

Russia (Football): Who Is Protecting LGBTQ Fans at the 2018 World Cup?

Friday 15 June 2018, by [CICCHI Tan-Delli](#), [ZIRIN Dave](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2018).

It doesn't look like FIFA or the Russian state will act to halt anti-gay violence.

Welcome to the 2018 World Cup, a World Cup you may not be watching. Many Americans will undoubtedly be choosing to tune out this year's soccer extravaganza, absent the nationalist pull of seeing the US team, not to mention flushing away the rancid memories of the the United States being dumped out in the qualifiers by the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago. But for those preparing to make the trek to Russia this July, the specter of violence looms large, especially for LGBTQ fans.

Travel advisories for American soccer tourists on the State Department website warn of Russia's 2013 laws against "gay propaganda," which have spiked homophobic attacks, arrests, and killings over the past five years—while the Fare network, a soccer advocacy group, was more direct with its advice to gay couples: Don't hold hands. This isn't just US State Department fearmongering. One poll found that 39 percent of Russians think it's likely that someone will attack a foreign LGBTQ person during the competition [1]. Expecting the Russian state police to assure safety against homophobia seems like a pipe dream. As Piara Powar, executive director of the Fare network, said in an e-mail to *The Nation*, "Russia is a homophobic state, and although homosexuality is not illegal, it is clear that laws brought in over the past few years have encouraged the marginalisation of the LGBT+ community and created an environment where they are under attack."

At the center of these concerns is the country's anti-gay propaganda law. Unanimously passed in Russian parliament, the law banned the spreading of "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" to children, effectively forbidding any mention or public display of homosexuality. Relatively few people have been convicted and fined under the federal law, but it's what it represents that's more lethal: the tacit endorsement of homophobia by authorities. Hate crimes against LGBTQ people have doubled in the five years since the law was enacted [2]. In particular areas of Russia, such as the federal republic of Chechnya, where the Egyptian national team is based, the threat to LGBT folk is even more brutal—gay people are rounded up, tortured, and "purged."

Di Cunningham is the chair of Pride in Football, an alliance for LGBTQ fans of teams in England's soccer leagues. She's also an organizer with 3 Lions Pride, a group for LGBTQ fans of the England national team, and for her the propaganda law makes clear that homophobic violence is state-sanctioned. "It's a question of the authorities looking the other way when there's a vigilante-type assault," she told us. "You can't trust the institutions and you can't trust law enforcement."

With under a week to go, vague promises from Russian authorities offer little reassurance. Russian Football Union official Alexei Smertin recently suggested that foreign LGBTQ fans would be exempted from the law, saying that they "would not be fined for expressing feelings." [3] How exactly this policy would be enforced specifically for foreign World Cup fans has not been explained

clearly, and it has not stopped some hooligans from sending death threats to fan groups like Pride in Football or Russian militia pledging that they will patrol matches to stop gay men from kissing [4]. “I’m not satisfied that there is adequate protection for LGBT people traveling to the World Cup,” said Ed Connell, chair of the Gay Football Supporters’ Network in the UK. “I’m not convinced that the message that there will be increased tolerance has necessarily filtered down to the police and those who will be stewarding the games. And even if it has, I’m concerned the general public will not be so tolerant.”

And even while Cunningham is cautiously optimistic after Smertin’s comments, she is aware that the promise falls short on multiple fronts. “It’s encouraging, but not every region will interpret the guidance in the same way. It might not be the same in the hotels or in the streets,” she said to us. “Also it’s really not going to benefit LGBT people in Russia, because this small bubble of tolerance is going to disappear after the World Cup.”

This resonates with Dmitri Bartenev, a lawyer in the European Commission on Sexual Orientation Law who has represented gay-rights’ cases in Russia. “I do not foresee any changes in Russian laws beyond the Cup as homophobic legislation is part of general campaign on promoting ‘traditional values,’ which is one of the tools for supporting the existing regime and justifying attacks on human rights in general,” he told us. “LGBT rights are an easy target for the politicians.”

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The lackluster response from the Russian government raises the question of FIFA’s responsibility and accountability in ensuring the safety of LGBTQ fans. FIFA and sponsors have had five years since the passage of Russia’s propaganda law to request its repeal. FIFA has in the past frequently demanded the change of laws, yet on this we have heard nothing.

Minky Worden, director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch, said to us, “The anti-gay propaganda law gives homophobia a veneer of state support, which makes it especially dangerous. That is why Human Rights Watch has long said that FIFA needs to do more, and make it clear in public that violence, hatred, and homophobia are not values of FIFA or the World Cup. I think, under pressure from sponsors and because it’s a genuine concern, FIFA has made clear that they will not tolerate anti-LGBT activities. But in the week to go before the World Cup, much more needs to be done, including statements from the president that LGBT fans are welcome and protected.” Worden also said that she has heard from many fans who have testimonials from LGBTQ fans who simply will not be going. Similarly, for all the fans within the Gay Football Supporters’ Network who have traveled to previous foreign soccer competitions, Connell is only currently aware of two who are planning to go to Russia.

As Pride month begins, some advocates like Cunningham are hopeful of what visible global representation at this year’s World Cup could mean for fighting homophobia in soccer at large—a small but important message that LGBTQ people belong on the fields and in the stands, and are entitled to enjoy the game they love. But the signs just don’t look good, such as the rise of homophobic and racist chants reported recently in stadiums planned to be used for the World Cup [5]. Experts stress that LGBTQ fans traveling to Russia should first and foremost take heed of the multiple warnings that have been issued.

“Our advice is to exercise caution,” Powar said. He noted his organization is “offering detailed advice for people of colour and the LGBT community” through its DiversityGuide2018, and would be

hosting “Diversity Houses” in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Dave Zirin and Andrew Tan-Delli Cicchi

P.S.

* THE NATION. JUNE 8, 2018:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/protecting-lgbtq-fans-2018-world-cup/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/03/20/world-cup-exclusive-four-in-10-russians-say-lgbt-fans-will-be-attacked/>

[2] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-lgbt-crime/lgbt-hate-crimes-double-in-russia-after-ban-on-gay-propaganda-idUSKBN1DL2FM>

[3] <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2017/11/30/russian-officials-insist-gay-fans-will-not-face-arrest-at-world-cup/>

[4] <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/06/04/russia-world-cup-homophobia-lgbt-cossack/>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2018/may/30/russia-sees-spike-in-discriminatory-chants-before-world-cup>