

Life Goes On for Gays in Olympic Sochi

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Andrei Ozerny, 24, smoking a cigarette at the bar while sitting in Sochi's Mayak club, where he is a regular. **David Goldman**

SOCHI — The mascara-lined eyes of a petite man dressed in a tuxedo greet visitors after they buzz at the armor-plated door of a one-story building.

Welcome to the Mayak cabaret, the best-known gay club in Sochi, and one of the few safe places for gays in the Olympic host city to meet.

Most of Mayak's clients shy away from cameras and plead for anonymity. Not so Andrei Ozyorny, a 24-year-old Sochi native. Ozyorny, one of Mayak's regulars, has recently done something that he feels proud of and which makes his partner fear for his business and safety.

When Sochi's mayor said in an interview last month that there were no gays in Sochi, Ozyorny wrote a letter to the mayor that was published in prominent Russian media. "Nice to meet you, I am one of them," Ozyorny wrote.

Russia adopted a law last year prohibiting vaguely defined propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations and pedophilia. The legislation makes it illegal to disseminate information to children even if it merely shows that gay people are just like everybody else.

Russian authorities insist that the law is aimed at protecting children from harmful influences. Activists, however, insist that the law is fostering homophobia in Russia. Vigilante homophobes from a movement called Occupy Pedophilia have been using gay dating websites to lure young men and boys into meetings, where they taunt them on camera and then publish the videos online.

World leaders and journalists have confronted President Vladimir Putin with questions about gay discrimination in Russia. Putin has been stubbornly equating homosexuality with pedophilia even though he has assured gays that they will be welcome in Sochi, but only if they "leave the kids alone."

"[The law] instills in people's minds that these are synonymous terms: if you are gay, you are a pedophile," Ozyorny said.

Ozyorny, who runs a travel agency with his partner, had a hard enough time as a teenager coming to terms with his sexuality. Now he is concerned the law will make life even more difficult for Russian teenagers.

"They need someone to tell them: you are all right, you are not sick, you a're not a pervert, this is the way you were born, you have to accept this," he said. "You cannot do this anymore. Now this is a crime."

At Mayak, packed on Saturday night, gay men and women steered away from discussing the law, preferring to enjoy life, closeted as it is. About 100 people were chatting at the bar, sitting in armchairs or dancing. Couples were sharing kisses. Everyone was waiting for the club's specialty: a drag show. At 1:30 a.m. on Sunday, the music stopped and the show began.

Backstage, the star of the show, Miss Zhuzha, was adding the final touches to her make-up. The 44-year-old female impersonator, who has been performing for 20 years, served two years in the Soviet army in East Germany as Andrei Sarkisian.

The crowd at Mayak mostly avoided politics and hardly anyone was contemplating a public protest.

Ozyorny's partner Georgy, 32, said he does not feel affected by the anti-gay law but finds it meaningless. "I do not understand the wording of the law," he said. "Do I go around schools saying: I am gay, follow me? How can you impose it on anyone?"

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