

How Far Will Russia's Wartime Anti-LGBTQ+ Campaign Go?

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Maxim Zmeyev / AFP

State-led attacks on Russia's LGBTQ+ community intensified dramatically following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Nevertheless, the phrase "Orthodox Sharia" that sometimes gets bandied around is misleading when it comes to understanding the Kremlin's motivations. Unlike the Soviet Union and Iran, modern Russia is not so much trying to eradicate a group of people because of their sexual orientation as seeking to destroy a particular civil and cultural phenomenon.

Within weeks, the full-scale war in Ukraine had had consequences for Russia's LGBTQ+ community. Russia was expelled from the Council of Europe in March 2022: a symbolic milestone given that the decriminalization of male same-sex relations was a condition of Russia's admittance 29 years earlier. Many feared Russia would move to recriminalize homosexuality, but policymaking went in a different direction.

The only formal discriminatory measure in place at the time of the invasion was a 2013 law banning “gay propaganda” to minors. But by the fall of 2022, the State Duma was preparing to pass amendments to extend that law to all ages. The timing was significant: the Ukrainian counteroffensive was in full swing, and the Kremlin had just announced a partial mobilization, along with the formal annexation of four Ukrainian regions. Even amid these momentous events, the second front against the LGBTQ+ community continued. The war is taking place “not only on the battlefield, but also in people’s minds,” the author of the amendments, Alexander Khinshtein, [said](#) at the time.

Then, in July 2023, Russia banned gender transition. This was justified by an absurd [claim](#) by Investigative Committee chief Alexander Bastrykin that Russian men were changing their gender en masse to avoid conscription. No evidence for this was ever produced, and [statistics](#) showed that the number of people transitioning in Russia held steady at about 3,000 per year in a country of over 140 million. With that ban, Russia not only went further than Iran (where gender transitioning is permitted) but also abandoned its usual adherence to international healthcare standards, all in an attempt to turn its back on what it portrays as a corrupt Western society.

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A stalemate on the battlefield by the end of 2023 seemed to have hardened the Kremlin’s resolve to pursue internal enemies. On Nov. 30, 2023, Supreme Court judge Oleg Nefedov approved a legal request submitted just two weeks earlier by the Justice Ministry to designate the “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organization.

The court hearing took place behind closed doors and lasted just four hours. Nefedov had been in his post for less than five months, and up until that point, had mostly [ruled](#) on land and property disputes. Several weeks later, the court [leaked](#) an explanation for its historic decision, claiming that an international LGBT movement arose in the United States in the 1960s and put down roots in the Soviet Union after 1984. It identified no fewer than 300 LGBTQ+ representatives in 60 regions of Russia.

Despite the ridiculousness, it was not a bid to criminalize homosexuality. The scope was much broader. Instead of going after those who engage in same-sex relations, the authorities sought to shut down any public discussion of LGBTQ+ issues. Simply “displaying extremist symbols” (such as a rainbow avatar on social media) can now be punished by up to 15 days in prison and a [fine](#), while organizing or taking part in the “activities of the movement” is punishable by [12 years](#) in jail. For comparison, the crime of “sodomy” in the Soviet Union was punishable by up to five years in jail.

Following the ruling, there were several [spates](#) of police raids on gay clubs. While such raids have happened before, the police have stopped pretending they were looking for drugs. Now the raids are officially [characterized](#) as “preventing LGBT extremism.” In other words, the police are no longer checking pockets. They are looking at the contents of phones to find LGBT chats, rainbow flag avatars on social media, including from many years ago, and other signs of affiliation with an “extremist organization.”

When it comes to convictions, however, there have been far fewer for LGBTQ+ -related

offenses than, for example, under Russia's military censorship laws. According to the Supreme Court, there were [214 administrative cases](#) in 2024 brought under the most often used LGBTQ+ law (punishing the "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations"). Using open sources, journalists have [counted](#) 13 extremism cases in 2024 linked to the Supreme Court extremist designation.

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One recent significant development involved the book publishing industry. On May 14, security forces searched the apartments of dozens of people employed by publishers Individuum and Popcorn Books, which are imprints of Russia's biggest publishing house, EKSMO. Three people were placed under house arrest.

The reason for the searches was the publication of books on LGBTQ+ topics, including the novel "Summer in a Pioneer Tie," which has [sold](#) more than 250,000 copies. Following the raids, publishers recalled books with LGBTQ+ topics — or [obliged](#) distributors to pulp them. There have also been many cases of censorship of LGBTQ+ content in films and television: the streaming platform Amediateka, for example, [cut](#) almost four hours of material from the popular TV series "Game of Thrones."

The Russian regime does not shy away from gay aesthetics — just look at the official photos of a topless President Vladimir Putin. It has repeatedly shown it is not bothered by the sexuality of prominent members of the political and cultural elite. However hypocritical this might appear, it aligns with the political logic of the state-led anti-LGBTQ+ drive. Russia's prudishness is not directed against "[nontraditional sex](#)," or even those who practice it. Rather, the target is any information about the LGBTQ+ community, any hint that such a community even exists. This is what officials mean by "gay propaganda."

In this respect, it makes sense for Russia's anti-LGBTQ+ drive to have intensified after the start of the full-scale invasion. The regime was not only in need of a scapegoat and a distraction, but also required a wave of repression that could generate fear among a broad group of Russians.

Going forward, Russia's anti-gay campaign is bound to evolve further — at the very minimum out of inertia. The regime will keep seeking to dismantle gay-friendly public spaces and censor LGBTQ+ content, but is unlikely to send thousands of people to prison for gay sex. Nor will there be more than a few high-profile criminal cases every year — just enough to maintain a level of fear.

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