

# A Temporary Thaw for Russia's LGBT Community

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**Anton Vaganov / Reuters**

In late 2016, Alexander Stein began posting about LGBT issues on Facebook and Russian social media site Vkontakte. He shared links to news articles on gay marriage laws in European countries and images promoting tolerance.

It wasn't long before there was a backlash.

"I started getting messages through SMS, Facebook and other platforms," Stein told The Moscow Times under a pseudonym. The messages warned him to stop posting his liberal opinions, and that he would pay the price for supporting gay rights.

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Stein, a chemistry student completing a doctorate at the Moscow Technological University, stopped speaking out because he didn't feel it was safe. Friendships with Americans which he thought could bring him unwanted attention were put on the back burner.

Since the Russian government passed its infamous law banning "gay propaganda among minors" in 2013, any public affiliation with LGBT issues is risky. Rainbow flags don't often — if ever — make it out the door.

Hate crimes against LGBT people have doubled in the five years after the law was passed, the majority of which have been murders, research by the Center for Independent Social Research found.

Unsurprisingly, some fans were concerned when Russia won the bid for the World Cup: Could the country safely welcome gay fans? The concerns were buoyed by reports of a rise in homophobic chants at football matches and evidence of targeted detentions and killings of gay men in Russia's Chechen republic.

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin vowed that those who traveled to Russia for the tournament would find a country free of discrimination. For its part, FIFA also promised a monitoring system to detect discrimination in real-time at games.

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But Stein, a football fan, isn't convinced that Russia's new tolerance will outlive the tournament.

While foreign fans might be safe during the month-long World Cup, the situation will continue to be dire for LGBT Russians, he said.

"It was a bad idea to host the World Cup in a place where the state openly discriminates, intimidates and kills LGBT people," he said. "They want to pretend that they treat people nicely here, but it's a lie."

## **Be prepared**

In advance of the tournament, local and international groups issued advice to traveling LGBT fans on what to expect and how to behave in Russia.

The Football Against Racism in Europe network (FARE) released a guide plainly telling LGBT fans that while "it is not a crime or punishable offense to be gay in Russia, the LGBT+ community faces both exclusion and discrimination."

"Periodic outbursts of homophobic violence have also been on the rise since 2013," the report said.

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FARE also opened two Diversity Houses — one in Moscow and one in St. Petersburg — to offer what it referred to as “safe spaces” to challenge racism and homophobia in Russia. The Russian LGBT Sports Federation, headed by Russian football player Alexander Agapov, will hold a series of inclusive amateur football games, in partnership with FARE, during the tournament. And ComingOut, a St. Petersburg-based group, has set up a hotline for LGBT World Cup fans to access legal or psychological help during the World Cup.

For Joe White, however, it took a signal from higher up to convince him to buy a ticket.

Speaking to The Moscow Times, White, an LGBT English football fan, said the public promises of protection from Putin and FIFA officials made it possible for him to travel to Russia for the tournament.

“Having that kind of added protection as foreigners visiting for the World Cup is definitely an opportunity to take,” said White, who is a cofounder of Three Lions Pride, the LGBT fan group for the England team.

But, he said, Russia still has plenty of progress to make. He pointed to the increasing number of LGBT fan groups for English Premier League teams as an example of what he would like to see in Russia. “Football is a massive opportunity for social change and accepting diversity in all of its beauty.”

Other foreign fans say no amount of promises would make them feel safe in Russia.

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Adrian Hyrylainen-Trett, a candidate for the Liberal Democrats in the UK and an openly HIV+ advocate, said he chose not to come to the World Cup because it felt “just too dangerous.”

Not only would Hyrylainen-Trett be worried about entering the country as an open supporter of LGBT rights, he and his husband “would have to tone down or act in a different way and not be our normal exuberant selves because we wouldn’t want to offend local Russians, and that is very sad,” he said.

Since the World Cup started, an apparent thaw has swept across the country: Football player Agapov waved a rainbow flag at the opening match and a British LGBT activist named Di Cunningham also flew a gay flag at an England match, after confirming with Russian authorities that it would be allowed.

But outside the stadium, public LGBT events were met with a harsher hand.

The opening of the Diversity House in St. Petersburg was [delayed](#) after the landlord of its original premises pulled out only hours before the opening, forcing the organizers to scramble for another venue. The project’s coordinator said the move was “politically motivated.”

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And gay rights activist Peter Tatchell was detained after holding a one-man protest on the opening day of the World Cup.

“I reasoned that this was the ideal moment to do a protest that would secure worldwide media coverage about the victimization of Russian and, in particular, Chechen LGBT+ people,” Tatchell told The Moscow Times in a statement. “There can be no normal sporting relations with an abnormal regime.”

## **After the Cup**

For some Russians, the thaw around LGBT issues during the World Cup, while likely short-lived, also offers a glimpse into what Russia could be.

On a Sunday afternoon during the World Cup, six people in Moscow’s Diversity House sat on bean bags that look like giant footballs, on a room with the floor carpeted in artificial turf, and openly discussed LGBT issues in sports.

“There aren’t a lot of places in Moscow like this, especially for LGBT people,” said Galina, an employee at the center for the duration of the football tournament who asked that only her first name be used.

Diversity House is a model for the Russia Galina hopes to see again in the future. But with a nod to the two security guards at the door, she acknowledged the country still has some way to go. “The World Cup provides us with a window of opportunity for people here to experience that equality,” Galina said. At the Diversity House, “everyone can come and feel that it can work like this.”

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