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Gay Expats Experience Hardships, and Joys, of Russia

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Demonstrators holding signs protesting Russia's new anti-gay law at a rally in central London on August 10. **Luke MacGregor**

John, a 31-year-old American lawyer, said that when his family and friends first found out he was coming to live in Russia, they immediately assumed that it would be scary as a gay man in such a conservative country.

With the recent passage of the law banning so-called "propaganda" of gay relations among minors — legislation criticized by many as a tool to prohibit gay pride parades or any other public advocacy of LGBT rights — concern for his well-being has become more acute.

"With this aspect attracting so much hostility, I think people [back home] are genuinely worried about my safety," John said.

The reality, John and other current and former gay expatriates said, is not as bad as many

of their families perceive it to be, though there are real dangers.

The outcry in the West over the new law puts gay expats in a unique position, being forced to experience firsthand the sometimes harsh treatment of gays in Russia while their families fret about them back home and remind them that they can always return to a friendlier environment.

Coming from countries where members of the LGBT community are gradually gaining more rights and social acceptance, Western expats living in Russia can feel particularly uncomfortable by comparison. But most said Russian friends and acquaintances have embraced them, and none of the five expats interviewed by The Moscow Times had experienced violence themselves.

That safety has come in part from anonymity.

"I find it funny when people say it's not safe to be a gay person in Russia," said John, who has lived in Russia for four years.

"It's perfectly safe, because no one would ever assume you could be gay. Especially your friends, people who like you — they would never think that about you," he said, adding that even his flatmate of several years did not know about his sexual orientation and would likely be genuinely surprised if he found out.

The most dangerous consequence of the anti-gay law, the expats said, was a reinforcement of this habit of hiding one's sexuality, a habit they said could make LGBT people in Russia an almost completely invisible minority.

Coming Out

The expats said coming out to people they knew was one of the most difficult experiences for them in Russia, since in the U.S. and such announcements were long in the past for them or were unnecessary, with many people able to differentiate a gay person from a straight one by the way they behave or dress.

"Russia is palpably a more conservative country, and I was very conscious that being gay was not something I wished my colleagues, especially my Russian colleagues, to discover," said Tom, 32, a British journalist who lived in Russia for almost six years before returning to Britain in December.

"It was not something I had bothered hiding in Britain, where I can discuss boyfriends and related issues in the office," Tom said by email.

Tom said it was difficult to tell Russian friends about being gay and that he had to be very cautious about whom to tell, but that most people surprised him with their tolerance.

All the expats interviewed for this story asked that their last names not be used because they could encounter problems with their employers for speaking with the press.

Sitting in a cafe in central Moscow, John, the lawyer, said there was no reason for foreigners to be so closed, since he believed many Russians viewed their homosexuality as "another

weird thing that people from Western countries can do." He also said no Russian had ever stopped being friends with him after he told them he was gay.

Sitting beside John, his friend Joseph, 32, an American who does market research in Russia, said people were sometimes shocked to find out he was gay.

"A female colleague once asked me if I was dating anyone, and I said I was, and she asked what her name was," Joseph said. "I replied 'Sergei,' and I think she was astonished. She said she needed to sit down for a while after my confession."

Heather, a 48-year-old American who teaches English in Russia, said in a phone interview that there were people she would never tell she was a lesbian. For example, the parents of some of her students, she believes, would react only negatively.

She said she has discussed the issue of gay rights with her students and was surprised by the large gaps in their knowledge about it, with teenagers tending to have a very negative association with homosexuality, even though many of them did not know about the law banning gay "propaganda."

Most of them said they thought being gay was strange and negative, said Heather, who believes many of them have been taught to believe that by their parents and the school system.

According to opinion polls, negative attitudes toward gay people are on the rise in Russia. Results of a Levada Center survey released in May showed that one-third of Russians considered gays to be mentally defective, while only 12 percent of people said homosexuality had an equal right to exist with heterosexuality.

The number of people who want gays to have limited rights also rose from 40 percent last year to 47 percent this year, with 73 percent of people saying the state must suppress any public display of homosexuality.

Tom said he thought that to some extent, Russians in fact just do not care about gay issues. He noted that they had become more political over the years, "hijacked by lobbyists, the church and the government, and this has brought it more to the fore."

New Dangers?

In July, four Dutch tourists were detained for shooting a documentary on gay rights in Russia. The Federal Migration Service banned them 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 gay relationships.

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

But the expats said there was no reason to be afraid of the law itself, but rather of the phenomena it was leading to such as intolerance and violence toward gays.

Joseph said his family's reaction to the new law was immediate, with his apprehensive parents sending messages asking him to explain the situation in Russia and pleading him to come back to the U.S.

All the expats agreed that people abroad were not aware that there were no gay rights in Russia to begin with and that the law did not change the situation significantly.

"Many people abroad think that this problem has just appeared — they don't understand that people were already in the closet," John said. "So for almost all gay people, the situation is not different in any way. The only thing that is different for me is that it is the topic on people's lips now."

Joseph, who has lived in Russia for nine years, said the main thing that's changed since he first arrived in the country in terms of gay issues is an increased awareness about what homosexuality is.

"No one talked about it then, and I feel like this time the concept is a bit more familiar to younger people," Joseph said. "I think almost all young people in Moscow know someone who's gay."

"With this awareness more hostility has appeared, though. I think it was there before, but now it's like a movement against gay people."

Reports of attacks at gay clubs are not uncommon in Russia. Tom said the greatest risk he ever exposed himself to was going to his favorite gay club, where a group of thugs could break in and beat people up at any moment, despite strict security.

Last year, a group of young people attacked a club called Seven Three Days during a "coming out" party, and several gay club-goers were severely injured.

Heather said she had friends who were in the club that night and that the incident made her realize she could encounter violence at any time.

Clubs are one of the most common places for gay people to meet each other in Moscow, though, and since there are not many gay clubs in Moscow, usually people gather at one place, according to John. "In a city of more than 10 million people there should be a huge scene, even if it was underground, but the city basically sustains only one gay club at a time," he said.

In Britain, Tom said people assumed that daily life for gay people in Russia was grim, adding that Western media had made it seem worse than it was.

Referring to recent reports by major world newspapers saying gay people in Russia could be arrested on the street, John said he understood why people were confused.

"The law is so vague, even Russian people can't say what it means or what it entails," he said. "That's what upset me, because the reality is bad enough, the reality is something to get upset about, you don't need to make it worse than it is."

James, a 30-year-old British interpreter who lived in Moscow for a year and still works with some Russian companies, said he believed it was bad enough for gays in Russia that he agreed

with the idea of boycotting the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

Various gay rights groups have called for a boycott of the Sochi Games because of the anti-gay law, although the idea does not appear to be making traction within Western governments.

"Unfortunately, Russia is becoming a very dangerous place," said James, who asked that his real first name not be used.

Changes to Come

Some of the expats said the fact that Russians and the international community were talking about the issue could help gays win rights faster here.

"It is definitely a more oppressive environment here, but it's probably something like what it was in the U.S. 40 years ago," said John, referring to the U.S. in the 1970s, when much of American society held more negative attitudes toward gay people, many of whom remained in the closet.

"There were a few people then who were beginning to fight for gay rights, and I think that's what it's like in Russia right now. I think it's beginning to become normal. Granted, that process takes a long time, but I do see something hopeful," John said.

The reaction should not be "loud and proud," agreed all the people interviewed, noting that parades may not be a logical first step.

"They misunderstand the idea of gay pride parades," Joseph said. "Before organizing a parade, you must be proud."

Although there is no law specifically banning gay rights demonstrations in Moscow, authorities have never approved a gay pride parade in the city, and small gay rallies are usually interrupted by Orthodox activists who attack the participants.

Heather said she believed the Sochi Olympics could become the perfect platform for raising awareness about the issue worldwide and could change the state of the things immediately by having gay and straight people celebrating their victories together.

Both John and Joseph said they thought it would take Russia at least 15 years to go through the changes Western nations have gone through in granting certain rights to gay people.

John grew up in a small town in Michigan, and during his childhood people did not accept gays there, sometimes treating them with open hostility.

"I see the progress in my native town and those people who I would never have expected to accept it started to do that so I can't sit here and say Krasnoyarsk will never accept gay people," he said.

They both said they envisioned eventually moving back to the U.S., however.

"I love Russia, but when I think about my future, I understand it will be rather difficult to live a normal life here if you compare to how it could be in major Western cities," Joseph said.

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