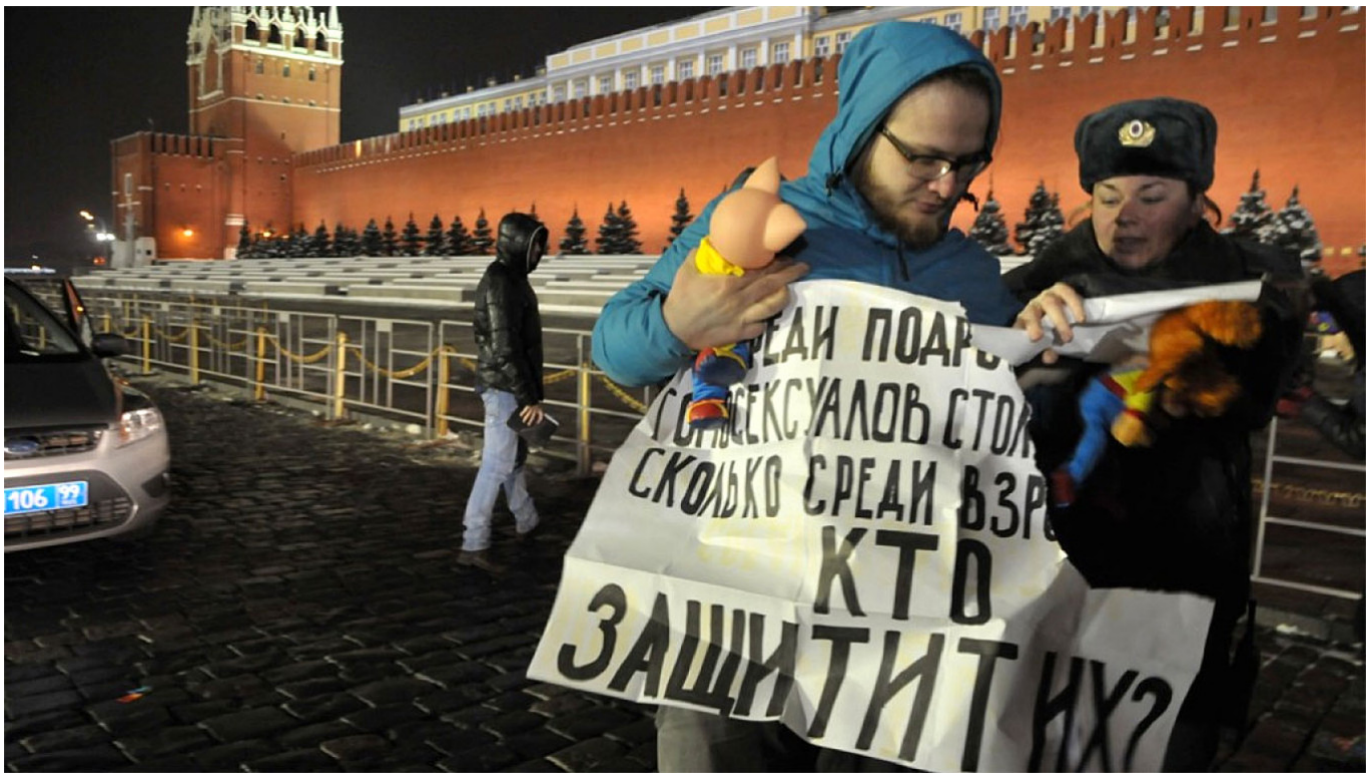
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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Russia's 2013 'Gay Propaganda' Law Catalyzed a Decade of Anti-LGBTQ+ Violence

By Joshua Robinson

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An LGBTQ+ activist being detained on Red Square in Moscow. **GayRussia.ru**

"They forced me to castrate a pig because I wanted gender-affirming surgery."

Ada Blakewell, 23, a non-binary transgender woman, was undergoing hormone therapy when in August 2022 her parents took her to a private center in the Altai region to undergo "masculinization" — an attempt to change her to her birth sex.

"My parents, with the help of third parties, sent me to an official center where they tried to take me through what they would call 'conversion therapy'," Blakewell told The Moscow Times. "They got me to do things like construction, physical activity, everything that society considers especially masculine."

"Then there were some, what we might call 'unique' activities. They forced me to castrate a

pig because I wanted to have gender-affirming surgery. Therefore, I should do the corresponding operation on animals 'to know how it looks.' That was their logic."

"Sometimes they would beat me... they would show me news about how 'trans society' had taken over the West, and this was already starting to happen to Russia."

Blakewell said staff threatened her to conform to the program by describing the prosecution of prominent transgender activist Yan Dvorkin for spreading "propaganda of 'non-traditional' sexual relations."

After nine months of abuse and trauma, she finally escaped in May 2023.

Her treatment is representative of a dangerous, longer-term shift in attitudes and approaches to sexuality and gender identity in Russia today. This trend is closely connected to the Kremlin's "anti-propaganda" laws and "traditional values" rhetoric.

This year marked 10 years since Russia passed the first of several anti-LGBTQ+ laws banning the distribution of "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" under the guise of protecting children. The legislation fails to define what "propaganda" is, allowing for broad enforcement.

Prosecutions for propaganda usually dominate headlines. However, as underscored by Blakewell's case, these laws — accompanied by anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in Russian talk shows, state news, and lawmakers' speeches — are creating an increasingly hostile environment for queer Russians.

Related article: 'No One Knows Anything': St. Petersburg's Queer Community Grapples With 'Extremist' LGBT Ban

Recent research of court records by Sergei Katsuba of University College Dublin documented 1,056 anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes — 365 of which ended in fatalities — from 2010-2020.

Combing through court databases and applying keyword search terminology relating to sexuality, Katsuba's research reveals a significant and sustained spike in violent hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people following the 2013 law.

To be categorized as a hate crime, an incident has to include both a base crime (such as murder) and a biased motive. This includes crimes where an LGBTQ+ person is targeted due to their position as a vulnerable "easy target."

"What we found is that after 2013, there was a threefold increase in the level of hate crimes. Discrimination and mistreatment always existed in Russian society, but the 'gay propaganda' law really increased this," Katsuba told The Moscow Times.

"After 2013, crimes become more violent. There was this emotional spike in the number of hate crimes, but most of these were cases of 'street violence' — for instance, attacks due to how somebody looks [or] dresses. But a few years after the law, very violent crimes such as murder, torture, dismemberment, are becoming more frequent."

“There is an increasing number of premeditated, organized, often collective crimes, [which] are more serious. It’s when a group of people decide to find gay people on dating websites, rob them and attack them.”

The 1,056 documented incidents in the study represent only a fraction of incidents of LGBTQ+ specific hate crimes. Court records only show prosecutions for crimes concluded through the courts, and hate crimes are not officially documented in Russia.

The difficulty in measuring this violence is exacerbated by a very low reporting rate, which the Russian LGBT Network rights group suggested was just 9.7% in its 2021 discrimination report.

Dilya Gafurova, the director of the LGBTQ+ support and discrimination-monitoring charity Sphere, told The Moscow Times that the vague wording of the anti-propaganda laws and violent rhetoric have created a breeding ground for discrimination, particularly toward teens.

“Even adults get confused. Psychologists, social workers, people at schools ... they don’t understand what ‘propaganda’ actually is,” she said.

“This legislation instigates an atmosphere of fear around the topic of sexual orientation and gender identity, which breeds ignorance, and that results in more discrimination.”

Sphere regularly receives requests for legal and psychological assistance from LGBTQ+ people across Russia. However, Gafurova said that 2022 saw requests for help coming from remote Russian towns and cities that the charity had never previously worked in.

“The Russian government has done what we could never have imagined we could do — they have promoted the very idea of LGBT propaganda, and informed everybody across the country about LGBT,” Gafurova said. “Before, people never really thought about it much.”

Related article: Has Russia Made it Illegal To Be LGBT?

In 2022, the number of prosecutions for “propaganda” was significantly higher than in any year since 2013, according to Katsuba’s research.

Professor Alexander Kondakov of University College Dublin, who researches anti-LGBTQ+ violence in Russia, told The Moscow Times that anti-LGBTQ+ violence is linked to the “propaganda” laws.

“People who commit violence ... were given the idea that this was one of the areas through which they could express their prejudice,” he said.

Kondakov said that the 2013 and 2022 laws, as well as this year’s anti-trans legislation and Supreme Court ban on the “international LGBT movement,” were conceived by the authorities for political manipulation.

“This is one of the most powerful tools that the Kremlin has because it uses it so often. It gives Putin back his undemocratic legitimacy.”

Dan Healey, a professor emeritus at Oxford University and a leading specialist in state homophobia in Russia, told The Moscow Times that the timing of the December 2022 law was significant.

“The laws came in at a very particular weak point for the Kremlin in their ‘special operation.’ It’s not just [the withdrawal from] Kherson, but the declaration of mobilization … that looked like a loss,” he said.

“If the war took a bad turn, LGBT people would provide a very useful and powerful scapegoat for venting people’s frustration.”

Activists say the war in Ukraine as well as the state's anti-Western narratives and discriminatory laws — not least the ban on the nebulous “international LGBT movement” — will determine how LGBTQ+ people are treated for years to come.

Blakewell’s experience is a testament to this.

“In 2021 and even 2022, when I was studying at university, we had an LGBT club,” she told The Moscow Times. “The administration knew about the club and even gave permission for official meetings. It was possible to meet and discuss personal issues, in the open, at university. But right from the start of the war, everything totally disappeared.”

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