The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Transgender Community Struggles for Acceptance

Medical and bureaucratic hurdles make life hard despite recent signs that attitudes are changing.

August 07, 2019



There are no official statistics on the number of transgender people in Russia. **Pixabay / MT**

Harry, a slight 20-year-old man dressed in a classic white shirt, black trousers and a baseball cap that hides his hair, passes through the turnstiles in the reception area of the high-rise housing The Moscow Times office with a deadpan expression.

Harry is not his given name and he is using someone else's documents to enter the building for our interview because he is transgender and his own papers still bear the photograph of a young woman.

"In Moscow, I try to be myself, I even wear this rainbow bracelet, but it is hard because the level of transphobia is still very high," Harry said.

In Russia, transgender people are classified as mentally ill, at odds with the World Health Organization (WHO) global manual of diagnoses, which in May reclassified gender incongruence as a sexual health issue rather than a behavioral disorder.

There are no official statistics on the number of transgender people in Russia, but experts put the number at around 15,000 across the country, or about 0.1% of the population.

Any transgender person wishing to undergo prescribed and controlled hormone treatment must have a diagnosis of "transsexualism" from a psychiatrist. Without that, many decide to buy hormones that are available over-the-counter, a self-medication process that can be dangerous.

Russia is due to change its transgender classification to be in accordance with the WHO in 2020, but Tatyana Glushkova, a lawyer for the Transgender Legal Defense Project told The Moscow Times that she has little confidence the guidelines will change according to that timeline.

"The Russian bureaucratic machine is very slow and clumsy," she said.

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But there are some signs that attitudes are changing. In April, a printing company in St. Petersburg rehired a transgender woman and paid her two years' worth of lost income in Russia's first known court case to acknowledge workplace discrimination against a transgender person. And a poll by the independent Levada Center in May showed that Russian support for the LGBT community was at a 14-year high.

However, just this weekend police in St. Petersburg reportedly detained at least 11 LGBT activists, three of whom were taken away in an ambulance, at an unauthorized Pride event. Last month in the same city, LGBT activist Yelena Grigoriyeva was found dead shortly after her name appeared on an anti-LGBT "death list."

For people like Harry, the first signals of change are not enough. When he arrived in Moscow in August 2018, from a small town in Russia's Far East which he declined to name, Harry lived in the country's only shelter for LGBT people.

The shelter was founded in 2017, to help people fleeing a series of "gay purges" in Russia's Chechnya region that made headlines across the world.

Harry says he had no other choice but to move to the capital.

"Either death there or move here to Moscow. In my native town, I had to act, to be someone else. Although I was wearing unisex clothes, I suffered from violence," he said, adding that to heal the memories he sometimes spends his last 500 rubles ($7.80) on therapy because he believes that without it he would have already died by suicide.

The 2013 passing of the so-called "gay propaganda" law, which prohibits behavior that could

be seen as promoting homosexuality to minors, has led to an increase in crimes against members of the LGBT community, according to research from the European University at St. Petersburg's Center for Independent Social Research.

In 2012 there were 33 court cases based on hate crimes against the community. A year later, after the law had been passed, the number rose to 50. By 2015 — the most recent year for which figures are available — it had risen to 65. And in 2018, the Stimul NGO found 26 cases of discrimination towards LGBT people in Moscow alone.

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Irma, a 43-year-old trans woman, said she tried for seven years to change her documents at Moscow's Registry Office after receiving a diagnosis of transsexualism and gaining approval for the administrative change.

She eventually had to have gender reassignment surgery she didn't want because the registry office believes that gender is defined only by biological attributes.

"Transgender life in Russia — these words are incompatible in one sentence," Irma said.

Many transgender people in Russia are rejected by their families and then find it almost impossible to find a place to live.

Irma's parents told her to leave home when she was 17. While she eventually found an apartment in Moscow, she said that when landlords saw her, most of them simply refused to deal with her. Harry's parents also threw him out when he told them he was transgender.

"I want to try to have some kind of relationship with my mother, but she isn't interested," he said.

Related article: Russian Support for LGBT Rights Hits 14-Year High, Poll Says

In the Moscow shelter, which is funded solely by private donations, transgender people have the chance to be accepted for who they really are without physical violence or psychological pressure, said its director Tatyana Vinnihenko.

It also acts as a short-term haven — people can stay with full board for six weeks — offering legal advice and psychological help.

But not everyone who passes through the shelter thrives in Moscow and many end up seeking asylum abroad, Vinnihenko said.

Harry hopes that won't always be the case.

"One day things might change in Russia, but I'm afraid I will see it only in my old age," he said.

Original url:

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