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Anti-Gay Propaganda Bill Passed in 436-0 Vote

By Jonathan Earle

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The State Duma has unanimously passed a bill introducing stiff fines for portraying homosexuality in a positive light to children, a move LGBT activists called a major blow to gay rights in Russia and especially the country's gay teens, who are particularly vulnerable to harassment.

The bill, passed in a 436-0 vote on Tuesday, would make propagandizing "non-traditional" sexual relations, widely understood as shorthand for "homosexual relations," among under 18-year-olds punishable by a fine of up to 100,000 rubles ($3,100) for citizens and 1 million rubles for organizations. Foreign citizens would face fines and deportation.

It would ban presenting minors with information designed to turn them gay, make homosexuality seem attractive, promote the "distorted perception" that traditional and non-traditional sexual relations are equal, or force them to become interested in such relations, according to the bill's text.

LGBT activists fear that it will inspire hostility and muzzle rights groups and advocates.

Olga Lenkova, an activist with Vykhod, a gay rights group in St. Petersburg, said a similar measure introduced in her city last February prompted potential partner organizations, including those that would ordinarily host seminars and discussions, to shy away from working with the group for fear that they could be fined.

In addition, Lenkova said, the legislation's passing was followed by a rise in anti-gay violence and aggression, committed by ultra-nationalists and religious extremists who saw the law as justifying their actions.

In what seemed like a grim preview, hundreds of anti-gay activists pelted a handful of pro-gay demonstrators with eggs and poured urine on them during a protest outside the State Duma on Tuesday while police looked on, blogger Ilya Varlamov wrote. At least one picketer was beaten up.

Gay teens, many of whom face debilitating hostility at home and at school, look likely to be the hardest hit by the legislation, because the ban will probably make it harder to find objective information that could help them come to terms with their sexuality and find support.

"An LGBT teenager who is cut off from information is a teenager who's left without support," Lenkova said by telephone on Wednesday.

Support is critical, given that over 80 percent of gay teens report being bullied, and 30 percent say they've considered suicide, said Lena Klimova, creator of Deti-404, an online community that supports LGBT teens, referring to the results of a poll she conducted.

"Yesterday, a 15-year-old girl wrote to me, 'Lena, they've passed the law. Will I really be banned from talking to you, because we'd certainly be breaking the law?' I would have burst out laughing, but it's not funny. It's horrible," Klimova, 25, wrote in an e-mail message on Wednesday.

The measure has also received criticism from abroad.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Wednesday called on President Vladimir Putin to veto the bill, which must first be approved by the Federation Council before it arrives at his desk, out of concerns that it would lead to discrimination. Merkel also said through a spokesman that the bill contradicted the spirit of the European Convention on Human Rights, Itar-Tass reported.

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