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Fallout of Anti-Gay Law Felt in Far East

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Yermoshkin standing in a classroom at Khabarovsk's School Number 32, which fired him from his teaching job.

KHABAROVSK — Before a nationwide ban on LGBT "propaganda" among minors took effect this summer, there was no homophobia in this far eastern city.

Or at least that is what Alexander Yermoshkin, the city's best-known gay rights and environmental activist, likes to say, not without a trace of bitterness.

Yermoshkin, 38, had for years been holding "rainbow flash mobs" on Khabarovsk's central Lenin Square in his time away from teaching geography to eight-graders. He had never been bothered by the authorities in either endeavor.

But a few days before the start of the 2013 school year, he was told that his 18-year career as a teacher would be terminated due to a letter signed by 678 residents of Khabarovsk, representing a group called the Movement Against Sexual Perversions. The group asked for Yermoshkin to be fired from his school because he could exert a negative influence on the

children and make them think that "nontraditional relations are as normal as traditional ones."

"The government in Moscow sent a signal that was interpreted by local people," Yermoshkin said with a sardonic grin, speaking in an interview at a local intelligentsia hangout called Book Cafe.

President Vladimir Putin gave assurances earlier this year that the anti-gay propaganda law would not affect LGBT people's job prospects, saying "the rights of people with nontraditional orientation are infringed upon neither in terms of profession nor salary level."

But Putin's statement does not appear to be accurate. In a recent poll conducted by the Russian group LGBT Network, 38 percent of respondents said they had experienced difficulties at work due to their sexual orientation.

Yermoshkin said he believed that by passing the national anti-gay law, Moscow sent out a signal to be interpreted by local officials across the country, and in Khabarovsk, located seven time zones east of the capital, the authorities decided that they needed to show that the message had been received.

For Yermoshkin and his fellow activists, the atmosphere in their city began to change earlier this year.

Starting back in 2008, Yermoshkin had organized the "rainbow flash mobs," at which activists would gather on Khabarovsk's main square at an appointed time and released rainbow-colored balloons in a show of gay pride. The events gradually attracted increasing numbers of participants, eventually gathering more than 100 people.

The flash mobs went peacefully until May of this year, when members of the local Stoltz Khabarovsk group, which takes inspiration from Nazi Germany's SS regiments, showed up, threatening and insulting the participants.

Yermoshkin has been harassed personally by Stoltz activists on several occasions. In August, he was followed home by a few aggressive young men from the group who yelled insults and threats of violence at him before police officers intervened.

The harassment has come as something of a shock to Yermoshkin, who is part of a small but thriving intelligentsia in Khabarovsk, where one can see many of the same trends among young people that have come to the fore in Moscow in recent years. Many in the city are curious about the outside world, traveling to neighboring China and Japan, with even more going to Moscow and St. Petersburg to study.

At Book Cafe, a bar occupies the first floor, while the second floor is home to a lecture hall where intellectuals deliver lectures on culture, literature and environmentalism to a cohort of inquisitive youth.

For most of his life, Yermoshkin had the opportunity not only to deliver lectures to bright young people in places like Book Cafe, but also to teach school students, a career brought to a sudden halt by the anti-gay law.

According to Yermoshkin, school principal Natalia Polyudchenko was pressured by city authorities either to leave her post or to make the gay teacher leave by all means possible.

When contacted by phone, school officials refused to comment on the situation.

The list of people who signed the document calling for his firing was not made public, and Yermoshkin said even he only knows the number of people, not their names.

Following his dismissal from the school, Yermoshkin suffered another humiliation when he was asked to leave his post as a lecturer at Far Eastern State Humanitarian University.

He is now suing School Number 32 for what he thinks was discriminatory treatment against him. He said he never received any official reprimands as a teacher, and his former students, who apparently were not aware of his sexual orientation before his firing, have expressed support for him. The city's hipster youth has also backed him, helping Yermoshkin gather about 11,000 signatures for a petition sent to Khabarovsk's education department.

In an effort to ease tensions over the situation, the city's then-top education official, Andrei Bazilevsky, summoned Yermoshkin for a meeting last month.

"What he told me was that various rumors circulate about me in the city. People say that I was seen on Karl Marx avenue, our main thoroughfare, with makeup on and in a garish gown," Yermoshkin said.

Bazilevsky, who had occupied his post since 2007, resigned Sept. 20, a move that Yermoshkin believes was not connected with his firing.

Last week, Yermoshkin was summoned to meet with an assistant to Bazilevsky's replacement. Accompanied by a lawyer, he arrived for the meeting, which to his surprise was to take place on a different floor than the education department, and was met by two men in civilian clothes. The pair, Yermoshkin said, had the conspicuous air of law enforcement officers.

The two men expressed their displeasure with the fact that Yermoshkin had shown up with a lawyer and threatened him with legal problems unless he sent the lawyer home. Faced with the threat, Yermoshkin decided to cancel the meeting and left.

Yermoshkin said that he was sure that the men were from the Federal Security Service and that his only defense against persecution is publicity.

"There is already a saying in Khabarovsk: What is scarier than being a gay teacher in Russia? Being a gay teacher who also works on environmental issues," he joked.

Being the most visible LGBT activist in town, Yermoshkin believes he was singled out. But instead of triggering a widespread anti-LGBT campaign, his case served only as a signal, receiving heavy coverage in the local press, he said.

"Now they think that I will cease my activities, but in fact the opposite is true: now I will have more time to act," he said.

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