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Sorry, Mum, Still Gay - Group Offers Support for Russians With LGBT Children

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The offices of Vykhod (Way Out), an LGBT activist group that hosts support meetings for parents of gay children.

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Meetings of the Parents' Club take place on the third Monday of every month in the office of the LGBT activist group Vykhod (Russian for "Exit" or "Way Out"). It is a typical building in central St. Petersburg, but getting into the gathering isn't easy if you don't know the address, floor and room number. There are neither signs outside, nor markings inside. There is only the guard who asks you to show your passport and tells you where to go. Gathered there are parents of gay children. Ilnur Sharafiev stopped in on one such Parents' Club meeting for a Meduza special report.

The club has a few rules. Organizers can refuse entry to any individual without explanation. They adopted this policy after a visit from Anatoly Artiukh, the coordinator of the St.

Petersburg branch of the conservative movement Narodny Sobor ("People's Assembly"). According to activists from Vykhod (not to be confused with the similarly named fund for autism assistance), nothing serious happened. "He just shouted something and left," they say. In a meeting, the only person allowed to speak is the one holding a plush blue dragon doll. Interrupting and criticizing are forbidden, you only speak for yourself, and turning off your phone is preferred.

First, everybody introduces themselves: sitting and holding hands are Valentina and her daughter, Olga, who live in different cities and haven't seen each other in a long time. Three mothers, Nina, Marianna and Elan, have been in the Parents' Club since its founding. A few of the mothers are here for the first time, looking over the people around them with curiosity or modestly looking at the floor. In spite of the fact that it's a club for parents, there are more young women and men at the meeting. And not a single father.

"My mother got very sick recently. I took care of her, and she did not resist," says Sergei, a young man of 30 with the plush toy in his hands. "At least, she didn't yell like she did earlier: 'Ew, gay, get away from me and don't touch my things!'" Seventeen people are listening to him, sitting in a circle wearing handwritten name tags. "Now that mom doesn't reject me, it means she can't completely not care," Sergei goes on. But so far talking with his mother happens rarely. She wanted to throw out the brochures and books from Vykhod that he couldn't give her personally but left in her mailbox, but a neighbor asked to read them.

Nina, one of the club's veterans, asks to be passed the toy. She thinks that you have to try to talk to your parents regardless of the situation. "You have to explain to them that gays aren't the people that they're talking about on television. It takes them a lot of time to become aware of what's happening. Remember how long you spent doing the same. Everybody loves their kids. Everybody will get it."

Immediately a few people object, recalling stories in which parents kicked out their kids or sent them away to be healed of their homosexuality.

"Fine, not everybody, but the majority," Nina corrects herself. "Sometimes they're not ready to read the flyers you bring. That's why it's better to enter a dialogue. I often said to my son, 'I want to ask you something, but I don't know how to put it.' He did it for me, 'Is that what you wanted to ask me?' Honestly, I usually answered, 'Well that too, but I meant something totally different,'" she laughs.

They pass the dragon to Nikita. He thinks that those who hide their homosexuality from their parents are mostly protecting themselves. "I get the impression that people handle acute stress better than a chronic, negative condition. Keeping someone in the dark, being constantly unhappy — for a parent that's harder than coming out," he says.

At Parents' Club meetings discussing and asking anything is allowed. Somebody shares what has happened in his life over the last month, others recommend LGBT-themed films. Those who still haven't made the decision to come out ask other moms how best to handle it or whether it's worth it at all.

Usually the most expressive are those who aren't here for their first time. Newcomers to the Parents' Club — whether parents or their kids — do more listening. Only toward the end

of the meeting does the toy make it around to Sasha; he recently moved to St. Petersburg. "I lived for a long time in a small village. The word 'gay' is horrible there, something they can grab you on the street and kill you for," he says. "All of my relatives, they're old-fashioned. I'm worried that if I tell my mother, she'll blame herself. Has that sort of thing happened to any of you?"

The others respond that this is one of the phases of acceptance, that it has to be this way. They advise him to prepare himself and consider the potential consequences. From their experience, coming out to a mother living in a small town is tough.

The club meeting wraps up after 2 1/2 hours. Yelena looks at Valentina and Olga, who held hands for the entire meeting, and smiles. Then she turns her head towards the window and says softly, "I don't want to go back out there."

Yelena: A Mom Crusading for LGBT Acceptance

Yelena became an activist because she thinks that parents of LGBT children can understand people who find themselves in similar situations better than anyone else. Five years ago, her son Dmitry returned from Japan after living and working there for 10 years. Yelena immediately understood that something was troubling her son, at first attributing it to his readaptation to Russian reality. When Dmitry started his coming out with the words, "I want you to hear me, but this might startle you," Yelena thought he might have some sort of disease. Or maybe he had done something he was ashamed of? Yelena had dozens of scenarios running through her mind, but the possibility her son might be gay was unthinkable.

"After our conversation it was terrible and sad," Yelena recalls. "It seemed like I was the only mother who had to come to grips with this. I couldn't just say right away, 'Imagine that!' That would have been dishonest, but I tried not to show him that I was deeply upset. My son's comment was sobering and comforting: 'I am so much happier now than when I was pretending.'"

Dmitry brought her along to a meeting of the Parents' Club a year after his coming out. Yelena remembers her expectations; she figured her son was taking her to some semi-underground place where "gays dwell." Now she laughs, "When I saw that nobody there was prancing around in pantyhose, I was a bit surprised." Before long, Yelena became a club activist, and she now helps other parents accept their LGBT children.

"They usually come to us with horror in their eyes. They look as if they've experienced some family tragedy, usually they're silent. We ask them to relax and look at us: do we look that crushed? It shows that being a parent of an LGBT person isn't fatal, that you can live with it and even be happy," she says.

According to Yelena, "acceptance" can take months or even years. "It's only in movies that you see mothers taking their child's homosexuality easily and immediately." But if a parent keeps coming to the club, there is always progress. "It's noticeable that the mother unwinds a bit, smiles, becomes ready to discuss the situation — that's already good. It means that she no longer considers her child lost." It is true, however, that parents most often come to a meeting, keep quiet, thank them for their help, and do not return. There have been cases

in which they've called the group a cult, and explained that they fail to see the importance of Russia's law against "homosexual propaganda." Mothers in the club, meanwhile, think the law isn't just their problem, but a problem facing the entire society. If television is constantly denouncing gays, why should anybody believe a handful of people who disagree?

Marina: A Mother's Journey Through the 5 Phases of Acceptance

"After the coming out they lose their heads, the old world is shattered along with plans for the child's future," says Marina Melnik, founder of the Parents' Club. Her son, Roman, told her about his homosexuality six years ago. She explains that every parent in that situation goes through five phases of acceptance. She uses her experience as an example. "The shock lasted for about 10 days. Then there's denial, though I practically didn't have that. This is when you try to talk the child out of it, prove to them that it is all imagined. Pain arose immediately for me. Once we were sitting in a cafe and Roma turned his attention to an attractive guy — it hurt me. For some reason I wanted him to have looked at a pretty girl. Then I blamed myself for a long time. Did I not love him enough or love him too much? Was I too harsh or too lax? Maybe I bought him the wrong toy as a child — a stuffed animal instead of a car?"

A year and a half after her son's confession, Marina decided to become an activist. Together with other mothers whom she met at the LGBT film festival Side by Side, she founded the Parents' Club. She remembers that four people came to the first meeting — all of them were unsure what to do with their feelings of guilt. "After I talked to other mothers, that feeling finally left me," Marina says.

Then she entered the final phase: acceptance, after which another coming out follows, this time from the parent. "I was terrified to tell my neighbors, those around me," Marina recalls. "That took almost a year."

The club's activists say this is a common situation. The neighbor of one young man suspected he was gay, and his mother started specifically inviting that neighbor over for tea. Then she invited a girl she knew and asked her to act as if she was a couple with her son. "The Parents' Club is the only place where they don't have to lie or feel embarrassed," she says.



Sergey Chernov / MT

Protesters state: “Parental love does not depend on a child’s orientation!”

Igor: Coming Out to a Family That Never Utters the Word 'Gay'

Igor was able to bring his mother to the Parents' Club two years after he came out. He says that before then, discussing the LGBT issue was difficult.

"In our family nobody said the word 'gay.' Mom used the word *goluboi* [a common slang term for "gay," literally meaning "light blue"], and dad said *pederast* [a slur similar to the word "fag"]," Igor remembers from his childhood. He describes his mother and father as having different views. His father is an Orthodox, nationalist patriot. His favorite writer is Grigory Klimov, author of the saying, "If all isn't well between your legs, it isn't well in your head." His mother is apolitical, balanced, and "more liberal in a cultural sense."

"When I was little, I didn't understand how it was possible to have feelings for a person of the same sex. I asked my mom what sexual orientation was, and she answered, 'It's who is *goluboi* and who isn't.' What *goluboi* meant, she didn't explain. At age 11, from family conversations, it was understood that gay people were perverts who practice anal sex."

Igor says his father raised him according to the Orthodox canon. Together they read the "Lives of the Saints" and prayed in the morning and evening, before and after eating.

Then he frequently went to confession, took communion, and attended Sunday school. His coming out happened unexpectedly. In September 2007, he left his home village in the Pskov region to study in St. Petersburg, and returned in October to visit his parents. His mom casually asked, "You're so nervous, did you fall in love?" Igor answered honestly that he had. "With a man or a woman?" his mother unexpectedly followed up. It became clear that his lover was a man. They cried together, but quickly reached their peace. In a week, Igor went back to St. Petersburg, and it wasn't long before his father found out the news.

"Dad always reacts this way to things that don't fit into his worldview. He breaks dishes, smashes doors," Igor says. "Since I was in Petersburg, the issue only came to shouting by telephone. He said that homosexuality is a great sin, and demanded that I return to the true path."

Soon Igor agreed to come home at his father's request, to attend confession in his presence. He told the priest that he had fallen in love with a young man. The priest advised him to "correct the disease of his spirit" and repent; Igor protested. "Formally he absolved me of my sins, but it was obvious that we were both unhappy with the outcome. After that I was irrevocably disappointed in the church. That was the last time I participated in confession, and I feel fine," he laughs.

Half a year ago, Igor introduced his parents to his partner. "There were no special rituals, I just introduced him as usual: 'I live with this person, and these are my parents, you have to live with this.'"

Now they send each other greetings. Recently Igor was talking to his father by Skype and mentioned his boyfriend. "His face didn't even flinch, he reacted completely normally."

The relationship with his mother is simpler: Igor is confident that if she watched less television, lived with him in St. Petersburg, and talked with the parents in the club, then she would accept him quickly.

Dmitry: Failed Efforts to Come Out of the Closet

For Russia, this remains a rarity — there are no exact statistics, but activists with the Parents' Club estimate that for every LGBT-accepting family there are five unaccepting.

Dmitry belongs to one of those five. After his second unsuccessful coming out, he took on a girlfriend as a cover. "Mama knows Ira well, so there are no questions asked," he says with a smile.

His first coming out was at age 18. Dmitry admits thinking everything would pass over well, so he didn't especially prepare for the conversation. At the outset his mother really did react calmly, but cried after a few hours and a scene unfolded. "She screamed about HIV, about the fact that I would never have children," he recalls. After that, Dmitry decided not to tell his mother about his personal life. If he went out with a guy, he would tell her he'd agreed to meet up with friends. She gradually forgot about her son's homosexuality, and their relationship improved again.

Dmitry couldn't escape the feeling that his mother did not understand him, since he had been

unable to explain everything to her properly. So after three years passed, he decided to try coming out a second time. This time he was better prepared — he took brochures from the advocacy group Vykhod and thought out answers to questions his mother might ask. But after the words "I'm sorry, mom, but I'm still gay. That we avoid the issue doesn't change anything," the argument started all over again.

Dmitry didn't know what to do next. He came to gatherings of the Parents' Club a few times, where they told him to show his mother the film "Prayers for Bobby." It is a story of a gay man who killed himself because his religious parents refused to accept him. "First I watched it by myself and cried; it was very painful," Dmitry says. "Then I watched it with my mom, but couldn't understand her reaction. She said the parents had lost their son because they didn't believe strongly enough in God or pray enough."

Soon icons began appearing in their apartment, along with calendars featuring the Virgin Mary, Orthodox magazines, and brochures about monasteries. Dmitry says they didn't interact for a long time, and that's apparently when his mother decided the church was the only path to saving her son. "I came home and already in the stairwell I could smell burnt incense," he tells. "Mom could have spent her last penny on new calendars, crosses, Bibles, arranging them on the tables, and hanging them from the walls. I asked, why? She responded by speaking of bad influences, a spiritual haze, and the wrong path. Our apartment began to look like a church shop." The arguments became more frequent, and after one of them his mother decided to move in with a friend. She came back in a month, having heard that her cat's ears were hurting.

Dmitry isn't going to come out a third time. He has already been dating Grigory for 2 1/2 years, yet he tells his mother that he has a girlfriend named Irina. Just as after his first coming out, they avoid the topic of homosexuality. The crosses and Bibles gradually disappeared from the apartment — some of it was donated, the rest is in boxes in the attic. His mother stopped going to church.

Leading a double life takes a lot of effort; to talk on the phone Dmitry shuts himself in the bathroom and turns on the water. If his mother asks something about his personal life, he tells it like it is, only changing the name Grigory to Irina. Last year he and Grigory went to Egypt, but he could only show his mother pictures of the hotel, the beach and nature. "The Parents' Club does not approve of legends like mine. They suggested that I come to the group with her, but I'm afraid of her reaction," Dmitry says. "If she thinks that religion helped me, so be it. What matters is that mom is happy and satisfied."

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