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Books Removed and Movies Banned Under Russia's 'LGBT Propaganda' Law

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Women in a bookstore in St. Petersburg. **Alexander Petrosyan / Kommersant**

Amid reports of books being banned in Russia as a result of the country's December anti-LGBT law, Alina Kuznetsova, a marketing specialist from Yekaterinburg, couldn't help but recall family stories about her grandmother, who worked in a library in the Soviet Union.

Alina's grandmother routinely saved books banned by the Soviet authorities from being thrown out — by asking her son to take them home on a sled at night.

In the three months since the passage of Russia's controversial Dec. 5 law banning LGBT "propaganda," history was beginning to repeat itself, said the 33-year-old Kuznetsova.

By outlawing any public displays of LGBT behavior, the bill has sent a chill through the Russian arts establishment, with books, movies and artworks being withdrawn from public circulation for fear of fines and even criminal charges.

In the Siberian city of Khabarovsk, activists from the nationalist Union of Fathers group tore up several novels with LGBT subject matter and fed them into a recycling machine a few days before the law entered force last year.

While that incident was — so far — the only known public destruction of LGBT-themed books, activists told The Moscow Times that censorship is proceeding rapidly behind the scenes.

According to Vladimir Kosarevsky, the former head of Moscow's Anna Akhmatova Library, the authorities send orders to remove library books — but usually via phone calls or lists that do not have seals or signatures.

This is so that "it will be possible to blame the librarians themselves and say that it was their personal initiative" if the bans are publicized, he said.

Last year, Kosarevsky leaked a list of books he said libraries were ordered to remove.

The titles included novels by writers Haruki Murakami, Stephen Fry, Hanya Yanagihara, Michael Cunningham, Eduard Limonov, Virginia Woolf, Truman Capote, and Jean Genet.

Kosarevsky criticized the list for its seemingly random nature.

"It was as if the officials had rushed to blindly implement the new law to curry favor," he said.

Examples of self-censorship inspired by the new law have also crept into the Russian film and television industry, with commercial companies taking steps to erase LGBT content.

The Vedomosti business daily reported in January that media watchdog Roskomnadzor had included Oscar-winning drama "Brokeback Mountain" and romantic drama "Call Me By Your Name" in a list of materials featuring "LGBT content" — meaning most commercial streaming services in Russia have since removed them from their platforms.

Popular streaming service Amediateka, known for its longtime partnership with HBO, has reportedly deleted and edited scenes from several successful television shows.

Award-winning HBO series "Euphoria" about recovering drug addicts, lost almost two hours of footage on Amediateka, according to the Ostorozhno, Novosti Telegram channel.

In addition, Amediateka changed the plot of the second season of "The White Lotus" and, in translation into Russian, the word "gay" was replaced with "man." Viewers noticed the same alteration in translation in an episode of "Sex and the City."

Russian officials have denied the existence of lists of banned books and lawmaker Alexander Khinshtein, one of the authors of the anti-LGBT law, said earlier this year that Rozkomnadzor had not ordered steaming platforms to edit shows.

The legislation's vague content makes it very difficult for commercial services to know how to respond, according to Yekaterina Tyagay, a partner at Pen & Paper, Attorneys at Law.

In particular, there is no definition for the kind of information that should be considered LGBT “propaganda,” she said, nor exactly what it means to “distribute.”

It cannot be ruled out that even a passing mention of "non-traditional relationships" in books, printed publications or on screen could be classified by the authorities as “propaganda,” Tyagay told The Moscow Times.

This lack of clarity has not only caused widespread alarm and led to self-censorship, but has also sparked some panicked responses.

Russian theater festival Raduga (“Rainbow” in Russian) dropped its name from this year's event because they were worried about appearing to promote LGBT values, the head of the festival, Svetlana Lavretsova, told Teatr magazine in January.

Major Russian bookstores Chitay-Gorod, Labirint and Respublika reportedly chose to proactively withdraw “ineligible” books from stock at the end of last year.

Cases of “over-insurance” are likely to become more common until there is more clarity about the law, according to lawyer Tyagay.

A document compiled by Roskomnadzor on the criteria for determining "LGBT propaganda" is expected to come into force in September.

Meanwhile, the first criminal case under the new law is already underway.

Related article: Choices Narrow in Russian Bookstores Amid Anti-LGBT Law, Wartime Restrictions

Russian police opened a case against publisher Popcorn Books, known for its focus on young adult books that address themes of self-identification, racism and sexism, in January.

Popcorn Books has drawn the ire of nationalist activists by publishing “Leto v Pionerskom Galstuke” (“Summer in a Pioneer Tie”), a young adult bestseller about a relationship between two teenage boys.

As of last month, "Summer in a Pioneer Tie" was unavailable in Russian bookstores, including online.

Librarian Kosarevsky, who is openly gay, was fired from his job after he revealed that he was the one who leaked the list of banned books in an interview last month.

He subsequently left Russia.

However, he remained hopeful that his former colleagues would find covert ways to avoid destroying books — just like Kuznetsova’s grandmother rescued them in the Soviet Union.

In one interview, Kosarevsky urged readers not to return banned books to libraries, where they could be pulled from shelves and destroyed.

"The ways to save books are known," he said.

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