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OPINION

Why Does the Kremlin Need Queerphobia?

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Shaped by both Western conservatism and domestic prejudice, queerphobia in Russia is now part of the ideology of war.

Russia was ranked as the most dangerous place for LGBTQ people in Europe in 2024. But it wasn't always like that.

Despite some stereotypes, Russian society is not virulently queerphobic by default. Instead, the country's anti-LGBTQ drive has been cultivated and honed by the Kremlin, which is motivated by both foreign and domestic policy concerns. Russian officials seemingly want to both appeal to the global conservative movement and build a repressive machine based on domestic conservatism.

While the story of the queer community in Russia is far more nuanced than is often thought, it is undeniable that the country has long struggled with queerphobia. The Soviet Union was briefly at the forefront of queer rights and transgender research in the 1920s, before it began portraying queer people as inherently alien. By 1990, the Soviet Union still had some of the most repressive anti-gay laws in the world, and a number of people were in jail for «sodomy.» Then, following the Soviet collapse, the queer scene experienced a renaissance. Activists held pride parades in major cities, and mutual aid hubs and open communities popped up across the country. Same-sex relationships were decriminalized in 1993, and gradually became more accepted. Homosexuality was no longer seen as a mental disorder.

The 1990s were a time of openness: conferences, film festivals, and publications thrived with little to no government interference. In big cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg, LGBTQ organizations grew, offering support and advocacy while attracting more allies. Gay clubs and drag culture flourished, and some events were even part of official celebrations. Queer themes were heavily represented in the pop culture of the 1990s and 2000s, and some queer-themed songs became megahits.

By 2012, however, as repression intensified, the queer community once again found itself in the crosshairs. In June 2013, a law banning «gay propaganda» among children led many queer people to leave the country. Although the law

was rarely enforced, the era of relative freedom for the LGBTQ community was rapidly coming to an end. Large opposition demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 spooked the Kremlin, which was worried that «color revolutions» in ex-Soviet countries might reach Russia. So once the protests were quelled, the regime began to seek ideological tools to mobilize its supporters over the long term. Like many authoritarian leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin turned to conservatism, marking the beginning of a shift in Russian public life that would lead to anti-queer legislation, as well as an overall increase in repression.

In the summer of 2020, the Russian Constitution was amended to state that marriage is «the union of a man and a woman.» By the fall of 2021, LGBTQ organizations, including Coming Out, Revers, and Mayak had all been labelled «foreign agents.» In late 2022, a bill was passed extending the ban on «LGBT propaganda» to all ages, and in July 2023, a law banned changing gender markers in documents, making gender-affirming care impossible. Finally, on November 30, 2023, Russia's Supreme Court designated the «international public LGBT movement» as «extremist.»

The global astroturfing of Kremlin queerphobia is rarely talked about, but it is important to understand the role of international actors. As reported by *Mother Jones* in 2014, the Kremlin's anti-queer laws were shaped by lobbying from the U.S.-based group World Congress for Families (WCF). The WCF, which was set up in 1997 by U.S. and Russian conservatives, serves as an umbrella for a myriad of conservative organizations—and it had an impact on Russia's repressive laws via conferences, powerful oligarch connections, and more. A particularly illustrative case was WCF's cooperation with the Russian Duma deputy Yelena Mizulina, a leading proponent of anti-queer legislation. Her bill banning gay adoption was, at the very least, inspired by her WCF contacts.

That is not to say that the WCF is solely responsible for the Kremlin's queerphobia—but it has contributed to the direction of official Russian rhetoric. «Putin is repeating our words, " a WCF representative told *Mother Jones*, and, indeed, the anti-queer rhetoric coming out of the Kremlin is often a carbon copy of Western conservative tropes.

Anti-LGBTQ oppression has been weaponized by the Kremlin and its ideological sympathizers in the global culture war. A network has emerged of Western conservatives, Russian oligarchs, and Russian Orthodox clergy engaging in «anti-gender diplomacy, " which has been particularly successful in southeastern Europe.

At the same time, queerphobic repression in Russia has been portrayed by pro-Kremlin outlets as a sign of traditional values, contrasting Russia against the «decadent West.» In this respect, Russia's anti-queer laws are used as an ideological bludgeon, demonstrating Russia's supposed purity to the world. It is a form of soft power.

Even though an all-white, traditional Russia is something that exists solely in the imagination of Western conservatives, the Kremlin's anti-LGBTQ campaign also builds on domestic queerphobia. The percentage of Russians opposing same-sex relationships rose from 60 percent in 2013 to 69 percent in 2021.

One bastion of queerphobic, especially homophobic, sentiment is the Russian Orthodox Church, which has worked extensively with conservative politicians and groups, including the aforementioned WCF. Russian Orthodox Church clerics regularly pop up to express anti-gay sentiments: most recently, the Orthodox Church responded to the Vatican's rapprochement vis-à-vis the queer community with «complete rejection of the sin of sodomy.»

Also on the list of Russia's queerphobic actors is the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya. A bona fide gay purge has

been going on in Chechnya since at least the early 2010s, with the security services employing honey traps, torture, and kidnapping. The purge is motivated by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's regime pandering to Islamic fundamentalism, and by the public association of gays with foreign and alien elements. Kadyrov's messaging is almost a hyperbolized version of what comes out of the Kremlin: he paints Chechnya as naturally «free» of gays who are, therefore, to be eradicated for the sake of society and the state.

Finally, the most important queerphobic actors in Russia are the enforcers: the security services themselves. Their queerphobia is not expressed solely in implementing Russia's anti-queer laws—they also enable a deeply abusive and homophobic prison hierarchy that puts queer men in the lower caste. This hierarchy is then used against political activists. For instance, security officers leaked private photos of leftist activist Azat Miftakhov in order to lower his status in prison and put pressure on him.

In its public rhetoric, the Kremlin uses queerphobia to justify an aggressive foreign policy—in other words, turning it into an ideology for war. Queer rights activists point out that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been an impetus for a new rush of anti-queer laws. But current Russian queerphobia is not wholly indigenous. It has been imposed, albeit on fertile soil, in a top-down fashion, and very much inspired by foreign conservatism. In this way, the Kremlin has transformed Russian society, enabling its queerphobic elements. And it did all this to create a perfect wartime ideology: one that depicts Russia as a savior of traditional values, both at home and abroad.

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