

Homophobia Distracts From Economic Woes

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When President Vladimir Putin ramped up homophobic rhetoric last week, saying gays will be not harassed at the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi so long as they stay away from children, it is easy to overlook that Russia's campaign against LGBT people is, and has always been, a distraction from serious and growing problems in the Russian economy.

Russia's economic boom from 2000 to 2008 was chiefly based on rising energy prices. Now energy prices have stabilized, and Russia has entered a period of economic stagnation. As a result, the Kremlin has to maintain control over Russians without being able to increase their living standards. Putin's response to this has been to create and exaggerate external threats to the country as a means of stimulating internal solidarity. Today, one such threat is the LGBT community.

In Putin's world view, a strong, conservative Russian state is facing down Western-sponsored liberalism. Such liberalism, it is said, is a chaotic and dangerous import, and entirely

antithetical to "traditional" Russian values. This view is strongly supported by the resurgent Orthodox Church, which rejects "decadent" Western understandings of sexuality in favor of an emphasis on the conventional family.

Given the problematic history of homosexuality in Russia, it has not been difficult for the Kremlin to portray the LGBT community as an external contagion that needs to be cleansed from society. A public opinion poll conducted last year, for example, found that 74 percent of Russians believed homosexuality is unacceptable. More worryingly, 5 percent of Russians said homosexuals should be "liquidated."

As the Russian economy stagnates, Putin's impulse to distract people with the scapegoating of minorities will increase at precisely the time when Western countries' ability to protect them is weak.

There is, however, one opportunity. Russia will chair the Group of Eight throughout 2014 and host its summit in Sochi in June. If the West wants to work with Russia to help the country attain its goal of economic development, it should stress that the Kremlin's homophobic policies are outdated and deeply offensive.

This would likely go much further in alleviating pressure on the country's LGBT community than any symbolic act of not attending the Winter Olympic Games could ever do.

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