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‘My Government Doesn’t See Me as a Citizen’: Russian Ex-State Worker Reflects on Being Outed, Forced Into Exile

By Moscow Times Reporter

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Denis Leontovich. **Photo from personal archive**

Denis Leontovich took a job at the regional youth policy agency in southern Russia's Samara region in February 2024.

After just a few weeks on the job, he would resign and leave the country in a matter of hours after he was outed as gay by a federal lawmaker and started receiving threats.

“I didn’t think that my private life would become a public topic. I had never encountered homophobia in my professional life,” Leontovich, 23, told The Moscow Times in an interview.

State Duma deputy Alexander Khinshtein, who is known for his anti-LGBTQ+ stance, accused

Leontovich of being in a relationship with a man and of spreading “gay propaganda,” adding that he had complained about Leontovich to the Prosecutor's Office, the regional governor and the Samara mayor.

“I realized that I had very little time to leave the country — that it wasn’t a matter of days, but hours,” Leontovich said.

Related article: Russian Ex-Official Outed as Gay Flees Country, Denounces War

LGBTQ+ rights in Russia have steadily eroded since President Vladimir Putin signed a law banning the spread of "LGBT propaganda" to minors in 2013. Last year, Russia named the vaguely defined "international LGBT public movement" a banned extremist group, putting at risk of criminal prosecution anyone who has publicly associated with LGBTQ+ lifestyles or displayed LGBTQ+ symbols.

Leontovich said he wished to share his story from exile “to help others who remain in Russia and fear similar persecution.”

The Moscow Times spoke to Leontovich about his life in Russia, his forced emigration and his plans for the future.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

MT: Can you recall how you decided to leave Russia?

DL: It all started with a post on local Telegram channels in April, where I became the target of homophobic harassment. The main message was that it's terrible for a gay person to be working in youth policy with children and that this shouldn’t be happening. At first, I thought it would blow over in a couple of days. Of course, I was wrong.

At first, my boss called me into a meeting and I was suspended from public events until the situation calmed down. But in just a few hours, the scandal escalated to the point that it spread across nearly all the local Telegram channels, different local groups on VKontakte [social media] and regional media outlets. About an hour later, it was in the national media.

This caught the attention of [State Duma deputy Alexander] Khinshtein — his message was that I should be investigated under the criminal article on extremism since the so-called LGBT movement was recognized as an extremist organization. At that moment, I realized that I had very little time to leave the country — that it wasn’t a matter of days, but hours, and that I needed to leave urgently. So everything happened in just one day and I left.

MT: Weren't you afraid even before you received these threats, considering the repressive anti-LGBTQ+ measures that were passed last year?

DL: I never imagined that working in a government-funded institution would lead to such serious scrutiny. I joined the local agency for youth policy in February 2024, working on social projects. My role involved advising young people on grants and social projects they wanted to implement. This job required a certain level of public engagement, like speaking at events and so on. But I didn’t think that my private life would become a public topic, especially since it

had never been an issue in my previous jobs. At work, I was always seen as a competent employee who did my job well. I had never encountered homophobia in my professional life. Maybe because I mostly interacted with people who were open-minded and tolerant — most of the people working with us were young, recent university graduates.

For an LGBT person, living in Russia means accepting certain risks — you just come to terms with the fact that you could be outed, beaten near your home or thrown into a police station and mistreated there. Of course, these are real threats. I didn't hide my sexual orientation; close friends and good acquaintances knew. But while it was important for me to be myself, I never made it a topic of discussion in professional life or at events. It was part of my private life, something I shared only with people close to me. Some people at work might have known, but we never talked about it.

MT: How did your colleagues react to the outing?

DL: My colleagues at the agency were compassionate towards my situation. They found it strange because we had good relations. Many of them approached me and spoke to me openly, expressing their support. That was incredibly valuable and heartwarming and I'm very grateful to them for that.

MT: Why did you decide to work in a state-funded youth policy agency in present-day Russia?

DL: Does a country, even one like Russia, still need teachers? Do we need people who will educate children properly — not through the lens of propaganda, but through the values of humanity and human rights? Of course we do. This applies not only to education but also to youth policy, as the two areas are closely intertwined and work hand in hand. When I took this job, I saw it as an opportunity to act as a filter, a barrier against the hatred and propaganda that permeate our country.

Throughout my career, I never imposed any political stance on my students. I taught them to think critically. If they can justify their political views, whether they support the government or not, that's their right — they're adults. No one has the right to force them otherwise. I always tried to protect students from the abuses that often happen in educational institutions.

In my view, even now in modern Russia, working in the public sector — in education or youth policy — isn't a terrible thing. If you're genuinely committed to promoting critical thinking, if you're not forcing state or personal opinions on others but encouraging thoughtful choices, then it's a noble cause. It's worth pursuing, even in the face of war and totalitarianism.

MT: Do any of your colleagues share similar thoughts?

DL: In regards to public sector employees, I can't really speculate on how many people share my views because everyone understands the risks of speaking openly about their opinions, political beliefs or affiliations with certain social groups. People tend to be very cautious, and there are various attitudes toward what's happening in Russia right now. For instance, some may not support the war but still organize patriotic events in support of it. Others openly reject it and resign as a form of protest. Some don't have the option to quit and feel compelled to comply. Also, public sector employees, as everyone knows, earn very little and don't have the means to just quit, leave the country or plan their emigration ahead of time.

There are certainly diverse views [toward Russia's political trajectory] within the public sector, particularly in education and youth development. I don't know how many people feel the same way I do, but I hope that at least some understand what's going on in the country and are taking even the smallest actions to resist and fight back.

MT: What are your plans for the future?

DL: I currently live in France and am in the process of seeking asylum. Before this, I spent nearly six months in Kazakhstan and it was only when I arrived here that I realized I could feel free and safe and most importantly that I have my freedom of speech. It's very important for me to share my story and what has happened to me, as it might help others who remain in Russia and fear similar persecution or those who left for similar reasons. I don't plan to return to Russia until the regime changes and the repressive laws — especially those targeting the LGBTQ+ community — are revoked. I understand that even though there's no open criminal case against me right now and Russia is a very unsafe place for me.

Of course, my plans also depend on the French authorities' decision regarding my asylum application. If the decision is positive, which I very much hope for, I'll strive to build my life here and integrate into society. I'm already learning the language and trying to communicate with people. In forced emigration, I've realized that many people from many different countries need help. I feel a desire to assist others and I may want to focus my efforts on working with refugees and helping immigrants adapt.

It's very sad and strange that my own government doesn't consider me a proper citizen. Especially given that I seem to have done so much for the benefit of society, and in some sense for the country, trying to make it better and believing that it can change for the better. I understand that in the near future, I won't be able to return to Russia, see my loved ones, or do the work I used to do. Nevertheless, I still see helping others in my future.

MT: Do you feel any disappointment in working with people and helping them? You mentioned earlier that you wanted to be a filter against propaganda in Russia while working with young people, yet you had to leave in the end...

DL: I'm disappointed that this situation happened at all and that I couldn't stay in Russia longer to do more good. I had big plans and ambitions. I can only speak for myself because maybe not everyone is ready to be that filter and to advocate for rights and opinions. However, I still see that there are people in our country who are doing small things to make the world a better place. And I have hope.

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