

My Clash With Homophobes on Russian TV

By [Michael Bohm](#)

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When I was invited to appear on Arkady Mamontov's [talk show](#) "Special Correspondent" on Russia 1 to discuss gay rights last week, I jumped at the opportunity to express an alternative to the viewpoints offered by pro-Kremlin propagandists on state television.

Little did I know what was in store for me.

The show started with a 30-minute documentary-style film that claimed an aggressive, well-financed and organized Western homosexual lobby was forcing its values on Russia. If the country failed to defeat the threat, we were told, the number of homosexuals would increase. The film ended with a collage of scenes depicting rainbows in Russia — on a pharmacy, a supermarket, the covers of notebooks and on a sign in front of a business center. All of these rainbow symbols, it was explained, were part of an insidious Western conspiracy to propagandize homosexuality and corrupt Russia's fundamental moral and spiritual values.

After I said that the Kremlin's understanding of homosexuality is "primitive," the audience became enraged, screaming at me and demanding an apology. I felt like I was in the U.S. Deep South in the 1920s, speaking before an infuriated crowd of white segregations about equal rights for African-Americans.

After the film, Mamontov asked me, the only foreign guest on the show, the first question: "Why do you stick your nose in our business?" he said. "Why do you try to impose your alien values on us?"

The question struck me as odd. I am not a gay activist nor a representative of a Western government. I am an independent journalist who writes about what I observe, including what seems to me to be a backward attitude among many Russians toward gay people.

I began my reply by saying, "Russia is at a primitive stage in terms of its understanding of homosexuality."

My remarks were directed at Mikhail Degtyaryov, a State Duma deputy from the Liberal Democratic Party, who stood opposite me. Degtyaryov has authored a bill to create a state-funded program to "treat" homosexuality through psychological counseling so gays can "return to a normal life" as heterosexuals.

As I continued to speak, I noted that it has been about 50 years since the West classified homosexuality as a "disease," and no respected doctors or psychologists believe that homosexuals can be "treated."

I really wanted to ask Degtyaryov how he plans to treat homosexuals — through shock therapy, castration or the tried-and-true Soviet methods of prison terms and forced psychiatric confinement? Perhaps, however, he prefers more humane methods, such as mandatory Orthodox church education. Unfortunately, the show's host and my opponents were not interested in a serious discussion of the topic.

As soon as I pronounced the words "primitive stage," the studio audience of about 75 people tried to drown out the rest of my comments with an outburst of [boos, whistles and shouts](#).

Another guest who stood opposite me, television journalist Andrei Karaulov, leapt into the fray, demanding that I apologize for "insulting the Russian people."

I refused. Why should I apologize for an opinion backed up by fact? Mamontov had invited me onto his show to share my opinion. Then, after I attempted to express it, I was accused of poking my nose into Russia's business and was told to apologize for doing so.

When I refused, the crowd erupted again, shouting at me: ["Shame! Go home! Leave the studio!"](#)

Degtyaryov went even further, calling me a podonok, or scumbag. He also threatened to "vmazat" me, a crude slang word that means to "pound someone in the face."

I felt like I was in the U.S. Deep South in the 1920s, trying to make an appeal for equal rights for African-Americans in front of an enraged crowd of white racists and segregations.

The television talk show was a classic "only-in-Russia" moment that most foreigners experience in one form or another if they live in the country. Imagine, for example, if a Russian journalist were to go on a U.S. talk show and say that the U.S. was at a "primitive stage" because of its George W. Bush-era policy of torturing suspected terrorists, nobody would see his remarks as an insult. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that anyone would demand that he apologize to the American people, threaten to punch him in the face, or scream insults at him from the studio audience.

Notably, during the television show, Mamontov rarely used the term "homosexual" and stressed that "perverts" or "sodomites" are more appropriate words to describe gays. Furthermore, he agreed with the conspiracy theory presented in the film, saying, "Western Sodomites are trying to sneak into Russia and mobilize a protest movement among our own perverts."

[Mamontov wrapped up the show](#) by declaring that a meteorite that fell over Chelyabinsk in February was a warning from God about the danger of homosexuality in Russia. If homosexuality is allowed to continue unchecked, Mamontov warned, God might pour fire and brimstone down on Russia as he did on Sodom and Gomorrah according to the biblical narrative.

"God does not tolerate sin," Mamontov concluded in a menacing tone. "We need to oppose it [homosexuality] so that we stay alive."

Mamontov got it all wrong. The major threat to Russia is not homosexuality but state-sponsored ignorance, intolerance and hatred for minorities — particularly when it is spouted regularly on prime-time television.

To be fair, homosexuality was only decriminalized in Russia 20 years ago, so it might be too early to expect a sea change in society's views.

Indeed, state-sponsored segregation and racism existed for 100 years in the U.S. South after

slavery was abolished. But three main factors allowed the U.S. to finally eradicate state-sponsored racism. First, it had a powerful civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. that fought for and ultimately achieved equal rights. Second, official segregation and racism were limited to a relatively small number of states. Finally, the federal government — in particular Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson — supported the civil rights movement and, in the case of school desegregation in the South, even deployed federal troops to enforce equal rights for African-Americans.

Unfortunately, none of these political and social factors exists here. On the contrary, Kremlin spin doctors, lawmakers and the Russian Orthodox Church are actively propagandizing homosexuality as a Western disease, while state television is airing rabid homophobia that engenders even more intolerance among viewers. As long as this continues, Russia will remain stuck in that primitive stage.

Michael Bohm is opinion page editor of The Moscow Times.

Related coverage (Russian only):

Watch a [Dozhd television report](#) from Nov. 21 with Michael Bohm's side of the story. Watch Michael Bohm's full comments on [Moscow Times' YouTube channel](#) on why he chose not to apologize.

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