The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Film Festival Faces Bomb Threats and Cancellations

By Sergey Chernov

November 27, 2013



The opening of the Side by Side film festival was attended by police officers and nationalists as well as film lovers.

The Side By Side LGBT festival — now in its sixth year — has found itself the target of numerous bomb threats in St. Petersburg.

The police evacuated 1,000 people including 200 festival guests from the Warsaw Express trade and entertainment center, which contains the Prisma supermarket, the Karo Film movie theater, the Zal Ozhidaniya rock music venue and cafes, after receiving a bomb threat one hour before the opening scheduled for 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 21.

Audiences from both the festival and the club, where a concert by American rock band Mindless Self Indulgence was due to take place, were forced to remain outside the venue for two hours as the police inspected the building for explosive devices.

A group of about 20 nationalists was seen near the building but remained at a distance, apparently due to the presence of police. The group was observed taking video and photos of those gathered for the event.

The audience was readmitted to the venue at about 8:40 p.m. Foreign diplomats who were present included the Consul General of the Netherlands Jennes de Mol and Consul General of Norway Heidi Olufsen, Swedish Consul General Jan Nyberg, U.K. Deputy Consul General Ben Greenwood and Political/Economic Officer Chad Norberg of the U.S. Consulate General, according to the organizers.

The delay caused the shortening of the opening ceremony, the cancelation of a planned reception for festival dignitaries, and a Q&A session with Dennis Wielaert, the cinematographer of Diederik Ebbinge's 2013 film "Matterhorn," which was being screened at the opening.

St. Petersburg human rights commissioner Alexander Shishlov, who spoke before the screening, said the Constitution proclaims equality for all citizens and warned against all forms of xenophobia. He pointed out that the language of art is more convincing than that of protest rallies. Shishlov also referred to President Vladimir Putin, who spoke against discrimination of people with "nontraditional sexual orientation" at his meeting with the leaders of nonparliamentary parties on Nov. 20.

A group of ultra-nationalists that attempted to enter the event were kept out by security personnel and soon departed without incident. However, a confrontation was reported involving Anatoly Artyukh, the local chair of Orthodox nationalist organization Narodny Sobor (People's Assembly) and an alleged aide to anti-gay Legislative Assembly deputy Vitaly Milonov.

According to LGBT rights activist Kirill Kalugin, Artyukh attacked him two hours ahead of the festival opening at a cafe located in the Warsaw Express building, where Kalugin had come to speak to a journalist.

"[Artyukh] came to my table and first attempted to pour my own coffee on me and then to tear the earring out of my ear," Kalugin told The St. Petersburg Times.

"Once security guards came, he began shouting that I had tried to kill him."

Kalugin said he had reported Artyukh to the police for the attack. "I think he will be charged with criminal misconduct, and I hope to receive CCTV footage [of the attack]," he said.

Deputy Milonov condemned Side by Side via social media as being a festival of "pedophiles, homosexual creative workers and foreign agents [posing as] human rights activists."

"The festival should be stopped," Milonov wrote on Twitter. "If perverts are anxious to watch so-called films about their ilk, they can go to Paris." He also condemned Shishlov for taking part in the opening.

"Ombudsman Shishlov took part in a sodomite and pedophile get-together," Milonov wrote. "He has mistaken the perverts' sexual urges for human rights. He has mistaken St. Petersburg for Sodom. I want to invite Shishlov to the Legislative Assembly and ask him what country he

is working for."

On the morning of Saturday, Nov. 23, the police reported the detention of a man, described as a 37-year-old operator of a commercial firm, for making the bomb threat just ahead of the opening ceremonies. The police said he faced up to three years in prison for the "false report of a terrorist act."

However, that same evening, the festival was halted due to another bomb threat. About 120 viewers were evacuated at 8:20 p.m. on Saturday from the Mesto Deistviya co-working space, located at the Etazhi Loft Project art center on Ligovsky Prospekt, where the festival held its afternoon and evening screenings of shorts and documentaries as well as discussions on Friday and Saturday.

According to organizer Gulya Sultanova, the police orders to leave the building came at 8 p.m., during a screening of short films. Both viewers and festival staff had to wait for two hours while the police inspected the venue. Although the program continued once the audience was readmitted to the venue two hours later, a screening of Negar Azarbayjani's "Facing Mirrors," the first Iranian film to deal with transgender issues, was moved to a later date.

Following the incident, Mesto Deistviya cancelled its rental agreement with Side by Side citing a decision by the owners of Etazhi, which led to the cancellation of the festival's Sunday program. The program due to be screened at the venue on Wednesday, Nov. 27, was also canceled. It was later moved to the Green Lamp press club.

Two other possible incidents were also prevented by the festival, Sultanova told The St. Petersburg Times on Sunday. Three young men, who appeared to be neo-Nazis, tried to break in into the venue on Saturday with a video camera an hour ahead of the screenings. They were removed by security guards.

Later the same day, three apparent minors attempted to enter the festival, which is restricted to people over 18, something Sultanova believes could have been an attempt to have the festival blamed for promoting homosexuality to minors — an offense punishable under recent Russian legislation.

"[The anti-gay groups] act with total impunity. They have made it their objective to prevent us from holding the festival normally at any cost, which has led us to work closely with the police," Sultanova said.

"There was a police presence both on Friday and Saturday. They had information that attacks were being planned. Our opponents realized that they could not carry out the attacks due to the presence of the police and our security guards."

On Monday, a third bomb threat caused the evacuation of the Skorokhod theater at about 9:50 p.m., 20 minutes before the end of a screening of "Keep the Lights On," the 2013 drama by American director Ira Sachs. As the police were checking the building, the organizers took the audience to watch the rest of the film in a nearby gay bar.

The 10-day festival is due to continue during the rest of the week at Skorokhod theater and concert venue, Jam Hall movie theater and Green Lamp. It is scheduled to close with

the screening of Gus Van Sant's 2008 film "Milk," based on the life story of pioneering gay San Francisco politician Harvey Milk. Director Van Sant is due to take part in the event at Skorokhod on Saturday, Nov. 30.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/11/27/film-festival-faces-bomb-threats-and-cancellations-a29975