

# Russia Should Create Private Zones for LGBT

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By restricting the rights of its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, Russia defines itself as a conservative European society.

The French parliament passed legislation last month expanding the rights of LGBT citizens, while Russia's State Duma is trying to move the opposite way by advancing its bill limiting LGBT propaganda. This alone reveals a stark and growing divide between Russian and European values. This issue has brought two basic dilemmas to the fore: the relationship between the minority and the majority and the relationship between traditional and postmodern values.

It is no coincidence that the LGBT question has arisen at the same time as the Pussy Riot case and the issue of foreign funding of nongovernmental organizations. Russia is rapidly establishing its own identity with regard to a number of key issues, primarily measuring itself against Europe — a yardstick it has used for centuries.

Russia defines its political system not as a liberal democracy with an emphasis on the rights of minorities but as a democracy that respects the rights and wishes of its majority. That emphasis on the majority is not a personal whim of President Vladimir Putin. It is society's reaction to the social disaster of the 1990s, caused in part by the uncontrolled and egoistic actions of a small minority. That is why society expects the government to defend the interests of the majority and to protect it as much as possible from an aggressive minority.

Meanwhile, France and most other EU countries continue to expand the rights of minorities, paying little attention to protests by the majority in the belief that the majority will itself gradually break down into a number of separate minorities. But Russians believe that any erosion of the majority will lead to instability, which society fears most of all after the traumatic and highly unstable 1990s. Even a hint of movement in that direction elicits a strong negative reaction.

What's more, Russia defines itself as standing somewhere between traditional and postmodern values. The EU is a purely postmodern society, rejecting tradition and building new social institutions. It is also a post-Christian society that not only has no interest in defending traditional values but also actively undermines them in favor of an alternative framework, albeit vaguely defined. Russia, however, has just emerged from the communist period and its failed attempt to build a utopian society. It is rediscovering Russian Orthodox principles along with other traditional spiritual values that will bolster society and protect it against the turbulent present and uncertain future. Therefore, religion will definitely play an increasingly important role in Russia's public life.

The idea that Russia is somehow more backward than the West is a typical error based on the linear understanding of progress that dominated in the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, that notion also served as the basis for the initial, fairly primitive concepts of modernization and democratization in the West. According to this concept of linear progress, all countries are on the same path, and Russia is several decades behind Europe and the U.S. Russia's legislation on LGBT propaganda only reinforces that gap. But modern humanitarian science sees society as multifaceted and allows for different approaches to a single problem. Only time will tell which solution to the issue of minority and majority rights is more effective and humane: Russia's or the West's.

As a member of Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I have encountered many European lawmakers who have critical views of LGBT but are afraid of voicing those views in public. Fear of speaking your mind hardly fits the definition of freedom. The EU has essentially forbidden public discussion on the issue of whether LGBT is an illness or not. Why should this discussion be outright forbidden? This is a typical example of an aggressive minority squashing freedom of speech.

With its bill prohibiting homosexual propaganda, Russia is trying to establish its own model for relations between the traditional majority and the LGBT minority. The majority's position is clear: LGBT lifestyles are immoral and sinful, and while individuals have the right to live as they please, they have no right to promote such behavior among others who find it alien and offensive. Obviously, public rallies and attempts to create a positive image of LGBT lifestyles on television would be considered propaganda and would be banned.

In this way, Russia is effectively pioneering a new concept: the "zoning of public space." LGBT minorities are free to pursue their chosen lifestyles and values, but only within private zones.

At the same time, however, the government is obligated to protect the LGBT's rights as long as they obey society's laws. In particular, the state must protect the LGBT community from militant homophobes who could interpret the new law as sanctioning vigilante violence against LGBT adherents and their supporters. In the end, legislation to prevent the LGBT community from promoting and propagandizing its lifestyle outside its allotted zone will actually help protect LGBT followers from violent attacks from the majority.

Another issue that must be addressed is a permissible form of narrowly defined legal union for LGBT couples. They need this to resolve property-based issues, including the distribution of property when one partner dies or leaves the union. Of course, the traditional values of the Russian majority cannot grant such couples the full status of legal marriage and the right to raise children. The state and society must reserve that classification for relationships leading to natural childbirth and the healthy rearing of children by a heterosexual couple. But that is no reason to deny LGBT couples the right to own property and distribute and allocate that property in the event of separation or death.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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