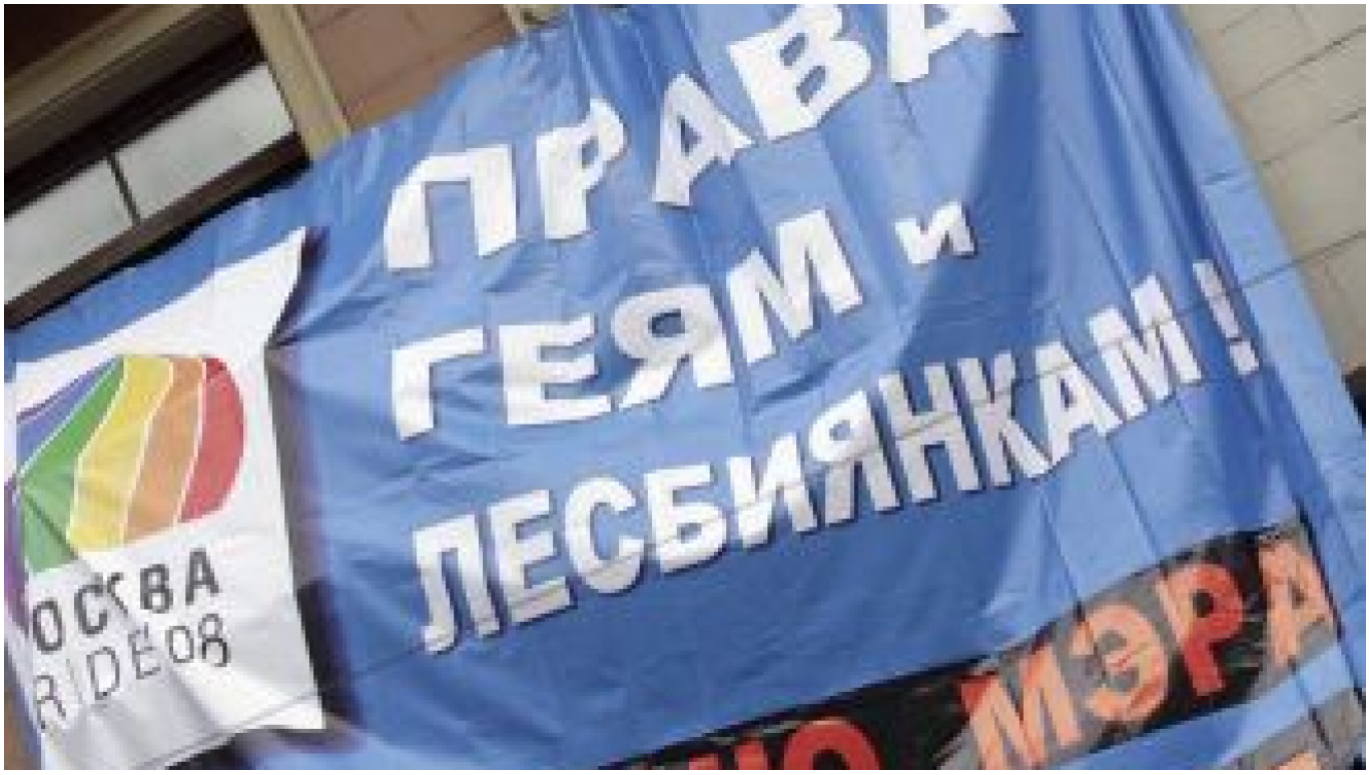
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Detentions Intensify Fears Over Gay Rights

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Gay rights banner in Moscow 2008. **Igor Tabakov**

After four Dutch citizens were detained in Murmansk last weekend for "homosexual propaganda" amid repeated calls by activists for a boycott of the upcoming Olympic Games, concerns are mounting over the impact Russia's recently passed "gay propaganda" law may have on this winter's games in Sochi — for tourists, athletes and for Russia's reputation abroad.

The strongest call for a boycott in recent days came from prominent U.S. playwright and actor Harvey Fierstein, who in an op-ed for The New York Times on Monday compared Russia to Nazi Germany.

If the international community does not put pressure on Russia over the law, he said, the consequences could be the same as the Holocaust.

The law, which stipulates fines of 4,000 rubles to one million rubles ($124 to $31,000) for promoting homosexuality among minors, was signed by President Vladimir Putin in late June, and it has been provoking a wave of criticism from Western politicians and international human rights groups ever since then.

Fierstein's comments were republished and quoted by various Western media sources, as well as by many gay rights activists in response to the news on Tuesday that four Dutch tourists had been detained for shooting a documentary on gay rights in Russia.

After a hearing was adjourned on Monday, the Federal Migration Service banned the four Dutch tourists from coming to Russia for three years, saying they violated the law by participating in the Youth Human Rights Camp in the Murmansk region, where they interviewed a 17-year-old boy about homosexual relationships.

That was the first time the law was applied to foreigners, leading to fears that tourists in Russia could be detained for actions they may not consider to be "gay propaganda" in their own country.

Fierstein warned that anybody police suspected of being gay could be detained.

"Just six months before Russia hosts the 2014 Winter Games, Mr. Putin signed a law allowing police officers to arrest tourists and foreign nationals they suspect of being homosexual, lesbian or 'pro-gay' and detain them for up to 14 days. ... The law could mean that any Olympic athlete, trainer, reporter, family member or fan who is gay — or suspected of being gay, or just accused of being gay — can go to jail," he wrote.

Judging by the wording of the law, however, Fierstein's fears may be unwarranted, as homosexual propaganda is described as "spreading information aimed at shaping non-traditional sexual behavior, promoting the attractiveness of nontraditional relations, distorting understanding of social equivalency of traditional and nontraditional sexual behavior, imposing information about nontraditional sexual relations, provoking interest in such relations."

Although the law uses rather vague wording, it makes clear that homosexual propaganda is defined as a deliberate spreading of information, meaning if a gay tourist comes to Russia and does not plan to spread information in support of the gay lifestyle, the law restricting homosexual propaganda would not apply.

Human rights activists say it is unclear how much leeway authorities have in applying the law, however, and that any leeway is too much.

Several Western countries have warned gay travelers to be cautious if traveling to Russia.

The U.S. State Department has issued a warning saying there was widespread discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in Russia and that gay individuals might be subject to harassment, threats, or violence.

A Canadian travel agency also warned gay tourists about the possible dangers of traveling to Russia.

"For Canadians — where same-sex marriage is legal — it is unfathomable that Russia's laws permit the government to arrest and detain gay, or pro-gay, foreigners for up to 14 days before they would then be expelled from the country," the Canadian Travel and Escape agency said in an article published on its website.

The agency asked what many others are thinking: "And how are these new laws going to impact tourism and the world's spotlight on the upcoming 2014 Winter Games in Sochi? Will LGBT visitors — or anyone who embraces the gay community — want to visit the games?"

The Canadian Foreign Ministry also issued a statement, saying that homosexuals and their supporters can be targets of violence, perhaps a reference to the killing of a 23-year-old gay man in the southern city of Volgograd in May — a killing that investigators say was prompted by the man coming out to his friends as gay.

The Australian Olympic Committee told athletes that Australian officials could not guarantee gay athletes traveling to Sochi protection from persecution or arrest, though the IOC charter would act as a safeguard for athletes, The Australian reported Wednesday.

Boris O. Dittrich, Advocacy Director of the LGBT Rights Program run by Human Rights Watch, wrote a letter to the International Olympic Committee in June, asking the committee to put pressure on Russia so that it would withdraw the anti-gay legislation, since the law was "incompatible with the Olympic Charter's promotion of human dignity."

The International Olympic Committee issued a statement in response in which it said it would ensure that "the Games take place without discrimination against athletes, officials, spectators or the media."

But according to Lilia Shevtsova, a political analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center, such calls for an Olympic boycott have the larger goal of fueling international scrutiny.

"These calls are being made to draw the attention of the leaders of Western states [to the issue], not the athletes," Shevtsova said.

"In such a way, world leaders are being encouraged to ignore the Sochi Olympics just like they ignored the UEFA Euro 2012 in Ukraine to show their dissatisfaction with former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko's conviction."

Shevtsova said that the anti-gay legislation was just one development damaging Russia's reputation abroad and that other issues include the conviction of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and the law requiring NGOs that receive foreign funding and engage in political activity to register as "foreign agents."

As for whether or not a boycott was actually feasible, however, Shevtsova was skeptical, saying it was unlikely that Western leaders would ignore the Sochi Games, since Russia plays an important role in international institutions, including the U.N. Security Council.

Igor Reichlin, head of Reichlin & Partners, a company specializing in reputation management, said that even if there were a boycott, it probably would not have its intended effect.

"The calls to boycott may influence some people's decision not to come to the Olympics, and even if some countries decided to boycott, it wouldn't be a great tragedy, because from time to time some countries boycott the Games in other countries as well," Reichlin said.

As for gay tourists hoping to attend the games, Reichlin said the main thing was that they be informed of the gay propaganda law.

"Gays definitely don't correspond to the values and norms set by Russian authorities, but that doesn't mean that when they come to Russia they must comply with Russian values, they should just be informed [by their governments] that within Russia's political system they may be outlawed," he said.

Both analysts agreed that it was impossible for Russia to change the attitude of Western states in the months leading up to the Olympics, regardless of the PR strategies used, because the question of Russia's image really boils down to political differences.

In what was perhaps a strange coincidence, however, the Russian government issued a statement on Wednesday saying that the budget funds allocated to promote Russia's image abroad would be increased significantly in the near future.

But the image makeover Russia needs may require much more than budget allocations, analysts say.

"In order to change Russia's image, Navalny must be acquitted, the Russian government must apologize for its crackdown on NGOs and democracy must be established in this country," Shevtsova said.

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