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Latvia to Host Major Gay Pride Festival EuroPride in June

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Religion and politics are likely to make for a heady mix in Riga this summer when a former Soviet state plays host to Europe's highest-profile gay pride event for the first time.

The annual EuroPride festival will descend in mid-June on the capital of Latvia, a country forging ever closer ties with the West but still struggling with a legacy of intolerance towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

One in four locals takes a critical view of homosexuality and just one in 25 backs the decision to host EuroPride, according to a survey compiled last year by Latvian market researchers SKDS.

That mistrust reflects the country's conservative religious heritage, encompassing both the Western and Orthodox variants of Christianity, as much as its past as a satellite of neighbouring Russia, where a clampdown on LGBT rights is in full swing.

For Kaspars Zalitis, co-chair of EuroPride 2015, Riga's welcome may be less warm than that

offered by some previous host cities, but he still expects between 2,000 and 5,000 to attend an event he hopes might become a catalyst for change.

"Why not create history and make it in Riga, even if some parts of Latvian society are not ready... Nobody has ever been ready for big changes," he said.

The event will take place from June 15-21 and with feature lectures, exhibitions and a film festival; the event's centrepiece will be a parade through Riga's streets on June 20.

Zalitis said interest was building across many other former Soviet states, including Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as in Russia.

"This is our focus — to show that even if Latvia is not the best place for LGBT rights, compared to these countries, we live in a paradise," he said. "Progress is possible."

Sergey Alexeenko, head of Russian regional LGBT rights group Maximum from the northern city of Murmansk, said Russian society had become more hostile toward homosexuals.

"If in the past it (the attitude) was just a smile or verbal abuse now it has transformed into a physical threat," said Alexeenko, whose group is frequently threatened but who hopes to find time to attend EuroPride.

That hostility has grown since 2013, when Russia adopted a law banning any person from espousing non-critical views of the LGBT community in the presence of minors — legislation that around 70 percent support, according to a 2013 survey by independent Russian pollster the Levada Center.

While Moscow has taken a backward step on LGBT rights, the decision by Latvia's foreign minister to declare his homosexuality, and Estonia's recognition of all civil unions regardless of gender mix suggests its Baltic neighbors are trying to move forward.

Annija Sprivule, a 27-year-old Latvian in the tourism trade, said her experience of smaller gay pride events in Riga suggested getting her compatriots to join in was the main challenge.

"There are people who still stand aside and just look," she said. "Definitely there are going to be a lot of people coming from abroad and I think the biggest problem at the moment is to attract local society to participate as well."

Zalitis said some locals would protest, but that was simply a manifestation of the same political freedoms that allowed the Riga city authorities to give EuroPride their blessing.

"If they (protesters) do it within the law - it's ok, it's freedom of expression" he said.

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