

Russia: The Special Homophobic Operation

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Why anti-Ukrainian propaganda is anti-LGBTQ? Will the Russian anti-gay law be tightened up? Why do dictatorships always revert to homophobic oppression? Journalist, culture expert and gay activist Artem Langenburg answers these questions

In mid-July of this year, a new bill that radical left LGBTQ+ activists had feared for some time was introduced to the Russian State Duma. The public hadn't given much consideration to those concerns, seeing them as premature alarmism. However, deputies Nina Ostanina and Olga Alimova of the Communist Party, Yana Latratova and Nikolay Burlyayev representing the Fair Russia Party, and the Liberal Democratic Party's Aleksey Zhuravlev brought in a grotesque (although historically typical, but more on that later) piece of legislation that, if passed by the sham Russian parliament, would impose a ban on information "promoting non-traditional sexual relations."

Technically, the new law is an amendment to the Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection Federal Law. The law already prohibits distribution of information that might be perceived as inciting ethnic, racial or religious hatred, or as promoting war, and all other currently criminalized information. The deputies decided to propose an addition to this list: "contempt to family values" and "promotion of non-traditional sexual relations," which, in their opinion, are as dangerous to Russian society as are the already outlawed "promotion of suicide, drugs, extremism, and criminal behavior." Earlier, deputy Aleksandr Khinshtein, a member of the ruling United Russia Party whose primary job has been to publicly present the regime's most outrageous legislation, outlined the objective of this entire endeavor: the already existing ban on the promotion of "non-traditional relations" to children is not enough, it must be extended onto everyone. "Gay propaganda" is dangerous no matter the age and in every form of distribution: in traditional and online media, on social networks as well as streaming platforms. The law is scheduled for first reading during the Duma's upcoming session in September.

This unprecedented tightening of the state's homophobic policies has not attracted due attention from the public, and the officially declared intention to fuel discrimination and stigmatization against the LGBTQ community sadly did not trigger the appropriate backlash. Of course, there is reason for that: Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, massacres in Bucha and Irpin, the levelling of Mariupol, daily shellings and bombings of dozens of Ukrainian cities, atrocities committed by Russian occupiers — these horrors eclipse any domestic policy, however terrible, of the aggressor state. Yet, there can be no doubt that the Kremlin's openly homophobic rhetoric is an integral part of its militarist, chauvinistic narrative.

From the start, hatred towards the LGBTQ+ community was central to the aggression's ideological framework and was weaponized by the upper, as the phrase goes, echelons of power. This is how Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, put it in his March sermon on the eve of the Great Lent: "Efforts to destroy what exists in the Donbas have been going on for eight years. What exists there is rejection, a fundamental rejection of the so-called values promoted in our day by those who claim rights to global power. There is a loyalty test now for those who bow to that power, a ticket to the "happy" world, the world of excessive consumption, of ostensible "freedom". Do you

know what the test is? It's simple and abhorrent at the same time: it's a gay pride. Demands to host a gay pride are the test of loyalty to the world of power, and we know that people or countries rejecting those demands cannot enter that world, they become alien to it."

Propagandists of much lower ranks, including those behind numerous patriotic Telegram channels, are vying with each other to declare the war in Ukraine a "civilizational conflict" or a "sacred battle" against the "Sodomitical West", in which Ukraine is a mere buffer zone. However, the legal and media assaults on LGBTQ+ activists and non-profits do not come as a surprise. For years, such organizations have been systematically subjected to legal scrutiny. Pretty much every queer initiative and project has been deemed a "foreign agent", while some (like [Sfera Foundation](#), the legal entity of the Russian LGBTQ+ Network, a major human rights center of the 2000-2010s) were closed down by the courts.

There is, of course, a practical explanation for the homophobic narratives of anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Since day one of the war, thousands of openly gay people have been defending Ukraine, as part of the regular army as well as the civil territorial defense. Even before the full-scale invasion, the realities of Ukraine's LGBTQ+ community invoked cautious optimism, especially in comparison to Russia, Belarus, and many other post-Soviet states. Admittedly, violent attacks on public gay events have been perpetrated by the far-right, and everyday homophobia and transphobia are relatively common. Yet, according to the [Kyiv International Sociology Institute's](#) May survey, support for equal rights for LGBT persons has almost doubled in the past six years, going from 33% to 64%. The number of respondents reporting an indifferent / neutral attitude towards the LGBT people has increased by half, reaching 45%. Support for same-sex marriage is now at 24% (compared to just 3% in 2016). Russian propaganda has rejoiced in distributing this data to convey Ukraine's alleged descent into a liberal left abyss. In the schizo esoteric ideological narrative of the "[Russian World](#)", this kind of propaganda harmoniously coexists with purporting "the Kyiv regime's Neo-Nazi character." It is quite telling that the participation of queer Ukrainians in defending their country from a military invasion prompted Russian propagandists, the NTV network in particular, to revert to using humiliating criminal slang such as "prison bitches" when referring to LGBT fighters.

Russia's state-sanctioned rampaging homophobia may also reveal another, deeper motivation. In the past hundred years one will find many instances in which the persecution of homosexual, bisexual, transgender and other queer persons served as a tool to mobilize conservatives against foreign and domestic threats, not to mention the use of said persecutions to consolidate totalitarian regimes and legitimize authoritarian dictatorships. In Nazi Germany, the infamous Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code outlawed male homosexuality even without physical contact, and queer people in hundreds of thousands were sent to concentration camps, mental institutions, and euthanasia programs. All kinds of non-normative sexualities were declared manifestations of a "degenerative Jewish spirit", a threat to the Great Reich's very existence. The 1934 criminalization of "sodomy" in the Soviet Union served as the culmination of cultural policies of "Stalin's Thermidor" (as Leon Trotsky described Stalin's regime), becoming among other things a surefire way to punish political undesirables. In the four decades of Franco's dictatorship in Spain, thousands of gays and lesbians were subjected to criminal and psychiatric repressions; and even before the ultra-right came to power, at the very beginning of the Spanish Civil War, poet Federico García Lorca was executed by Falangists for his leftist convictions and homosexuality (since the 1975's Pact of Forgetting and to this day, homophobic oppression in Francoist Spain has largely been glossed over; more on that in Andrea Weiss' documentary *Bones of Contention*). There is no shortage of such historical examples, including mass killings of homosexuals during Latin American dictatorships in the 1970-1990s and those committed to this day under Iranian mullocracy, Saudi absolute monarchy, and Ramzan Kadyrov's terrorist regime in Russian Chechnya.

However, as is evident from recent history, actively professed homophobia is not limited to regimes

predicated on anti-Western or anti-liberal resentment. Many pointed out that 2013's Russian law banning "gay propaganda" among minors is a paraphrase, word for word in parts of it, of UK's "Section 28" that was passed by Thatcherite conservatives in 1989 (and only revoked more than a decade later by a Labour parliament). Margaret Thatcher herself [said](#) in the late 1980s, "Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay... All of those children are being cheated of a sound start in life — yes cheated." It is hard not to see in her word — and Thatcher remains a heroine for many post-Soviet liberals — a model emulated by Putinist ultra-conservatives.

In this context, one shouldn't forget about Western right-leaning, liberal politicians' speculations about "barbaric homophobia" found outside of the Western world. Institutional homophobia as it exists in India and many countries in the western, central and southern parts of Africa is obviously a consequence of European colonial politics, their repressive laws and religious indoctrination.

There is a reason why critical, radical queer theorists describe the current state of Western society as "rainbow capitalism", referring to the total integration of the LGBT community and the queer movement into the market economy, the culture of excessive consumption, advertisement and PR practices, gentrification, etc. The primary beneficiaries in such circumstances usually turn out to be White, Western, middle and upper class cisgender gays and lesbians. "Rainbow capitalism" celebrates diversity across the board, but business is business: so-called "gay friendly" corporations have more than once willingly obeyed the absurd demands of Russia's "gay propaganda" law (also nicknamed the "Don't Say Gay" law). To name but two examples, Paramount voluntarily deleted "excessively explicit" scenes from their 2019 film *Rocketman* in order to distribute it in Russia, while Google chose not to show its "rainbow doodle" to Russian users during the Pride month (i.e. for the entire month of June). These might seem like trivial issues; however, such instances reveal that Western capitalist culture is far from the LGBT paradise that it sets out to be to those who find themselves a part of it.

That being said, the Russian LGBTQ+ community is not uniform at all, even though the risks are the same for everyone: from the imminent extension of homophobic censorship to the prospect of criminal punishment for homosexuality being reinstalled along with enforced conversion therapy. Such a scenario seemed impossible even a short while ago, but after February 24 nothing is. It is important to note that among the Russian LGBTQ+ community, there are those who support the war and Putin's dictatorship; and we're not talking about those who can be ascribed to the ruling class and are a part of this phenomenon, people like Anton Krasovsky — star anchor of the Russia Today network, a major propagandist and a symptom of moral corruption of the media elites — and closeted homosexuals within the ranks of power, e.g. the Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin. Ironically, as if on purpose, Volodin is the one assigned to articulate the regime's most outrageous homophobic ideas. Volodin's circumstances echo a time-tested tactic, practiced by [ACT-UP](#)'s queer radicals, of publicly outing far-right pastors and members of the Reagan administration.

Chauvinist and anti-Ukrainian statements and even the Z letter [the symbol of the Russian invasion] are being posted on social media by regular Russian gays and lesbians: it isn't a very wide-spread phenomenon, but it happens. We can try to explain this by mechanisms of decompensating homophobic oppression or Stockholm syndrome experienced by Russian queers. Whatever the case, it is time to recognize that being a part of the LGBTQ+ community does not automatically make one anti-racist, committed to democratic values, or an advocate for the immediate liberation of Ukraine from Russian invaders.

In the current political climate, it would only be possible to fight against Russian regime's homophobic politics and fight for LGBTQ+ liberation in tandem with a global anti-war movement against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While recognizing that historical parallels should always be

taken with a grain of salt due to differences in geographical, temporal and class contexts, it would be remiss not to share one appropriate historical example. The radical gay liberation movement in the United States was born in 1969, emerging from the Stonewall riots' smokes and chaos, amid the Vietnam war. Gay activists stood together with anti-war activists, the human rights movement, second-wave feminists, the Black Panthers and other African-American groups.

Today it is not enough for queer Russians to simply speak out against the extended anti-gay law, which, let me remind you, is scheduled to pass in September. Although very important, it also won't be sufficient to defend the LGBTQ+ community's few surviving initiatives and venues. Under the current circumstances, survival and end to discrimination and violence are contingent upon Russia's decisive military defeat in Ukraine and the ensuing downfall of Russian dictatorship, or to put it in an even larger context, the long overdue dismantling of the Russian Empire. That said, liberation should not be equated with voluntary assimilation into the global capitalist order as its "niche consumers." Revolution, or fundamental transformation of the global order, however distant it may seem now, will be feminist and queer, or it won't be at all.

Artem Langenburg

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