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Madonna Vows to Defy Anti-Gay Law at St. Petersburg Concert

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Wherever Madonna goes, controversy follows.

The singer has vowed to defy a new law against promoting homosexuality in St. Petersburg when she performs there in August.

“I will come to St. Petersburg to speak up for the gay community and to give strength and inspiration to anyone who is or feels oppressed,” the outspoken pop star said in an e-mail to Bloomberg late Wednesday. “I’m a freedom fighter.”

The law, signed on March 7 by St. Petersburg Mayor Georgy Poltavchenko, an ally of President-elect Vladimir Putin, bans lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered “propaganda” that could give minors “the false perception that traditional and nontraditional relationships are socially equal.”

“I will speak during my show about this ridiculous atrocity,” Madonna said. “I don’t run away from adversity.”

Homosexuality was outlawed in the Soviet era and wasn't decriminalized in Russia until 1993. It is illegal in 76 countries, and at least five countries, including Iran, impose the death penalty for consensual same-sex relations, according to Human Rights Watch.

Madonna, the eighth highest-earning celebrity in Forbes magazine's 2010 list with estimated earnings of $58 million, plans to return to Russia for the third time in August with a concert in Moscow followed by another in St. Petersburg.

Tickets for both performances range from 1,500 rubles to 50,000 rubles ($51 to $1,700) apiece, according to PMI Corp. and Euro Entertainment, the organizers of the events.

Madonna's first show in Russia six years ago was met with protests from Russian Orthodox activists who objected to her performance of the song "Live to Tell," during which she wore a crown of thorns and hung from a cross.

Lawmaker Vitaly Milonov, who authored the controversial bill, cautioned Thursday that Madonna's defense of gays' rights might be considered "homosexual propaganda" and that she could face a fine of 5,000 rubles ($170) if she violates the law.

Concert organizers could face fines of up to 500,000 rubles ($17,000).

Russia's gay community was divided Thursday over Madonna's concert. Gay rights activist Nikolai Alexeyev accused the singer of hypocrisy and suggested that she cancel her concert in St. Petersburg altogether.

"We are going to hold a Slavic gay parade in the two cities protesting against foreign stars who come to Russia just to stuff their pockets with millions, thus supporting ... homophobia," Alexeyev said, Interfax reported.

But Igor Kochetkov, head of the St. Petersburg-based LGBT Network, argued that Madonna's concert will be "a great help" for the gay community.

She "proved that the city authorities have brought shame on Russia before the whole world," Kochetkov told The Moscow Times.

The Orthodox Church considers homosexuality a sin.

"There's lots of criticism from the media community about this law, but somehow most of the media forget about this crucial word — minors," said Vladimir Vigilyansky, a spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchate. "It's about propaganda among minors, not about banning homosexuality itself."

Russia, which is preparing to host the Winter Olympics in 2014 and the football World Cup in 2018, was chastised for the legislation by Canada, which issued a warning to its citizens who plan to travel to St. Petersburg to avoid "displaying affection in public, as homosexuals can be targets of violence."

Meanwhile, lawmakers in Novosibirsk said Thursday that they are looking to pass a similar bill there, Interfax reported.

Nearly identical legislation was passed in the Arkhangelsk region in September, and lawmakers in the Ryazan region introduced a similar ban in 2006.

(Bloomberg, MT)

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