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Image of Gay Russian Couple Wins World Press Photo

By Allison Quinn

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A photograph of a gay male couple in St. Petersburg has been selected as the World Press Photo of the Year 2014.

The photograph, taken by Danish photographer Mads Nissen, shows the couple, Jon and Alex, in what World Press Photo described in a press release as "an intimate moment."

Members of the jury praised Nissen's photo for being "aesthetically powerful" while at the same time confronting the global issue of discrimination against gay people.

"Life for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people is becoming increasingly difficult in Russia," World Press Photo organizers wrote in the press release. Activists in Russia say the adoption of a controversial "anti-gay" propaganda law in 2013 has led to an atmosphere of intolerance that includes discrimination and violent attacks.

That law prohibits the promotion of "nontraditional" sexual relations to minors. Activists say

the law has given the green light to homophobic vigilantes to carry out hate crime attacks across the country. A report by Human Rights Watch published in December said there had been an increase in anti-gay violence since the adoption of the law, with documented cases of torture of a transgender woman and a gay man.

Critics of the law have also said that it is too vaguely defined, allowing authorities to arbitrarily decide what constitutes the "promotion" of nontraditional sexual relations.

If the winning photo is deemed to be gay propaganda, any exhibition at which it is displayed in Russia will have to limit entrance to adults. Russian cities have previously been among those in the 45 countries visited by an exhibition of all the prize-winning photos in the contest.

Nissen's photo was selected because it "has a message about love being an answer in the context of all that is going on in the world. It is about love as a global issue, in a way that transcends homosexuality," Alessia Glaviano, a member of the jury, said in the press release.

Michele McNally, head of the jury and director of photography at The New York Times, said the image had "the potential to become iconic."

Several other Russian photographers won awards in the contest, including Sergei Ilnitsky, whose photo from the conflict-ravaged Ukrainian city of Donetsk took first prize in the General News category. The image shows a kitchen table covered in shards of glass and drops of blood in the aftermath of artillery fire between pro-Russian separatists and Kiev forces in the area.

Another prominent Russian photographer, Sergei Ponomaryov, took third place in the same category for his image of two grief-stricken brothers in Gaza reacting to their father's death after shelling by Israeli forces.

The photo contest drew entries from across the globe, with a total of 97,912 images submitted. The first World Press Photo 2014 exhibition is slated to open in Amsterdam on April 18.

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