

Gay Rights Rally Shot Down for 3rd Time This Month

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Demonstrators attending a gay rights rally in Tbilisi on Saturday. Seventeen were injured after fights broke out. **David Mdzinarishvili**

Moscow authorities have rejected a third request from gay rights activists to hold a rally later this month, just as an opinion poll was released showing that society has become more intolerant toward gays.

Officials on Friday said the demonstration was not possible because May 25, the day when it was planned to be held in Gorky Park, coincided with graduation day celebrations. Rally organizers said this was just an excuse to turn down the rally, however.

"Every year, they find a reason to reject it," said Nikolai Alexeyev, an organizer of gay rights parades. "This year it's graduation day, last year it was border guard's day, the year before it was Cyril and Methodius day — they can find a reason for any day of the year."

Gay rights activists filed a complaint with three of the city's courts to appeal the ban on the rally, citing a European Court of Human Rights ruling issued in 2010 that bans on gay parades from 2006 to 2008 were illegal. The ruling came in response to a complaint that Alexeyev filed concerning demonstrations during this period.

With a recent survey showing intolerance toward gays is growing, activists warn that bans on gay rights rallies will damage social stability.

Although there is no law banning gay rights demonstrations in Moscow, authorities have never approved a gay rights parade in the city. The recent rejections follow on the heels of the murder of a 23-year old man in Volgograd, believed to have been killed for being gay, and growing intolerance toward LGBT society.

An opinion poll released by the Levada Center on Friday showed that the number of people who want gays to have limited rights has risen from 40 percent last year to 47 this year, with 73 percent of people saying the state must suppress any public display of homosexuality.

The poll also said one third of Russians considered gays to be mentally defective, while only 12 percent said homosexuality had an equal right to exist with heterosexuality.

Alexeyev, the parade organizer, said the results of the poll were not surprising, as "it reflects the policy being carried out by authorities."

"If our politicians continue to repeat on TV every day that being a gay is not normal and that homosexuality must be banned, in 10 years people will say all gays must be killed," he said.

While the killing in Volgograd sparked outrage from the gay community and rights activists, 44 percent of Russians think the state is not obliged to protect gays from violence, according to the Levada Center poll.

Anton Krasovsky, a former editor in chief of the Kontr TV cable channel who was fired after coming out as gay, said in his op-ed for the Guardian after the Volgograd murder that state policy was aimed at making gays feel afraid and ashamed.

"As far as deputies are concerned, I am scum by the fact of my birth, and it was criminal negligence not to have made a note of that in my birth certificate," he wrote.

The State Duma in January tentatively approved a bill that would ban so-called "homosexual propaganda," a term that lawmakers presumably use for gay rights demonstrations. Observers say the legislation would not only ban mass events, but also influence the lives

of gays dramatically, possibly even leading to suicides.

The bill stipulates fines from 4,000 rubles to 500,000 rubles (\$130 to \$16,000) for promoting homosexuality among minors. Human rights activists have said the bill would violate the European Convention on Human Rights.

Several regions, including Novosibirsk, Ryazan, Arkhangelsk and Kostroma, already have similar laws on the books.

St. Petersburg authorities allowed a gay rights demonstration on Friday that, according to official statistics, brought together some 60 gay rights activists and about 200 of their opponents — mostly from nationalist organizations.

Thus, St. Petersburg — which incidentally also has a law stipulating fines for promoting homosexuality — became the only Russian city to mark Friday's International Day Against Homophobia, a holiday that saw 17 people injured at a gay rights demonstration in Georgia.

According to A Just Russia deputy Yelena Mizulina, head of the Duma's committee on children's and women's rights, the bill against "homosexual propaganda" may be passed by mid-July.

"It is an easy bill for me, one day of work," Mizulina said, adding, however, that she respected other people's opinions, and that the Duma intends to organize a working group made up of gay rights activists to make amendments to the bill.

"Discussions are needed to work out the right position," she said, Interfax reported Friday.

Alexeyev said he would not take part in the working group, though, "because it is idiotic to discuss a bill that contradicts all international and domestic legal norms."

"If the bill becomes law, it won't be effective, just like in St. Petersburg, where the only person who was fined was me," he said.

"But the impact on social stability will be horrifying, with cases like that in Volgograd happening more often," he said.

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