

Russia: Rainbow Extremism

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Why has pressure on LGBT+ people in Russia increased to frightening proportions since the full-scale invasion into Ukraine? How are people fighting back against repression? Feminist and LGBT+ activist Liliya Vezhevatova on the predicament of the community against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism

Oppression of LGBT+ people is one part of a broader strategy in Russia to establish total control over society, suppress dissent and consolidate power through the promotion of an ideology of “traditional values.” As both a symbol of victimhood for society and a convenient enemy for state propaganda, the LGBT+ community has found itself at the epicenter of this process.

At the heels of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the already difficult situation with LGBT+ rights in Russia has deteriorated dramatically. People whose sexual orientation or gender identity does not conform to prescribed norms have found themselves critically vulnerable against the backdrop of military action and the state’s increasing control over the private sphere: censorship and self-censorship have intensified; initiatives and institutions that provide support are closing down; any mention of people whose lives do not fit into the accepted norms is disappearing from the media; websites are being blocked. Grassroots xenophobia and harassment by law enforcement agencies are becoming even more common. In addition to the absurd (yet alarming) cases of short-term arrests for wearing rainbow earrings, those accused of organizing activities for the “extremist LGBT community” have already become political prisoners.

State pressure

The Russian authorities have been introducing large-scale efforts against members of the LGBT+ community for over a decade. Before the war, the main instrument of pressure was a [federal law](#) prohibiting “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors,” adopted in 2013. This law restricted LGBT+ people freedom of assembly and of self-expression, primarily by prohibiting any public events related to LGBT+ topics. Authorities often refused to authorize public events of this kind when requested and suppressed single pickets, which by law do not require authorization. However, the law was not applied on a mass scale, with only a few dozen people being fined in nine years. Everything changed after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Already in September 2022 Alexander Khinshtein, a State Duma representative from the ruling United Russia party, [proposed](#) a bill banning “LGBT+ propaganda” among citizens of all ages, not just minors, as had previously been the case. He justified the ban by the threat to the country’s demographic growth and economic development, and explicitly linked the law to the war. He stated: “A special military operation is taking place not only on the battlefields, but also in the minds of people.” The law passed in December 2022. It sanctioned any events, books, movies or internet publications that neutrally or positively mention anything related to LGBT+ people.

In the summer of 2023 the State Duma passed a [law](#) completely banning transgender transition. The ban applies to any “surgical operations aimed at changing a person’s sex.” It restricts hormone

therapy and prohibits transgender people from changing their name and gender identity on official documents. This ban deprives trans people of the opportunity to legally enshrine their identity and creates serious problems in their everyday lives, such as in obtaining medical services or employment. Having documents that do not match a person's appearance increases the risk of discrimination and even violence in everyday life.

“LGBT+ extremists”

Toward the end of the second year of the war, in the winter of 2023–2024, the Supreme Court's decision came into force to [recognize](#) the “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organization and ban its activities on the territory of Russia. Devoid of any legal justification, the court ruling represents a complete disregard for principles of law. It was characterized by human rights activists from Amnesty International, who described it as “shameful and absurd.” Completely lacking concrete evidence, the decision also manifests a lack of understanding of the very concept of extremism as it replaces a valid threat with ideological rhetoric. In addition, the use of extremism legislation to prosecute human rights movements undermines trust in the legal system and contributes to social tensions.

To begin with, the term “international LGBT movement” does not correspond to any specific organization with a structure, leadership or membership. It is rather an umbrella term encompassing a variety of initiatives and groups advocating for the rights of LGBT+ people around the world. Recognizing such an abstract concept as “extremist” makes it difficult to enforce the law and creates conditions for arbitrary accusations.

To recognize an organization as extremist, evidence of its involvement in violent or subversive activities must be presented. In the case of the “international LGBT movement” (if it even actually existed), there is no such evidence, since its activities are aimed at protecting human rights and fighting discrimination. In essence, this decision is a way of declaring human rights a threat to the state: a ridiculous notion to say the least.

Recognizing the “LGBT movement” as extremist is obviously a political tool aimed at increasing repression and diverting public attention from key issues. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, economic hardship and growing public discontent, the authorities are creating a convenient image of an enemy in order to redirect anger and fear. This solution has nothing to do with any real threat, but it has proved effective in strengthening control and suppressing dissent. It also legitimizes stigma and discrimination by justifying violence against LGBT+ people and pressure on human rights defenders.

Assault on safe spaces

Until the recognition of LGBT+ people as “extremists,” the policing of them had been mostly limited to online activity. It has since spilled offline, including raids on clubs and parties where organizers are arrested and attendees detained, venues are closed, and activists criminally prosecuted.

On the night of December 2, 2023, police [raided](#) several Moscow clubs hosting parties for the LGBT+ community. Police busted the venues under the pretext of searching for drugs, checked the documents of attendees and photographed their IDs. Some were detained.

In March 2024 in Orenburg, police officers supported by activists from the Russian Brotherhood, a national-patriotic organization, [raided](#) the private nightclub *Pose*, a meeting place for the LGBT+ community. The club owner and two employees were arrested and charged with organizing extremist activities. The independent human rights project Memorial considers them political

prisoners.

In autumn 2024 in Chita, a young woman was put under [house arrest](#) on charges of organizing the activities of an “extremist LGBT organization.” According to the investigation, she worked to organize “an entertainment establishment with the purpose of propagating the ideology of an outlawed international public association and increasing its membership.”

Repression has become part of everyday life in Russia. The sense of threat is constant and pervasive. Many experience anxiety and depression, and fear of physical persecution has become the norm. These challenges force people to go underground, withdraw into isolation or emigrate; as a result, social ties deteriorate and communities are deprived of the spaces and forms of support that used to help them cope. According to the most recent [study](#) by human rights advocates conducted in 2023, LGBT+ people are under extreme stress, and have become more isolated and less trusting of others.

The closure of safe spaces, the emigration of activists, and the fear of communicating even with friends and family jeopardize the very ability to stay connected and find support. The result is pervasive anxiety and isolation. Even simple things like seeking psychological help or participating in online groups carry a risk of exposure and persecution. It can only be called a crisis — not only a legal and political one, but a humanitarian one that is destroying the lives of thousands of people. This crisis cannot be ignored because it reaches far beyond one particular community, reflecting the degradation of rights and freedoms in society in general.

Violence and hate crimes

Against the backdrop of repressive laws and state propaganda in Russia, social exclusion and discrimination against LGBT+ people has [increased](#), violence has become more frequent, and hate crimes are on the rise. Homophobia and transphobia are fueled by official rhetoric that touts the “international LGBT movement” as a threat to children, young people, “traditional values,” and even Russia’s national security. While in 2022, 30% of LGBT+ people surveyed by human rights activists reported having experienced some form of violence, in 2023, the number rose to 43.5%.

There has been a 1,5 increase in the number of registered hate crimes against LGBT+ people in 2023, while the number of murders of LGBT+ people has doubled. It needs to be noted that only those cases that went to trial, and only those where victims’ “non-traditional orientation” is mentioned in the case have been included in these statistics. This is but a tiny fraction of all crimes actually committed.

Hate crimes cause deep and multilayered damage not only to individuals but to society as a whole. For victims, such attacks leave both physical and emotional trauma, often accompanied by fear, depression, and loss of trust in others. They will often begin to avoid public places, socializing, and expressing themselves for fear of being attacked again. But the consequences of these crimes go far beyond personal drama. Officially designating an entire group of citizens as “enemies” legitimizes aggression in everyday life. It destroys the social fabric, creating an atmosphere of mistrust, fear, and alienation.

Only a small part of such crimes are officially registered. Many victims of violence prefer not to contact law enforcement agencies, fearing additional humiliation, denial of protection or even the threat of being accused of “propaganda.” This makes the real extent of the problem invisible to society and creates the illusion that violence is uncommon. When hate crimes go unpunished, it sends the message that violence against vulnerable groups is acceptable. Such indifference undermines a sense of justice, destroys solidarity, and makes society less safe for everyone, not just LGBT+ people.

LGBT+ teens: Fear instead of a future

Today's oppressive policies create an extremely difficult environment for the next generation of LGBT+ people in Russia. In the atmosphere where the community's visibility is suppressed and any LGBT+ related activities are criminalized, embracing one's own identity becomes difficult and often traumatizing. A system that fosters fear and shame encourages isolation and self-censorship. People learn to hide their identity at an early age, which often leads to anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues later in life.

The situation is somewhat mitigated by the availability of the internet, which remains the main source of information and a place of communication for teenagers. There are, however, many obstacles to accessing these resources in Russia, as many websites are blocked and a fear of being de-anonymized and persecuted prevents many from seeking support in online communities. In a society where whistleblowing is actively encouraged, even online spaces are no longer completely safe.

All of this contributes to the rising suicide rate among LGBT+ teens. Even in relatively "affluent" countries, LGBT+ adolescents attempt suicide at twice, or according to some studies, four times the rate of their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Faced with rejection from family, community, and society, as well as the inability to find support and acceptance, these children come under extreme psychological pressure.

The conditions of repression and stigmatization increase these risks even further. Feelings of loneliness, fear of being rejected or subjected to violence, and the inability to openly express their feelings make Russian LGBT+ adolescents particularly vulnerable. Lack of access to safe spaces and professional psychological help only exacerbates the situation.

Fear and isolation push teenagers to desperate measures, and the lack of accessible and safe support deprives them of the opportunity to find another way out. This is one of the most severe and painful aspects of the LGBT+ community's repression in Russia. Every life lost is a tragic price that society pays for the discrimination and persecution of those who think differently, feel differently, love differently.

Forced emigration

Fear of repression has pushed many LGBT+ people to leave Russia. Far from being a free choice, emigration is necessary for their physical survival. As they are fleeing the country, they leave behind their homes, as well as their communities, friends, and the way of life to which they are accustomed. They have to start a new life and face new challenges: language barriers, lack of support, and the need to adapt to an unfamiliar culture.

Despite the difficulties faced by LGBT+ emigrants, they build new communities and create new projects aimed at supporting each other and preserving their identity in a new environment. These individuals remain part of the movement. Many continue to participate in human rights initiatives and support those who have remained in Russia.

In June 2024, the Feminist Anti-War Resistance group launched "[Words From Russia](#)" during Pride Month. The movement's activists brought posters to local Prides in different countries with texts written by LGBT+ people from Russia. The texts contained the words that Russians would have liked to take to street marches in their country, but could not. Here are some of them:

"I hug each and everyone who needs it. We are strong and we will survive anything and anyone."

“No matter how many regimes have changed, no matter how cruel, we have always been around and always will be. A time of celebration will come in Russia.”

“I want to hug everyone who is just as compelled to hide their true self, to hug everyone who is scared, everyone who doesn’t give up. None of us are alone. Someday rainbow flags will wave on the streets of our cities.”

“They are trying to outlaw our existence, but we are not afraid and we hold each other’s hands tightly.”

“I want us to be free and open, so that we are not threatened every day, so that I don’t feel scared to wear Pride symbols in Russia.”

This act of protest was a token of solidarity and support. The words written on the posters reflect the feelings and aspirations that LGBT+ people in Russia cannot express openly. These words unite those outside and inside the country, creating a space for solidarity and shared hope for a future in which everyone has the right to be themselves.

Grassroots resistance

But let us return to Russia. On the heels of the war, many civil and human rights organizations have been targeted by the state. As public LGBT+ activities in the country have become impossible, some of the supporting and human rights groups have gone “underground,” trying to be present in the public information space while not attracting unnecessary attention so as to help those who need it. These groups are often small grassroots initiatives operating in increased secrecy and with caution. They provide psychological support, legal advice, and simply a space for socializing, which is especially important in conditions of social isolation.

The internet remains one of the few relatively safe spaces for LGBT+ people in Russia. Social media platforms are used to organize private events and to share information and support. Against all odds, several new online projects have emerged since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. To name but a few examples, *LGBT Propaganda*, the queer zine by the Feminist Anti-War Resistance; *Kueer*, a new media outlet about the life and problems of the community; and *Let’s Cope Together*, the support network for queer people in situations of partner violence. Independent podcasts and blogs also continue to emerge that focus on LGBT+ topics and help the community’s voice be heard in the public sphere.

Despite repression, the erasure of the LGBT+ people’s visibility from public space, and a climate of fear, the community keeps fighting back. Even in the face of total control and pressure, new forms of solidarity and support are being born. LGBT+ initiatives that have gone underground retain the ability to help, inspire and unite people.

The situation of the LGBT+ community in Russia is not only a story of repression and isolation, it is also a story of perseverance in the face of systemic repression. Increased pressure on the community, stigmatization, and persecution are weaponized to divert attention from the war and internal problems; but these are real lives — ruined, frightened, pushed to the brink of survival — that become collateral damage.

The LGBT+ community continues to exist despite bans and threats. It changes forms, adapts, supports those who have stayed in the country and those who have been compelled to leave. This resistance may be quiet, but it is persevering, and it carries an important reminder: human rights cannot be abolished by decree or prohibition. They persist in anyone who refuses to give up. This is why there is still a place for hope amid all the darkness.

Our struggle and resistance is a reminder that even in the most dire circumstances, human dignity and the right to be oneself cannot be destroyed. This is important not only for LGBT+ people themselves but also for a future society in which justice and freedom become a reality for all.

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