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No Gays Allowed in Entrepreneurship Program

By Jonathan Earle

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Lenkova speculated that a wave of new “homophobic” laws has emboldened social conservatives.

Gays and lesbians need not apply.

That's one of the five criteria for applicants to the "Academy for Entrepreneurship," a program for aspiring business leaders organized by outdoor-goods retailer Expedition.

A program announcement on Expedition's website drew an angry reaction on Wednesday from LGBT activists, one of whom called for a boycott of the brand's 360 stores worldwide.

Discrimination against gays and lesbians is widespread in Russia, but it's rarely so explicit, said Olga Lenkova of Vykhod, an LGBT rights group in St. Petersburg.

"There's usually anti-gay 'face-control,' but it's seldom stated publicly," she said by telephone, referring to the Russian practice of quietly excluding undesirable guests from elite establishments.

Lenkova speculated that a wave of new "homophobic" laws — including bans on promoting homosexuality to minors in St. Petersburg and other cities — has emboldened social conservatives.

For example, a group of Russian Orthodox believers made headlines this week by calling for the closure of all gay clubs in Moscow as part of the drive to ban the promotion of homosexuality.

A spokeswoman for Expedition stood by the company's policy on Wednesday and expressed frustration that the policy had been getting more publicity than the program.

"Real men and real women, in all senses of the word, work in our company and attend our events. These people are very worthy, et cetera. We're for healthy relationships, new children and new families," Veronika Kuzenkova said by telephone.

Students at the Academy for Entrepreneurship, a three-month program, attend master classes by business leaders and develop their own business projects, according to the program's webpage.

"We are confident that you can earn $100,000 to $150,000 per year with your left leg!" Alexander Kravtsov, president of Ruyan, which owns Expedition, said in a statement on the webpage.

In addition to being heterosexuals, applicants for the program, which begins in November, must be 21 to 27 years old, speak fluent English, lack serious health problems and abstain from drug use.

Russia's LGBT community should boycott Ruyan until the company issues a formal apology and strikes "heterosexuality" from the program's requirements, said Bulat Barantayev, head of Novosibirsk-based GORD, an LGBT rights organization, news site LGBTsmi.ru reported on Wednesday.

It was unclear whether Expedition's anti-gay policy, which appeared on the Russian version of the program's webpage but not the English one, was legal, given spotty anti-discrimination laws.

Pavel Chikov, a human rights activist with the Agora Center, said by telephone that the rule violated the Constitution's Article 37, which forbids workplace discrimination, as well as consumer laws.

But Vykhod's Lenkova said Russian law doesn't protect minority groups, including the elderly, from discrimination, and a lack of trust in the judicial system means that victims are unlikely to seek legal recourse.

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