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Q&A: Transgender Lawyer Comes Out in Protest

By Ian Bateson

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Bast waiting for a client of hers to be released from detention in August.

Masha Bast is used to facing formidable tasks.

As the chairwoman for the Association of Russian Lawyers for Human Rights, Bast has worked on some of the most high-profile and politically sensitive cases in the country. She helped defend protesters implicated in violence at a 2012 opposition rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad; young men accused of taking part in a violent nationalist rally on Manezh Square in 2010; and the so-called Primorye partisans, dubbed the "Russian Rambos" by the media after they targeted corrupt policemen in the Far East.

Masha Bast

Education

2004 — Voronezh State University, diploma in law

Work experience

2004-06 — Head of the Legal Department of the Public Chamber of the Voronezh region
2006-present — Chairwoman of the Association of Russian Lawyers for Human Rights

Favorite book: On the Origin of the Species (1859), by Charles Darwin

Reading now: Cosmos (1980), by Carl Sagan, A Brief History of Time (1988), by Steven Hawking

Movie pick: Solaris (1972), directed by Andrei Tarkovsky

Favorite restaurant in Moscow: eating at home

Weekend getaway destination: anywhere where there is nature

Only recently, with those cases having come to an end and her client in the Bolotnaya case having been released, has she found time to fully embrace another, deeply personal project: living her life as a woman.

Just last week in a press release prepared by her spouse, Yulia Guseinova, Bast publicly announced that she would no longer be living her life as Yevgeny Arkhipov, but as Masha Bast. She invited people to follow her progress on Facebook as she undergoes hormone treatment and surgeries, and also said she would answer any questions that they may have about her journey.

Since then, the couple has begun working to raise awareness about her and the transgender community in Russia as a whole.

At a time when LGBT life in Russia is increasingly marginalized and violence toward the LGBT community is on the rise, Bast's public announcement came as quite a shock to some. But she wouldn't have it any other way, saying she's happier now than ever.

The Moscow Times sat down with Bast to discuss all the recent activity in her life. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Masha, why did you decide to come out now, and in such a public way, particularly at a time when the situation for the LGBT community seems to be getting worse and worse?

A: There were three reasons for my decision. First, it would have been very difficult for me personally not to come out. Second, having represented people in the Manezh Square, Primorsky partisans, and Bolotnaya cases, when those finished up I finally had the opportunity to come out. Third, my coming out was a protest against what is going on in Russia today. I couldn't just sit there and do nothing.

Q: What made you transgender?

A: There are people who actively choose their gender, and there are people who don't think about it, or they try and avoid questioning it because of their religious beliefs or other reasons. Those who choose to decide their own gender because their internal gender doesn't match their external appearance are called transgender, especially when they take visible steps to make their external gender match their internal gender. I don't think of myself as transgender though — I just think of myself as a woman. I do, however, consider myself part of the LGBT community because we are all in the minority.

The law banning gay propaganda among minors is completely wrong, though. I remember being 10 and wanting to be a girl and putting on girl's clothes. I didn't understand what was happening to me. This was in the Soviet Union and there was no information to explain what was happening to me. I went to dances dressed as a girl back when I looked more feminine. I also started taking hormone pills on my own, but they made me sick, and once an ambulance had to be called for me. I had to stop taking the pills, and for five or six years after that I couldn't take any pills at all.

You have to understand the complete lack of information on this subject. According to statistics, there are thousands of people going through what I went through. Just imagine all the kids who have no idea what's happening to them. I never once met a homosexual in my childhood and only learned what a homosexual was when I was 14. By then, I had long known that I was a woman and I had been wearing women's clothes for years.

So it isn't a matter of upbringing. It's nature. That's why I think the law against " homosexual propaganda" is a law against children and one that targets certain social groups. It is a fascist law and nothing else.

Q: And how do you feel now after coming out?

A: If we use terms that are frequently used to describe outer space, I would say that before coming out I was like a black hole. Now, though, I am expanding and becoming happier and happier. I'm like a bird that's finally free. I don't regret it. I did the right thing.

Q: How have people reacted?

A: At least 10 percent of people I know don't want anything to do with me anymore. Everyone else keeps in touch and calls me Masha now. Some people who you would have thought would've supported me based on their views haven't, and some nationalists, who based on theirs you wouldn't have expected to, have.

Q: And your wife?

A: I explained to my wife when we started dating that I wasn't the gender I appeared to be. I

am female and have always wanted to be a girl. We talked about it for a long time, and it wasn't an easy decision for her. I explained that I like men, but I am a bisexual woman. In Russia, same-sex marriage is illegal, but in practice we have a same-sex marriage. Really, I am more of the wife and she is more of the husband in terms of gender roles.

Q: Do you have any advice for young trans people? Especially for those who haven't come out?

A: Come out. The sooner, the better. Don't be afraid of your parents. Too many trans people worry about how society sees them and think they're a problem for society. Don't think that. It is your right. If it makes someone uncomfortable, that's their problem. And especially for young trans women, don't be afraid to go to a doctor. There are good doctors in Moscow and some in St. Petersburg who won't judge you.

We're all evolving. It isn't clear what humankind will be like in 100,000 years, in a million years. This idea of what is traditional, which is rooted in the Middle Ages, simply doesn't match reality. Evolution is ongoing. It isn't an issue of right or wrong. If there is a family, we have to recognize it. If it is a same-sex family, we have to recognize it. There are many different types of families.

Q: Do you have any role models?

A: You know, I don't consider anyone to be better or worse than me. We're all the same. Yes, our abilities are different, but we aren't better or worse because of them. People also have different degrees of opportunity to realize their potential because of their financial means.

Q: Do you think the situation for transgender people is different than for gays and lesbians?

A: Yes, of course. I had to do my coming out on my own after one LGBT leader stopped talking to me when I told him I wanted to come out as transgender. That is discrimination. The emphasis is usually on the LG in LGBT. Many people in LG society are ashamed of transgender people. They don't understand that we're the same.

Q: How did you choose your new name?

A: Oh, that was a long time ago. I was 10. I sat down and thought about it for a long time and decided on the name Masha. I liked it. Bast, I chose later. I've always loved cats and wanted to find out who the goddess of cats is and discovered that in ancient Egypt, it was Bast.

Q: Do you consider yourself brave?

A: I hadn't thought about that. What is bravery? Because I came out? I wasn't trying to prove that I was brave. It was my choice. I'm a free person. Bravery and freedom are one and the same in my case. You have to be brave to be free. The freer a person is, the braver they have to be.

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