



Illustration: OVD-Info

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ARTICLES

# **“An Ideology for War”: Why Putin Needs Queerphobia Today**

**Today, 30 November, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation will most likely pass a law introducing criminal liability for LGBTQ+ organizations and activists. This will happen after the court will have ruled the «LGBT-movement» made up by the Justice Department to be extremist. We go through the basic history of state-sanctioned queerphobia in Russia, and the situation as it is today. At the end of the article is the list of Russian queer rights organisations who need your support.**

## ОБ ЭТОМ НИКТО НЕ УЗНАЕТ

Если об этом никто не напишет. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы плохие дела не оставались в тишине.

[ПОДПИСАТЬСЯ](#)

Текст на русском

State-enforced queerphobia isn't new to the Kremlin, beginning as early as the Russian Empire. The Soviet Union, after a brief time of permissiveness, re-instituted and strengthened anti-gay laws at the onset of Stalinism.

After the Soviet collapse, Russia found itself with a culture where queerphobia, especially homophobia, was deeply ingrained — especially in its prisons, where gay men are typically put at the very bottom of a brutal hierarchy. Still, the decriminalization of sodomy in 1990 led to slowly changing attitudes toward the queer community and the blossoming of queer culture throughout Russia.

Putin's Kremlin was willing to capitalize on, as well as develop queerphobia.

By the early 2000s, an astroturfed campaign of state-enforced queerphobia was afoot as Pride marches were getting banned by city authorities throughout the country. In 2013, Putin signed the infamous gay propaganda law. As is often the case, homophobia was thinly veiled into concern for children — media (and anyone else) that could inform minors about non-heterosexual relationships became forbidden.

Over time, more repressions were aimed at Russian LGBTQ+ communities, paired with a growing «uncivil society» — pseudo-activists in the security service's pay.

Some of these repressions included Chechnya's ongoing [anti-gay purges](#), beginning in 2017. Hundreds were allegedly

harassed, disappeared, and tortured. A 2020 constitutional amendment made marriage a strictly **heterosexual institution**.

As the full-scale invasion began, the war drive inspired a new spiral of queerphobic repression.

## **«CONTRADICTS THE STATE POLICY OF SPIRITUAL AND MORAL VALUES»**

30 years after the Soviet anti-gay laws were disposed of, the Kremlin is planning to criminalize LGBTQ+ people once again, although it is using different means than the old Soviet Union. On 17 November, the Ministry of Justice addressed the Supreme Court with a demand to recognize the «international social movement LGBT» as extremist and ban its activities on the territory of the Russian Federation. Thus, people that will be considered «organizers» of the «movement» will **face up to 10 years** in prison under Article 282.2 of the Criminal Code; «participants» will face up to six years (provided that it is possible to prove a «continuing offence»: that is, organization and participation after the court decision).

For a (non-existent) organization, being on the «extremist» list will entail a **ban on the symbols** associated with it: demonstrating them — an administrative arrest for up to 15 days under Article 20.3 of the Administrative Code, and repeated violations will entail criminal prosecution.

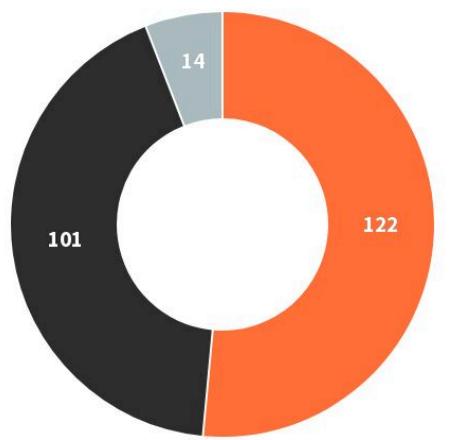
The LGBTQ+ legislation has been tightened throughout the year. In December 2022, the law prohibiting the aforementioned «propaganda of non-traditional relations» (and not only among minors as it used to be) entered into effect. In July, the authorities banned gender transition: now doctors are not allowed to carry out any medical intervention aimed at «sex reassignment», including prescribing medication.

Human rights activists that OVD-Info has spoken to say that the number of enquiries to aid organizations has increased drastically. For instance, Ksenia Mikhailova, a lawyer working with the LGBTQ+ group «Coming Out», notes that if in 2021 there were 230 enquiries on legal issues, next year it «abruptly became» 620, this year it is already 635, and the figures are growing. Half of such enquiries are of a preventive nature: «They ask questions about how to avoid fines, blocking of information channels and personal pages on the Internet.»

Coming Out has a monitoring program that records all cases of violations of LGBTQ+ people's rights. The statistics include requests to the organization using the feedback [form](#) on the website. Volunteers collect data from open sources, including homophobic groups and public pages. «They usually write something like „Oh, look, someone got beat up, „We contacted the prosecutor's office, and they blocked everything.“ This is also a source of information, ” says Coming Out's monitoring and international advocacy coordinator, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

By the time we had this conversation, the monitoring program had documented 101 cases of discrimination and violation of rights in relation to individuals, 122 cases in relation to the media, organizations and associations, and 14 cases related to legislative initiatives. 237 cases in total during 2023.

## Discrimination and violation of rights

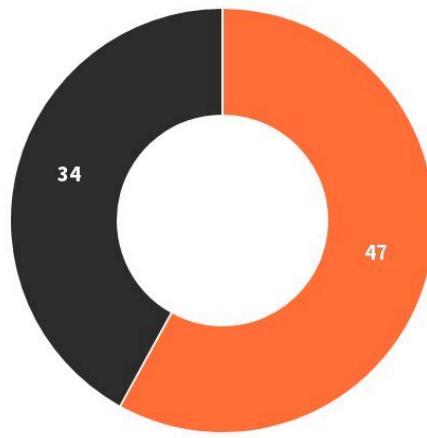


● Against organisations (media, businesses, unions, etc) ● Against individuals ● Queerphobic laws and bureaucracy

Data [«Выход»](#) • 25 November 2023

There have been 81 cases related to the article on «propaganda» (Article 6.21 of the Administrative Code): 47 of them were related to associations and the media, and the rest were related to individuals. However, not all cases ended with guilty verdicts and fines — some were stopped at the denunciation stage.

## Cases for “Gay Propaganda” this year



● Organisations (media, businesses, etc) ● Individuals

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However, compared to previous years, the number of administrative cases under the article on «propaganda» has increased significantly. None of the experts knows the exact number, but according to Katya Dikovskaya, head of the legal assistance programme at the Sphere Foundation,

human rights activists are aware of the majority of such cases: «The fines are enormous. A person living in a small town usually does not have the 100-200 thousand rubles (~113-226US\$) to pay them.»

Some people prefer to «pay and forget, » without appealing their fines — there have been several such cases at Sphere. The human rights defender recalls a recent case where a girl from a small town in the north was fined 200,000 rubles (~2260US\$). She didn't have that kind of money. «The most difficult part of the whole process for her was that law enforcement officers would come to her workplace, would summon her [to the department]. So everything was right out in the open for colleagues and neighbours to see.» Due to the pressure from the law enforcers, the girl experienced a psychological crisis. Upon learning about this, Sphere decided to help the girl pay the fine rather than appeal it. «This is an example of what happens to an ordinary person in a small town when they are faced one-on-one with the system. It can cause a lot of harm.»

In 2023, 271 people contacted the Sphere consultation service. Moscow leads by a significant margin, followed by St. Petersburg. The ranking also includes two other countries, Georgia and Kazakhstan, from which there have been enquiries from Russian emigrants. The people asking for help are mostly between the ages of 18 and 27.

Katya Dikovskaya points out that with the tightening of the propaganda article, police officers have become better at preparing such cases for the courts — for example, they now order expert opinions for them: «The fines have become much larger, and cases of propaganda have gained much more significance.»

A new practice in persecution by the authorities is that the Ministry of Justice often justifies including individuals and organisations in the «foreign agents» registry by citing «propaganda of LGBT relationships»: this was the case with

writer Linor Goralik, singer Monetochka, blogger Sasha Kazantseva, and others.

In March, the public association «Alliance of Heterosexuals and LGBT for Equality» **was included** in the registry of «foreign agents», with the explanation that the movement «propagandized» LGBTQ+ relationships, which «contradicts the state policy of spiritual and moral values». Natalia Tsymbalova (Haya Dvora Sharon) and Sergei Kondrashov **were named** as members of the Alliance. Subsequently, reports were drawn up against two other individuals — one from Voronezh and another from St. Petersburg — for the same publication in the Alliance's Telegram channel that did not have the «foreign agent» label (part 5 of Article 19.34 of the Administrative Code).



Alliance of Heterosexuals and LGBT for Equality at a St Petersburg rally, 2015 / Photo: David Frenkel

«Roskomnadzor did not even bother to consider the fact that two people in different cities could not publish the same post, » — says Ksenia Mikhailova. One of those prosecuted, Alexei Nazarov, the Alliance's media coordinator, was eventually

fined 10,000 rubles (~113US\$) by the Voronezh court; he will appeal the decision.

## «HOMOPHOBES NOW FEEL AT EASE»

Another new practice in applying the homophobic law involves cases of propaganda found in profiles on dating websites, particularly those posted by transgender sex workers (mostly migrants). «Some human rights activists suggest that for the police, this is a way to check off boxes both for the propaganda article and for violations of migration rules, » — says Coming Out's coordinator.

For instance, in January and February 2023, i.e. immediately after the prohibition of «LGBT propaganda» had entered into effect among all Russians regardless of their age, Mediazona found seven reports under this article on Moscow courts' websites. In April, the media reported four cases in Krasnodar, with one of the transgender sex workers deported. Before that, a court in Kamchatka found a German citizen Aleksander Roth guilty of «imposing» «LGBTQ+ propaganda.» This case was initiated after Roth offered a local to have sex in his hotel room. Roth was fined 150,000 rubles (~1693US\$) and ordered to be deported from the country.

These statistics do not cover cases when people were prosecuted not for «propaganda» but under other articles, like in the case of the activist Alexandra Sinko. On 15 June, she started a solitary picket against the law prohibiting gender transition.

The activist was arrested on the same day. The detention report was drawn up for «propaganda of non-traditional relationships.» However, the court reclassified this case and put it under the «COVID» article (part 2, Article 8.6.1. of Saint Petersburg law «On Administrative Offences»). This

article is commonly used to suppress public events. As a result, Sinko was **fined** 4,000 rubles (~45US\$).

Yan Dvorkin, the head and founder of Centre T which helps transgender and non-binary people, says that in summer, when «sex reassignment» was being prohibited in Russia, the organization experienced a «boom in enquiries». «We were operating in emergency mode, » he stated.

This law has already had a negative impact on Russians, Dvorkin says. For example, there is an increasing number of people with their appearance not corresponding to their passport information. «They are on hormone therapy but cannot change their documents. They are therefore trying not to use their documents and cannot be employed legally or enter universities, they are afraid to fly, etc. They are excluded from society in many aspects.» Having no job and, in many cases, having no support from their family members, transgender people are at risk of becoming homeless.

Some, panicking about the imminent passage of the transphobic law, have changed their documents and now want to reinstate the former gender marker in the documents — but they are unable to do so. «They are talking to lawyers and trying to deal with the situation somehow but there are still no successful cases of this kind.»

Another negative consequence is that transgender people are facing much more difficulties in receiving hormone therapy (the law does not prohibit the use of certain medications, only their prescription for «sex reassignment»).

«The number of people going through self-prescribed hormone therapy has increased enormously. They buy medications secretly, risking both their health and freedom. We worked for years to make sure people got hormone therapy safely, trained doctors, and negotiated lower costs. And in one day, years of hard work was undone» says the head of Centre T. Because of this, more people are falling into

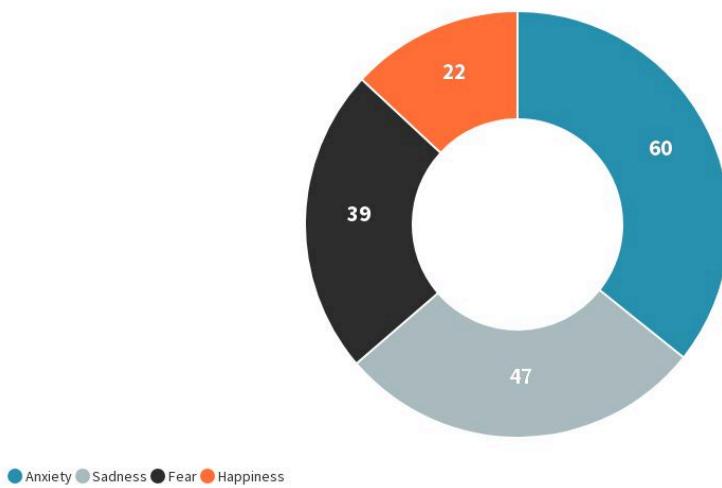
deep depression: «It's just that everything looks really hopeless.»

As the news broke that the «LGBT movement» would be declared extremist, Centre T began receiving hundreds of enquiries again, like in the summer. «People that are coming to us are in a vulnerable psychological state, as they cannot resist the increasing anxiety triggered by the news. There are also people who want to leave the country because of high risks. There are people who are now encountering violent situations, as those around them now feel that the law is on their side and allows them to employ violence more freely.»

The SOVA Nationalism and Xenophobia Research Center has recently **reported** 18 cases of violence against LGBTQ+ people in Russia throughout 2023, which is three times more than in 2022. The increase is directly linked to state policy, says Coming Out's coordinator: «People with homophobic views now feel at ease. And the prospects are grim: people are returning from war, and that is also a threat for LGBT people.»

Several days ago, Yan Dvorkin received the results of a survey conducted in the Centre T community (OVD-Info has reviewed the research). 1,161 people, located mainly in Russia, filled in the questionnaire. Transgender people most often cope with anxiety (60%), sadness (47%), and fear (39%). 22% of respondents feel happiness every day.

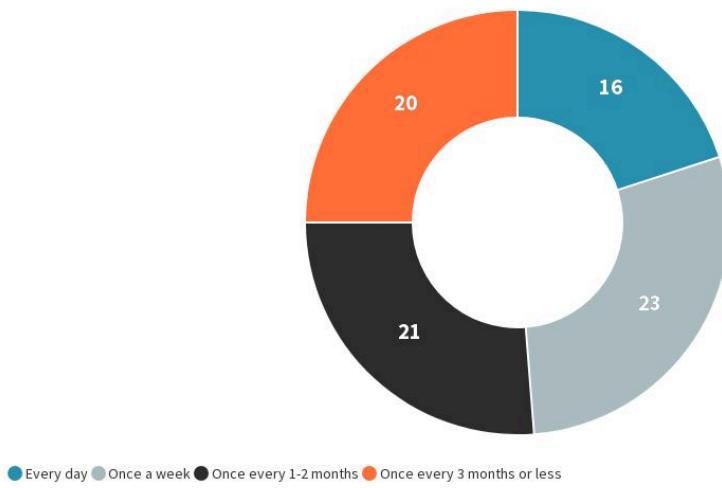
Trans Russians stay they most often face



Data Центр Т • Autumn 2023

The absolute majority of those surveyed (95%) experience gender dysphoria. About 80% of the respondents said that they were having suicidal thoughts: among them, 16% were having such thoughts every day, and 23% — once per week. Approximately 53% of transgender respondents currently keep putting together a plan of how to end their life: among them, 7% do so every day and 9% about once a week.

Roughly 80% of respondents have suicidal thoughts



Data Центр Т • Autumn 2023

## WHY LGBTQ+ PEOPLE ARE BEING TARGETED NOW AND WHAT IT MEANS

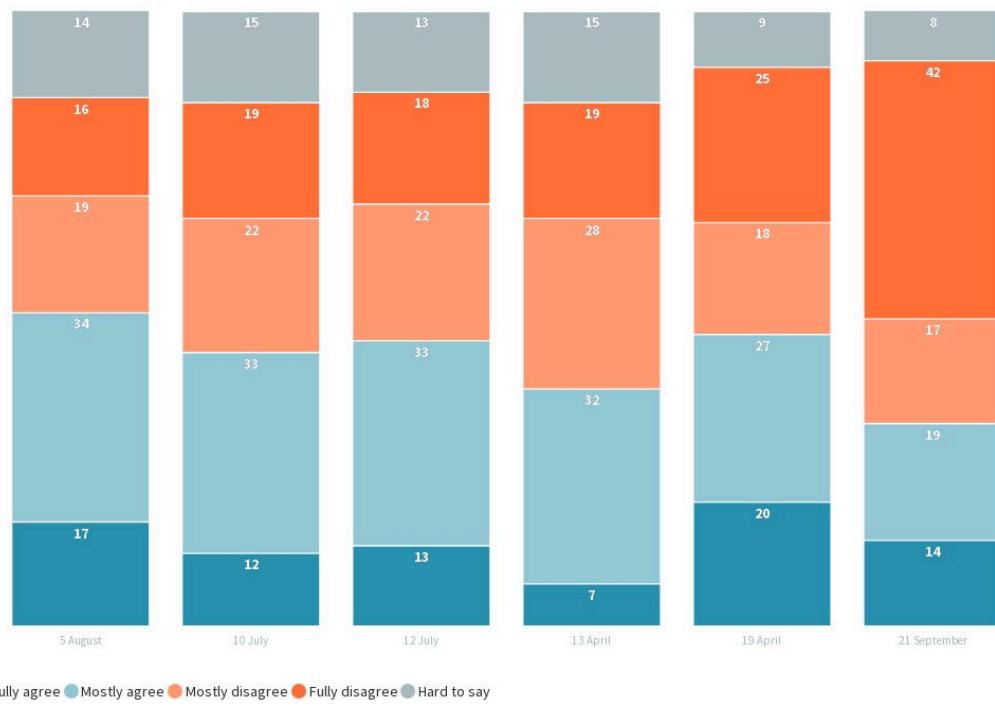
Despite the significant increase in administrative propaganda cases in 2023, the number still appears small on a nationwide scale. Human rights activists believe that the goal of the repressive measures is not to fine everyone or put everyone in jail, but to intimidate. «Here, we have the same situation as with the persecution of FBK (Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation). Not everyone who used to work at Navalny's headquarters or had donated to FBK has been jailed. But there have been dozens of cases, and those cases frightened millions of people, » says Ksenia Mikhailova. Human rights activist Igor Kochetkov compares the fact of declaring a non-existent „LGBT movement“ an extremist organization to the law on discrediting the army: „No one knows what discrediting really means, so anyone can be charged under that law. The ‘LGBT movement’ is the same thing.“

Kochetkov believes that the process of liquidating legal LGBTQ+ initiatives started in 2021 when such projects massively started being declared foreign agents. Back then, the Mayak («Lighthouse») movement in Russia's Far East that helps queer people who faced violence; the «Reverse» initiative; the Deystvie (Action) community centre; and the Russian LGBT-Network were all included in the registry run by Russia's Ministry of Justice. Igor Kochetkov, who had founded the latter organization, became a «foreign agent» several days after his organization did and left Russia soon thereafter. According to the September [data](#) published by Coming Out (that was also included in the list in 2021), at least 30 organizations, unregistered associations, and individuals related to queer activism are now declared «foreign agents.»

It is worth pointing out that as early as 2019, surveys conducted by the Levada Center [noted](#) a normalization of Russians' attitude to LGBTQ+. For instance, to the question of whether «LGBT people should enjoy the same rights as citizens of traditional sexual orientation, » 47% answered «yes» and 43% said «no.» Social scientists noted

that that was the «highest indicator of support for the past 14 years of research.» Boris Volkov, Levada Center's deputy director, linked it to a «weakening effect of the campaign around the law on banning the „propaganda“ of non-traditional sexual relations among minors that was adopted in Russia in 2013.»

Do you agree that gays and lesbians must have equal rights



«As late as 2020, [despite the amendments to the Constitution related to, in particular, marriage as a union of man and woman], Putin spoke about LGBT in a relatively mild and conciliatory manner, » recalls Igor Kochetkov. For instance, speaking on the Russia 24 TV channel, Putin **said**: «There has not been, is not, and will not be anything that would restrict rights based on race, sexual orientation, nationality, or religion.» He added that Russia only stands against «imposing» values on children: «Let a person grow up, become an adult, and make decisions about their life on their own.»

Igor Kochetkov describes the repression against the LGBTQ+ community as a «sign of transition from an authoritarian

regime to a totalitarian one»: «All government agencies, including the Ministry of Justice, strive to demonstrate their support and approval of the new official ideology of the Russian world and traditional values. This is why such lawsuits emerge.»

On 17 November, the day the news broke about the Ministry of Justice's lawsuit seeking to declare the «international LGBT movement» an «extremist organization, » Kochetkov submitted a statement to the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation requesting to join the case as an interested party. Predictably, the court rejected the request, and, to the surprise of the human rights activist, **issued** a corresponding ruling. The refusal was justified by stating that «the rights and obligations [of Igor Kochetkov] and the rights and obligations of the administrative defendant are not interrelated.» It remains unknown who exactly serves as the administrative defendant in the Ministry of Justice's lawsuit.

Then Kochetkov, journalist Renat Davletgildyaev, and Olga Baranova, the director of the Moscow Community Center for

LGBTQ+ Initiatives, as well as activists Elvira Chaika and

Yaroslav Rasputin, founded the «International LGBT

Movement.» This became known on 29 November.

«We decided that if we create a movement literally called the

same as stated in the Ministry of Justice's claim, the court will

have fewer grounds to reject our request to participate in the

process as an interested party. If they don't allow us to join

the case, we will create an informational buzz and not allow

what is happening to go unnoticed, » Davletgildyaev

explained to the «7x7» media.



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Founders of the «International LGBT movement»: Igor Kochetkov, Olga Baranova, Evelina Chaika, Renat Davletgildyaev, Yaroslav Rasputin / Photos: social media

Simultaneously, Russian human rights organizations, including OVD-Info, appealed to the Supreme Court to reject the Ministry of Justice's lawsuit due to its anti-legal nature. «...> „traditions“, as understood by the state, are valued more than the rights and freedoms of individuals and are opposed to constitutional values such as respect for human dignity, prohibition of discrimination, or the state's guarantee of protecting rights and freedoms. Not only this grossly violate the Constitution of the Russian Federation but also constitutes the actual establishment of a specific ideology by the state, » the declaration states.

The new surge in repressive initiatives coincided with the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, noted the Coming Out monitoring and international advocacy coordinator: «The war started in February, and by May, discussions about tightening the [LGBTQ+] propaganda law began.» Igor Kochetkov emphasizes that «homophobic prejudices and traditional values are now being used in Russia

to form an ideology for justifying the war, » referring to the LGBTQ+ community as the «internal avatar of the external enemy», the latter being the conditional West.

And since Russia lags behind the West in terms of standards of living and attitudes towards fundamental human rights, LGBTQ+ have become a convenient target — an indicator that «everything is still better in Russia, » Ksenia Mikhailova thinks. «They need to show that Russia is not just at war with Ukraine but rather with the entire West, and they need to explain what they are fighting for.»

«They claim that the West is imposing [LGBTQ+] on us, and the West is the enemy. They have this kind of logical chain where everything from the West is considered deceitful, » Katya Dikovskaya expands on this idea.

She believes that the abrupt tightening of anti-LGBTQ+ policy could be linked, in part, to the upcoming elections. Yan Dvorkin from the Centre T echoes the same notion:

«Declaring a marginalized group the enemy and rallying for its annihilation requires virtually no resources. However, it allows redirecting the frustration and anger of the people towards a specific scapegoat rather than the authorities that have led the country to its current state.»

However, Igor Kochetkov is convinced that the elections have nothing to do with the matter: «Many people believe [that these things are connected]. But I think that the presidential elections are connected to this tendency, rather than vice versa. We should not confuse the background with the front figure. It is obvious that the elections will be held against the backdrop of the adoption of a new official prescriptive ideology of traditional values; however, that ideology is gaining momentum not because of the upcoming presidential elections — they would have taken place either way. What is important is the fact that this ideology will not be pushed aside after the elections. We cannot hope that it will be forgotten after the elections. Not at all.»

# **WHAT WILL HAPPEN AFTER THE «LGBT MOVEMENT» IS DEEMED EXTREMIST?**

Fear is the main consequence of the total ban on LGBTQ+ initiatives: «It will cause the number of mental disorders, suicides and mass exodus of people from the country to skyrocket,» confidently predicts Ksenia Mikhailova. She firmly believes that the authorities will not be able to break the usual course of life: «The state will raise a new generation of even more resilient people. After all, the queer people are not going anywhere: they will always be born, grow up and be queer.»

Within Russia, LGBTQ+ organizations and activists will not disappear completely, but they will become illegal. «It's just that not everyone will be able to leave the country,» states Igor Kochetkov.



Pride flag at the Pushkin Square in Moscow, 2011 / Photo: Yevgeny Feldman

The Coming Out coordinator predicts that it will be LGBTQ+ organizations rather than ordinary people that will suffer from

persecution. In her opinion, there will be random casualties, collateral damage: «I would draw a parallel with the case of Sasha Skochilenko. Across the country, hundreds — if not thousands — of people have swapped price tags in stores with anti-war messages and put anti-war stickers. But there is this one high-profile case of a person whose punishment is extremely severe. The same could happen here as well.»

Censorship is inevitable; but so is total self-censorship. Coming Out has collected data from several polls addressing the ways the new propaganda law has affected people's daily life. The participants state that they have stopped posting, reposting, liking and commenting on LGBTQ+ content online. People are afraid of being fined or imprisoned. A lot of them have stopped going to clubs because they believe it is dangerous. This tendency will only increase in the future.»

«People are in a very intense panic — they are deleting their social media and breaking ties; they are taking impulsive, rash decisions because they are scared for their lives, » confirms Yan Dvorkin.

The previous day, the LGBT Sports Federation of Russia announced the suspension of their activity without waiting for the decision of the Supreme Court: «We are not ready to expose our members to the many risks coming from the state, » stated the organization.

The Coming Out coordinator recalls that when reporting to the UN on 13 November, Deputy Minister of Justice Andrei Loginov **said** that there was no discrimination whatsoever against LGBTQ+ individuals in Russia: «The rights of LGBT citizens are protected by the respective legislations.» «And a few days after, the decision to recognize the LGBTQ+ movement as „extremist“ was announced, » says the coordinator. «It seems to me that there is little room for manipulation and lies left now. However, knowing the

cunningness of Russian diplomats, I shudder to imagine what they will come up with.»

However, generally speaking, no one is able to accurately predict the future, as Igor Kochetkov sums up: «You see, it is impossible to predict the outcome of an absurdity.»

Trans people will probably face the most severe discrimination: their chances of getting proper medical care will be «reduced to zero», and they will suffer from social isolation. «Almost none of my acquaintances has any desire to remain in Russia. Everyone dreams of leaving the country and they live solely for this purpose, » says Yan Dvorkin. He and his husband left Russia immediately after hearing the news of the lawsuit filed by the Ministry of Justice.

## **THESE QUEER RIGHTS PROJECTS COULD USE YOUR HELP:**

**Sphere provides psychological, legal and urgent care:**  
<https://spherequeer.org/en/>

**St Petersburg-based Coming Out provides psychological & legal support:** <https://comingoutspb.com/eng/>

**TRANS\*COALITION is a platform for trans\* and non-binary activists from the countries of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Eastern Europe:**  
<https://www.transcoalition.net>

**Delo LGBT provides legal aid:**  
<https://delo.lgbt/en#rec501885675>

**CENTRE-T provides psychological support to trans\* and non-binary people:** <https://centre-t.com/english>

**Russian LGBT-Network provides psychological, legal and urgent care:** <https://lgbtnet.org/en/>

**These two only have Russian websites but you can use the translate function in your browser:**

**North Caucasus SOS helps LGBTQ+ people and their family members facing danger in the North Caucasus:**  
<https://sk sos.org>

**T-Action helps trans people in St Petersburg:** <http://t-action-team.org/contacts/>

## **ЧТО Я МОГУ С ЭТИМ СДЕЛАТЬ?**

Прочитать, рассказать, поддержать. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы как можно больше людей узнали о политических репрессиях в России сегодня.

**ПОДДЕРЖАТЬ**

## **More to read**



## **Memory Wars**

Alexey Uvarov explains civil society's struggle to commemorate repression victims.

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**Torture, slashed veins and a year in solitary confinement: in conversation with Ruslan Kostylenkov, a defendant in the “New Greatness” case**

Life in prison and its aftermath, a year in solitary confinement, and torture during detention.