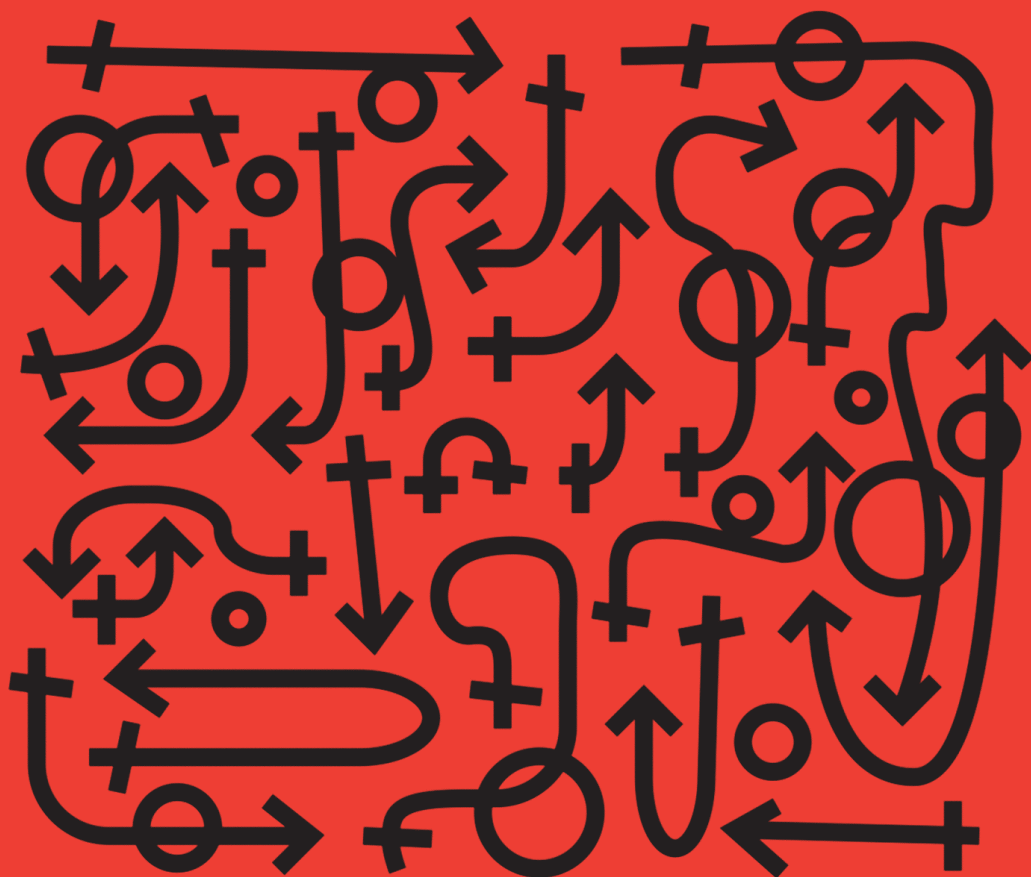


GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

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RUSSIA

ONLINE AND UNDER ATTACK: THE INTIMIDATION AND STIGMATISATION OF RUSSIA'S LGBT COMMUNITY



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Introduction

The protest was not large – some 50 people at most, who had stuck red masking tape across their mouths to symbolise how Russia's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movement is being silenced. As they made their way from St. Petersburg's Vosstaniya Square to Kazansky Cathedral this April, the abuse started. Beer was thrown; pepper gas sprayed. Their posters were snatched and burnt with the warning: "This is what is going to happen to those who support faggots."¹

Such intimidation was expected by the marchers. Since 2013, when Russia's internal political discourse became dominated by the need to "return to traditional values",² attacks on the LGBT community and its supporters have become all too common. What made the April rally in St. Petersburg noteworthy was not the harassment, but what those present were protesting against: the repression against Russia's LGBT community, now also occurring online.

Policy and political background

The federal legislation "For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values" – more commonly known as Russia's "anti-gay propaganda" law – was signed into force by President Vladimir Putin on 30 June 2013.³ It bans the dissemination among children of "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships", which in practice means lesbian, gay and bisexual relationships.

The law's passage and adoption has coincided with a spate of violence and discrimination against the LGBT community. A Moscow gay club was the

subject of a gas attack.⁴ In Volgograd a gay man was sexually assaulted with beer bottles and then tortured to death.⁵ Three men were jailed for the murder of a man they stabbed and set on fire because they believed he was homosexual.⁶ Teachers known to be in LGBT relationships were forced to resign in six Russian regions, often following a campaign by parents.⁷ LGBT public events have been banned, with the authorities citing concern that children might witness such activities.

As a result, Human Rights Watch has warned that the law has created an environment that "openly discriminates against LGBT people, legitimizes anti-LGBT violence and seeks to erase LGBT people from the country's public life."⁸

No safe haven

In a social and political environment where admitting to be gay risks stigmatisation, the threat of physical violence and state discrimination, there are few places Russia's LGBT community can turn without fear of reprisal. Increasingly required to hide and even deny their sexuality in public, one such place – at least until recently – was the internet. Svetlana is an example of someone for whom the anonymity of the online world provided an important and rare opportunity to voice her fears and worries.⁹ Aged 16 and living in a small town in central Russia where a man had been killed for being a homosexual, she posted: "I am scared that they will find me and lynch me. Sometimes I want to cry out: 'Accept me for who I am!'"

1 QueerRussia. (2015, 19 April). Clashes and Flashmobs on the Day of Silence in St Petersburg. *QueerRussia*. queerussia.info/2015/04/19/19492/#sthash.USS1oflH.dpbs

2 Kaylan, M. (2014). Kremlin Values: Putin's Strategic Conservatism. *World Affairs*, May/June. www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/kremlin-values-putin%E2%80%99s-strategic-conservatism

3 pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&vkart=card&nd=102337335&rdk=&intelsearch=135-%D4%C7

4 Nichols, J. M. (2014, 25 November). Gas Attack At Moscow Gay Club Central Station Rattles Russia's LGBT Community. *Huffington Post*. www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/25/poison-gas-russia-gay-club_n_4337823.html

5 McCormick, J. P. (2013, 12 May). Russia: Tortured and killed gay man was 'raped with beer bottles'. *PinkNews*. www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/05/12/russia-tortured-and-killed-gay-man-was-raped-with-beer-bottles

6 Day, A. (2014, 7 February). The 25 most shocking anti-gay stories from Russia so far. *PinkNews*. www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/02/07/the-25-most-shocking-anti-gay-stories-from-russia-so-far

7 Human Rights Watch. (2014, 30 June). Russia: Anti-LGBT Law a Tool for Discrimination. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/29/russia-anti-lgbt-law-tool-discrimination>

8 Ibid.

9 O'Flynn, K. (2013, 10 August). Gay Russian teens communicate in secret to avoid law on 'propaganda'. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/10/gay-russian-teens-avoid-propaganda-law

The site where she made this plea is Deti-404.¹⁰ Since the passing of the anti-gay propaganda law it has become one of the country's most important online havens for the LGBT community, and particularly for teenagers seeking help from professional psychologists or wishing to share their experiences about bullying and homophobia. Deti-404 means "Youth-404" in English. The name is a reference to the common web error message for a link that does not exist – "404 Page Not Found" – and was intended by its founder, Russian journalist and LGBT activist Lena Klimova, as a comment on Russia's desire to deny the existence of its LGBT youth.¹¹ Initially existing primarily on two social networks – Facebook and its Russian equivalent VKontakte – its forums became an online community filled with letters and photos from LGBT Russians looking to express themselves.

When she started the site in March 2013, Klimova did not realise how important it would become. At first it was intended as merely another forum for conversation, advice and assistance. It was only when the anti-gay propaganda law was passed that it became a much-needed refuge. She tells of the reaction the legislation provoked: "Many youngsters got very upset. Many were scared. Many are seriously discussing the possibility of emigrating abroad to study."¹² She explains that "their lives are far from easy. Coming-outs are associated with many and serious risks. In the worst cases, parents can go so far as forcing their children to leave, beating them, blocking phone and internet use, sending them to be 'treated' by a psychologist, placing them in a psychiatric hospital, or subjecting them to threats and harassment." In a survey she conducted of LGBT teenagers, she found that a number had considered suicide, and fewer than half had come out to their parents. Svetlana, the 16-year-old quoted above, has told how her mother called all homosexuals "mutants" and how her father said he would like to get out his gun and kill them. That is why, as part of the Deti-404 project, Klimova helps at-risk LGBT teenagers to get to talk to a specially trained psychologist if they wish.

It was in November 2014 that the Russian authorities turned their attention to Deti-404 in what has become the most symbolic example yet of how the limitations being placed on the country's LGBT

community in the "real world" are now also being imposed online.¹³ The country's media watchdog, Roskomnadzor, opened a case against Klimova for breaking the anti-gay propaganda law. "The information uploaded onto the community site is mostly geared towards creating a positive image of non-traditional sexual relations in the eyes of children, to make them seem equivalent and, in some cases, superior to traditional ones," its report said. Klimova was fined 50,000 rubles (USD 857, or twice the average Russian monthly salary). An appeal against the fine was meant to be heard on 6 April but, on arriving at court, Klimova found it had already been upheld at a secret session on 25 March to which she had not been invited. St. Petersburg lawmaker Vitaly Milonov has already demanded that the site be shut down.¹⁴ Now that Klimova has been tarred through the failure of her legal appeal as someone spreading "gay propaganda", the path is clear for Roskomnadzor to block her site whenever it wishes.

Nor is Deti-404 alone in finding itself under attack. In some cases the limitations being placed on the LGBT community in the digital sphere border on the farcical. The game *The Sims 4*, for example, was banned in Russia from being sold to anyone under the age of 18, as it historically allows same-sex relationships in-game.¹⁵ Then there was the denouncing of the new U2 album distributed free by Apple as part of its iTunes update – the cover image was criticised for being gay propaganda as it showed a man with a shirtless 18-year-old boy. It was in fact the group's drummer, Larry Mullen, embracing his son, Elvis.¹⁶ But the ridiculous nature of such examples should not hide the increasingly ubiquitous nature of what is occurring. The newspaper *Molodoi Dalnevostochnik* ("Young Dalnevostochnik") was fined for publishing a story about a gay teacher as in it he was quoted as saying that "homosexuality is normal."¹⁷ During the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi

¹⁰ www.deti-404.com/

¹¹ Isaacson, B. (2014, 25 February). Read the Heartbreaking Online Letters of Young, LGBT Russians. *Huffington Post*. www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/25/lgbt-russians_n_4823323.html

¹² Café Babel. (2013, 4 September). What's life like for Russia's LGBT youth? www.cafebabel.co.uk/society/article/deti-404-interview-whats-life-like-for-russias-lgbt-youth.html

¹³ Tétrault-Farber, G. (2015, 25 January). Russian LGBT Activist Fined for Disseminating 'Gay Propaganda'. *The Moscow Times*. www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russian-lgbt-activist-fined-50-000-rubles-for-disseminating-gay-propaganda/514867.html

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch. (2015, 2 April). Russia: Court Hearing against LGBT Group. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/02/russia-court-hearing-against-lgbt-group>

¹⁵ Malberg, E. (2014, 10 May). The Sims 4 gets adults only rating in Russia because it depicts same-sex relationships. *GameSpot*. www.gamespot.com/articles/the-sims-4-gets-adults-only-rating-in-russia-because-it-depicts-same-sex-relationships/1100-6419552

¹⁶ Meduza. (2015, 30 April). Russian politician denounces Apple's U2 album gift as 'gay propaganda'. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/30/russia-politician-denounces-apple-u2-album-gift-gay-propaganda

¹⁷ Duffy, N. (2014, 30 January). Russia: Newspaper editor fined under anti-gay law for printing 'being gay is normal'. *PinkNews*. www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/01/30/russia-newspaper-editor-fined-under-anti-gay-law-for-printing-being-gay-is-normal

a gay dating app was banned.¹⁸ But, like Deti-404, these are just the high-profile cases. Perhaps the most disturbing element of the online LGBT repression occurring in Russia today is the daily, usually unreported and often highly organised hunt for anything, however large or small, appearing on the internet which could be tarred as “non-traditional”.

Late last year a cartoon started to spread on Russian social networks of a long-haired, bearded man clutching a rainbow flag being crushed by a giant hand, while a little boy in green overalls looked on.¹⁹ Its caption read: “Any virus must be crushed instantly! LGBT, drug dealers and the propaganda of perverts are calling for the destruction of our future.” The cartoon was created by MediaGvardia, a new pro-Kremlin youth organisation whose stated aim is to purge the internet of anything that could “corrupt” children. It quickly recruited 4,000 online volunteers to monitor any new material appearing. So far this digital army has filed complaints against 18,767 sites and successfully had 2,475 of them closed. It was MediaGvardia that mobilised the opposition to Deti-404 that enabled Roskomnadzor to act.

And then there are the trolls. It is hard to quantify the scale of this problem but the anecdotal evidence is not only extensive but disturbing. LGBT activists all report receiving regular online abuse. Anti-LGBT groups have also used social media to connect with gay men, posing as potential love interests, before luring them into situations where they will be attacked, a process they refer to as “safari” using “bait”.²⁰ Klimova now receives almost as many death threats as letters from the LGBT community. In response she has launched a new online project titled “Beautiful People and What They Say to Me” which is meant to shame those sending such messages.²¹ It features publicly available photos of people going about their everyday lives, overlaid with the threatening messages they’ve sent Klimova on Vkontakte.²² It is these messages that fully expose the vitriol that LGBT people in Rus-

sia now routinely face, not only in public but online, if they seek to express their sexuality. “I’ll be the first to set fire to the stake you’re going to burn on,” says one. “If I saw you, I’d strangle you with my own hands,” writes another. “Gunning you down, you little bitch, is just the beginning of what you deserve,” is a third.

Conclusion

The online repression of Russia’s LGBT community is not occurring in isolation. The current bias towards conservatism in the country is built into a wide range of domestic and foreign policy initiatives. Indeed the promotion of traditional values was a key element in Putin’s campaign to return to the presidency in 2012.²³ One consequence of this is the lack of educational materials that presently exist in Russia to enable greater understanding of LGBT issues. It is, for example, a widespread view that homosexuality is an illness. This has also impacted on health initiatives. The number of registered HIV cases in children under 14 years of age in Russia jumped by 32% in 2014. Campaigners say that the trend in the under-17 age group is in particular driven by a lack of HIV prevention and education, much of which was previously provided by NGOs run by the LGBT community.²⁴

There is a tragic irony in the fact that organisations such as Deti-404 are singled out for promoting “gay propaganda” when their purpose is to allow LGBT people to share the reality of their lives, and these lives are often filled with stories of fear, abuse and stigma. As one Deti-404 supporter says: “If anybody thinks that we are trying to promote gay relationships then come and see how we are beaten, how we are humiliated, how we are bullied. Come and see how wonderful it is [to be gay in Russia].”²⁵ Russia’s anti-gay propaganda law was drafted with the stated objective of protecting children. Its effect – whether through stigmatising young members of the LGBT community or through the wider impact on AIDS awareness – has been the opposite. If the Russian authorities really want to protect children they need to condemn homophobia and prosecute

18 Duffy, N. (2014, 3 February). Russia: Gay dating app blocked, users threatened with arrest. *PinkNews*. www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/02/03/russia-gay-dating-app-blocked-users-threatened-with-arrest

19 Balmforth, T. (2015, 26 March). Meet The Kremlin’s Young Army Of Cybersnitches. *Radio Free Europe*. www.rferl.org/content/russia-mediaguardia-stalin-era-internet-snitching/26921838.html

20 Parkinson, H. J. (2014, 11 February). How anti-gay groups use ‘Russian Facebook’ to persecute LGBT people. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/feb/11/russia-violent-anti-gay-groups-vkontakte-lgbt-sochi

21 Rothrock, K. (2015, 20 April). The ‘Beauty’ of Russian Homophobia. *Global Voices*. globalvoicesonline.org/2015/04/20/the-beauty-of-russian-homophobia

22 https://vk.com/album6184701_214830577

23 Shadrina, A. (2015, 5 May). What is threatening ‘traditional family values’ in Russia today? *OpenDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/anna-shadrina/what-is-threatening-%E2%80%99traditional-family-values%E2%80%99-in-russia-today>

24 Fitzgerald, N., & Ruvinsky, V. (2015, 22 March). The fear of being gay in Russia. *Politico*. www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/03/russia-putin-lgbt-violence-116202.html#_VblmDNJvHbc

25 Edwards, M., & Wade, I. (2014, 12 June). Russia’s invisible youth. *OpenDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/maxim-edwards-imogen-wade/russia%E2%80%99s-invisible-youth>

homophobic aggression, both online and offline. Then there could be an answer to the question that one 15-year-old wrote on Deti-404: “What should I do? How to find love if you have to hide?”

Action steps

In this context, the following action is recommended for civil society activists:

- Lobby Western media companies present in the Russia market, such as Facebook, to have a zero tolerance policy on anti-LGBT abuse by users of their products and platforms.
- Support Deti-404 through public information campaigns and financial assistance.
- Disseminate the legal work that has already been done that demonstrates how the “anti-gay propaganda” law contravenes existing legislation on the Russian statute book.²⁶
- Gay rights, human rights and internet freedom groups should lobby Russian businesses and politicians to publicly denounce online anti-LGBT repression.
- Social media engagement with Russia’s LGBT community to ease the sense of isolation felt by many LGBTs would offer some measure of support.

²⁶ Examples of such work include Johnson, P. (2015). ‘Homosexual Propaganda’ Laws in the Russian Federation: Are They in Violation of the European Convention on Human Rights? *Russian Law Journal*, III(2). papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2251005; Poldsofer, S. (2014). Pride and Prejudiced: Russia’s Anti-Gay Propaganda Law Violates the European Convention on Human Rights. *American University International Law Review*, 29(5). digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/auilr/vol29/iss5/4/; Engle, E. (2013). Gay Rights in Russia? Russia’s Ban on Gay Pride Parades and the General Principle of Proportionality in International Law. *Journal of Eurasian Law*, 22. papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2296803; and Bauweleers, T. (2014). *The legal situation towards homosexuals in Russia: A closer look at the law on propaganda*. Masterscription for the degree of Master in Eastern European Languages and Cultures, University of Ghent. lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/162/541/RUG01-002162541_2014_0001_AC.pdf

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2015 Report

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