of open season on the LGBTQ community marks yet another tragic chapter in the ongoing history of LGBTQ persecution in Russia.

---

[71] Russia Issues First Prison Sentence for 'LGBT Extremism'. *The Moscow Times*, February 19, 2025.
[72] Russia Labels Elton John AIDS Foundation 'Undesirable' Organization. *The Moscow Times*, April 3, 2025. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/04/03/russia-labels-elton-john-aids-foundation-undesirable-organization-a88591

LGBTQ individuals in Russia endure systematic oppression, state-driven persecution, and widespread societal discrimination. The government has implemented restrictive laws, including the 2013 "gay propaganda" legislation, which criminalizes sharing information about LGBTQ identities with minors. This law effectively suppresses discussions on LGBTQ rights and fuels stigma against the community. Authorities exploit this regulation to intimidate activists, shut down LGBTQ organizations, and censor media that depict queer relationships in a positive light. The hostile legal framework normalizes homophobia, exposing LGBTQ individuals to mistreatment with little possibility of legal protection. Many face workplace discrimination, housing instability, and exclusion from public life solely due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Acts of violence against LGBTQ people are disturbingly frequent, perpetrated by both state officials and extremist groups. Hate crimes, including assaults, kidnappings, and even murders, often go unpunished, as law enforcement either ignores these incidents or actively participates in repression.

Despite the escalating hostility, LGBTQ activists continue to advocate for their rights, though their efforts are met with severe resistance. Pride events and public demonstrations are routinely prohibited, and those attempting to organize them face arrest or violent assaults from nationalist groups. Independent LGBTQ organizations struggle to function amid state crackdowns, often being branded as "foreign agents" to justify persecution. The climate of fear compels many to conceal their identities, fearing retaliation from both the government and society. As Russia intensifies its crackdown on civil liberties, the future of LGBTQ rights remains bleak, with little hope for progress in a nation that persistently marginalizes and dehumanizes queer individuals.