

Putin Says Homosexuals Enjoy Equality in Russia

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A demonstrator holding up a picture of Putin with rainbow circles on his face during a protest in Amsterdam. **Cris Toala Olivares**

AMSTERDAM — President Vladimir Putin defended Russia's treatment of homosexuals in Amsterdam, where 1,000 gay rights activists waved pink and orange balloons and blasted out dance music to press home their protest.

Western nations need Russia for energy and as a market for exports but are uneasy about Putin's human rights policies and his treatment of opponents in his new Kremlin term.

In Amsterdam on Monday, Dutch and Russian companies signed a batch of energy deals and Putin met Queen Beatrix and Prime Minister Mark Rutte, while about 1,000 protesters blew whistles, played loud music and waved the gay pride flag nearby in the city famous for its liberal attitude.

Putin, who laughed off a topless protest earlier in the day in Germany, said Russia did not discriminate against gay people.

On a trip to Amsterdam, the president is met by hundreds of protesters of a Russian "anti-gay" bill.

"In the Russian Federation — so that it is clear to everybody — there is no infringement on the rights of sexual minorities," he said.

"These people, like everyone else, enjoy all the same rights and freedoms as everyone else," he told a news conference held at Amsterdam's Maritime Museum, in a nod to the days when Peter the Great worked as a young man in an Amsterdam shipyard.

Russia's parliament has given preliminary approval to a ban on "homosexual propaganda" targeting minors, which critics say would effectively ban gay rights demonstrations. The United States has said the legislation "severely restricts freedom of expression and assembly."

Many houses and bridges in the historic canal district of Amsterdam were draped with banners and the rainbow flag of the gay pride movement, protesting what human rights organizations say is institutional repression of gays in Russia.

"Putin go homo," read one, echoing the message "Putin go home" on the front page of Friday's NRC Next daily newspaper.

"I'm protesting against the anti-gay law in Russia because it's unreal. You can't tell people to go back into the closet," said one protester, who gave his name as Connie Feather, dressed in a rainbow striped chiffon dress and blue feather boa.

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