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Russia's 'Gay Propaganda' Law One Year On

By Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber

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A photo from Moscow LGBT rally taken on June 12, 2012. Since the adoption of “gay propaganda” law, the violent attacks against LGBT people in Russia have increased.

In the year that has passed since Russia adopted a law banning "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations among minors," the country's LGBT community has witnessed the erosion of its rights and freedoms, human rights activists said.

Since President Vladimir Putin approved the so-called "gay propaganda" law on June 29, 2013, only four individuals have been fined for violating it, according to Tanya Lokshina, program director and senior researcher at Human Rights Watch Russia. But, Lokshina added, the rarity of the law's formal enforcement inadequately reflects its broader consequences for Russia's LGBT community.

"Only a few people were fined throughout the year and this might not seem to be much of a problem," Lokshina said. "But the fines are not what this law is about. This law is not only

contrary to Russia's international obligations but has also contributed to anti-gay violence and to creating a hostile environment for LGBT people in the country. It has contributed to stigmatizing LGBT individuals as unnatural, perverse and as acceptable targets."

Putin has distanced himself from the issue of LGBT rights in the country. In January, he said that he was "not prejudiced in any way" and that he even had gay friends. He has also said publicly that gays face no discrimination in Russia.

Since the adoption of the country's "gay propaganda" law, Human Rights Watch has observed an increase in violent attacks carried out against LGBT people in Russia.

Elton John announced plans to visit Russia and have a word with President Vladimir Putin over the gay-rights situation in the country during an interview with SkyNews on Sunday.

"I am going to Russia in December, or November. I will try and meet Putin and I will try and talk to him. I don't know what good it will do, but unless you build a bridge ... it is no good putting up a wall and saying 'I am not talking to these people.' The only way things get solved is by talking to people," John said in the interview.

U.S. advocacy group Human Rights Campaign reported that at least two men were killed because of their sexual orientation in Russia in the summer of 2013 alone and that others had been assaulted, pelted with eggs and blinded in air gun attacks in the past year.

The level of homophobia in the country had "greatly worsened" since the adoption of the law, Elena Volkova, an LGBT rights activist, told The Moscow Times.

"The law has not only made things worse for the LGBT community, it has also coincided with an increase in the number of attacks against gays — real attacks with real deaths," she said. "It is clear this law was conceived to foment homophobia in Russian society."

But for more conservative factions of Russian society, the law's first anniversary is viewed as a triumph of Russian cultural specificities over what is perceived as Western decadence.

"This law is useful for everybody," Vitaly Milonov, the St. Petersburg MP who spearheaded the "gay propaganda" legislation, told The Moscow Times on Sunday. "It is a declarative law that expresses what we [Russia] value and what we do not. Unfortunately Europe has forgotten the story of Sodom and Gomorrah [a metaphor for vice and homosexuality]."

In accordance with the law, any distribution of information among minors that is "aimed

at creating nontraditional sexual attitudes, makes nontraditional sexual relations attractive, equates the social value of traditional and nontraditional sexual relations or creates an interest in nontraditional sexual relations" can be punishable by a fine.

Ordinary Russians found guilty of violating the law can be fined 4,000 to 5,000 rubles ($119 to $148), while legal entities can either be fined 800,000 to 1,000,000 rubles ($23,700 to $29,630) or ordered to cease their operations for up to 90 days.

The legislation has also compelled certain members of Russia's LGBT community to leave the country. Arkady Gyngazov, the former manager of a Moscow gay club, said he would be seeking asylum in the U.S. because he feared for his safety. Musicians Oleg Dussayev and Dmitry Stepanov fled to New York from Moscow after being beaten in October. LGBT activist Vyacheslav Revin applied for political asylum to the U.S. in late 2013.

The adoption of the law has also sparked an online witch-hunt for gay teachers. An organization known at "Parents of Russia" claimed it had 1,500 activists who search for pro-LGBT teachers online. At least six teachers and college professors have been fired or investigated for their sexual orientation, according to Human Rights Campaign.

Members of Russian LGBT movements have also faced formal and informal pressure to terminate their activities.

Elvina Yuvakayeva, a member of the organizing committee of the Russia's first Open Games, said that the state's administrative resources had been mobilized to sabotage the event. The Open Games, a small-scale athletic festival geared toward the LGBT community, was held in Moscow in February.

"Venues would cancel on us at the last minute, hotels refused our bookings after receiving phone calls from authorities saying they should turn us down," she claimed. "The police would always show up where we were. We were pressured to cancel our activities in all kinds of ways."

A man who identified himself as a Federal Security Service employee cut short the basketball event of the Open Games after apparently detonating a smoke bomb at the venue, according to the organizing committee.

"When Putin responds that LGBT people are not discriminated against in Russia, this is not an adequate answer," Yuvakayeva said. "Because there is discrimination."

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Contact the author at g.tetraultfarber@imedia.ru

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