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Swedish Rocker to Front St. Petersburg's Queerfest

By Sergei Chernov

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ST. PETERSBURG — Queerfest, an annual celebration of LGBT art and culture has returned to downtown St. Petersburg after being forced last year to relocate to the city's northeastern outskirts.

Due to an increase in hostility toward the LGBT community in Russia last year, downtown venues refused to host the festival, citing reasons such as repair works, being booked or simply failing to answer requests.

But this year, Queerfest faced a different problem: getting an international artist to headline its music program. That is, until it contacted Jenny Wilson, the Swedish rock singer, who agreed to participate on the spot.

"It has never been so hard before," organizer Anna Anisimova told The Moscow Times.

"Many were prepared to support Queerfest with video or written messages, but did not want to come and perform. They said they could support us from Europe, but they were not prepared to come to Russia and make a statement here.

"We don't ask people to say anything from the stage. The very fact that a person participates in such a festival is a statement in itself. It is not a simple performance, not a commercial concert. Consequently, 99 percent of those we contacted did not want to go to Russia and perform at such an event at this point."

According to Anisimova, artists were scared off by the ambiguously worded law forbidding "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors" passed in Russia last year.

"There is no clear understanding of what is seen as 'gay propaganda' in Russia," she said.

The artists are "prepared to show support and express their point of view, but without violating the law. Since they don't understand what may be seen as a violation, it's easier for them not to come at all. However, as strong as their support may be, they refuse to violate the law of the country they are coming to. They don't understand what 'gay propaganda' is and how they may be accused of violating the law. We don't even know what to say. We can't say to them with confidence, 'No, you won't be accused of 'propaganda.'"

Wilson, who performed at St. Petersburg's Stereoleto music festival in July, will headline the festival's closing event, "St. Petersburg Without Homophobia," on Sept. 28.

"Jenny Wilson is an activist in Sweden. She has performed a lot at human rights events and supported conferences, made statements in Sweden, but not in Russia," Anisimova said.

This year's Queerfest, whose venues were kept secret until this week to save them from being pressured by the authorities like in previous years, will be mostly held at Freedom, a new art space right behind the Kazan Cathedral.

Queerfest will be held from Sept. 18 to 28. See www.queerfest.ru for more details.

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