
LGBT Russians and Political Environment for Activism

ABSTRACT This article examines the impact of external and internal state policies on Russian LGBT activism. Drawing on the political opportunity structure (POS) framework, it focuses on the analysis of two factors (the level of state repression on LGBT people and the direction of state foreign policy) and their impact on LGBT activism. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's goal for closer relations with the West facilitated the decrease of pressure on LGBT people. That created positive conditions for LGBT activism. Since the late 1990s, however, Russia's direction in foreign policy has become more assertive. That has facilitated the increase in state repression on LGBT people and activists. Such negative changes in POS have posed challenges for LGBT activism complicating its further development.

KEYWORDS social movement, political opportunity structure, traditional values, repression, foreign policy

INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism in post-Soviet countries has attracted increasing scholarly interest. In the last few decades, the region saw the appearance of LGBT activists, groups, and organizations organizing various events and campaigns to address issues related to sexuality and gender. The focus of this article is to examine the political environment and its impact on LGBT activism in Russia. The analysis in the article contributes to the literature on new social movements (feminist, human rights, LGBT) in the post-Soviet region (Ayoub, 2016; Baker, 2017; Bilić & Kajinić, 2016; Buyantueva & Shevtsova, 2019; Fischer & Pleines, 2014; Gould & Moe, 2015; Gruszczynska, 2009; Lukić, Regulska & Završsek, 2006; O'Dwyer, 2018) and reinforces the argument for a strong impact of local sociopolitical environments on activism. The emergence of Russian LGBT activism follows somewhat similar dynamics of other new social movements in the region when the changes in government policies of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet years created favorable conditions for mobilization. Yet, since then, the post-Soviet states have taken different directions in their policies impacting the development of social movements in these countries in various ways. Some states (e.g., Ukraine) experienced changes in political opportunity structures that were favorable for activism. Other countries (e.g., Russia), displayed growing nationalist and conservative tendencies impacting the development of new social movements (e.g., feminist, LGBT) in a negative way. This article focuses on the case study of Russia as a vivid example of how the domestic political backlash against Western influence may affect LGBT rights and the development of LGBT activism.

The article also contributes to the literature examining issues related to sexual orientation and identity in Russia (Essig, 1999; Healey, 2018; Kon, 1997; Kondakov, 2014, 2019; Nartova, 2007; Schluter, 2002; Stella, 2013, 2015; Tuller, 1996). It further adds to the literature investigating the activism of LGBT Russians. There is growing scholarship dedicated to the analysis of Russian LGBT activism exploring its certain aspects such as historical overview (Nemtsev, 2008), available resources (Buyantueva, 2020a), effects of the anti-LGBT propaganda law and foreign agent law (Pakhnyuk, 2019), work of LGBT organizations (Kondakov, 2013; Lapina, 2014), the activism of transgender people (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2016), and the effects of homophobia and other grievances on activism (Buyantueva, 2018, 2020b). This article aims to add to this literature by employing the political opportunity structure approach and analyzing the impact of state policies on the emergence and development of LGBT activism in the country. By doing that, it complements the studies utilizing the political opportunity structure approach to analyze LGBT activism in various (albeit predominantly Western) countries (Andersen, 2005; Ayoub, 2013; Day & Weatherby, 2016; Dixon et al., 2017; Van Dyke & Cress, 2006).

Employing the political opportunity structure (POS) approach, the article examines internal and external Russian policies that might have an important impact on the emergence and development of LGBT activism. Specifically, the study focuses on the level of state repression of LGBT people and the direction of Russia's foreign policy. The article explores the dynamics between the political environment and LGBT activism in Russia by drawing on the analysis of the Russian legislation related to state-civil society relations and LGBT rights. The study also uses the data from online documents of Russian and international LGBT and human rights organizations, as well as information available in Russian and international online news media sources on issues related to civic activism and LGBT rights in the country. The research findings highlight how changes in the direction of Russia's foreign policy influenced the level of state repression toward members of the LGBT community. Together, these changes in external and internal government policies affected the dynamics of Russian LGBT activism. Furthermore, the article highlights that increased mobilization of members of the LGBT community might bring changes in POS.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, changes in the direction of Russia's foreign policy aiming for cooperation with the West have facilitated a decrease of state repression on LGBT people. That has created advantageous conditions for the emergence (the period of the late 1980s to mid-2000s) and development of Russian LGBT activism (mid-2000s to late 2010s) in the country. By the late 2000s to early 2010s, a variety of LGBT groups and organizations (e.g., the Russian LGBT Network—the first and only Russian interregional umbrella organization, Avers in Samara, Rakurs in Arkhangel'sk, religious Nuntiare et Recreare in Saint Petersburg, Maximum in Murmansk) worked in the country. LGBT activists engaged in a range of tactics and strategies such as organization of cultural and education events (e.g., film screenings and discussions organized by the film festival *Bok o Bok* [Side by Side], sport and disco events organized by the Russian LGBT Sport Federation), petitioning, litigation, and street public events (e.g., Pride marches, Rainbow flash mobs). However, Russia demonstrated growing assertiveness

in foreign policy toward the West, which caused an increase of state repression toward LGBT people. By the late 2010s, growing political constraints complicated further development of LGBT activism forcing activists to adapt to the hostile political environment by changing their tactics and strategies. They, for example, focused more on organizing indoor events rather than street events to diminish the risks of attacks and harassment from the police and homophobic groups.

The article begins with a brief overview of the POS approach. Then it examines the dynamics between POS (the level of state repression of LGBT people and the direction of state foreign policy) and LGBT activism in Russia.

POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

When examining activism and social movements, it is important to consider the impact of political opportunity structures (POS) that consist of political opportunities and constraints (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1998). Tarrow (1998) defines POS as “consistent—but not necessarily formal, permanent or national—dimensions of the political environment that either encourage or discourage people from using collective action” (p. 18). Different countries offer different POS for activism (Eisinger, 1973; Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi, 2004). Moreover, POS affect tactics and strategies activists choose to use (Kitschelt, 1986; McAdam, 1982; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996). However, the POS approach has been criticized for identifying too broad aspects of POS and ignoring those POS that might be more relevant to a specific social movement (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Sartori, 1991). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify and put aside broader POS characteristics affecting all movements in a country in a somewhat similar way and, instead, to focus on specific aspects of POS affecting a specific movement (Berclaz & Guigni, 2005; Guigni, 2007; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004).

Thus, the article acknowledges that broader aspects of POS, such as the state’s institutional structure, power relations within the party system, and alliance structures (Kriesi et al., 1995), have an important impact on civic activism in general. It suggests, however, that we focus on the analysis of two specific aspects of POS and their dynamics with LGBT activism in Russia:

1. The level of state repression on LGBT people and activists. The level of state repression on members of the LGBT community should be relatively low for their activism to emerge and develop in the country. In other words, the level of state repression should be low enough to allow the possibility of activism. If the level of state repression is high, it might cause political passivity and activism would not emerge and develop. The repression should not be so high to completely oppress. Nevertheless, it should be present to make LGBT people willing to engage in activism (Engel, 2001). For instance, the ban of and police violence against the participants of the 2005 Poznan March of Equality resulted in a number of street events for LGBT rights in Poland (Gruszczynska, 2009). Brown’s (1995) concept of “wounded attachments” suits well to describe the impact of state repression on LGBT activism here. State repression—that is,

politicized segregation from an imagined ideal that forms wounded attachments—might facilitate mobilization of LGBT people who would claim inclusion and equal rights. In turn, increased activism of members of the LGBT community might facilitate backlash and growth of state repression (Gould & Moe, 2015; O’Dwyer, 2018).

2. The direction of state foreign policy. The article suggests this factor plays an important role in affecting LGBT activism. Or, rather, this factor has an impact on the level of state repression on LGBT people and, by doing that, it affects their activism. Depending on the direction in foreign policy, the government may decrease or increase of repression on members of the LGBT community. If, for example, the state’s foreign policy is directed toward cooperation and/or integration with the West, then it may decrease its level of repression. The European Union presents a good example of how the state’s foreign policy toward cooperation might be instrumental in facilitating favorable changes in the level of repression on LGBT people and activists. The EU promotes non-discrimination of minorities (including LGBT people). To join the EU, the new member states are encouraged to adopt certain policy changes to improve the situation with LGBT rights (O’Dwyer, 2012). Thus, potential member states’ desire to join the EU facilitates policy changes to decrease the repression of LGBT people. In turn, that provides advantageous conditions for LGBT people in these countries to engage in activism.

Activists might also instigate the boomerang pattern of influence, which occurs when local activists bypass the state and employ international (Western) networks to facilitate pressure on the state from outside (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). However, if the state is hostile or assertive toward the West and identifies Western influence as a threat to its national security and integrity, then it might be less responsive to such pressure and bring negative changes in POS. In this case, the state might increase repressive actions toward LGBT people and complicate activism. For example, Malawian LGBT people were blamed for the Western countries’ threat to withhold financial aid that caused intensified political and social homophobia, creating hostile conditions for LGBT activism in the early 2010s (Currier, 2014).

Thus, the direction of state foreign policy affects the level of state repression on LGBT people. Together, these two POS might have an interesting dynamic with LGBT activism by offering advantageous opportunities or complicating mobilization of LGBT people. In the following sections, the article will explore how these POS affected the emergence and development of Russian LGBT activism as well as how LGBT mobilization had brought changes in these POS.

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE RISE OF LGBT ACTIVISM: THE LATE 1980S TO MID-2000S

Until the late 1980s, there was little to no LGBT activism in Russia. It was related to the high level of state pressure on same-sex relations in the Soviet period. Sexual relations

between men were criminalized from 1934 until 1993. Same-sex relations (predominantly between men) were perceived as a capitalist influence and a threat to the socialist state (Horne et al., 2009). It is difficult for scholars to identify a solid number on how many men were imprisoned under sodomy charges for several reasons. First, not all of the official data is open for the researchers. The Federal Security Service (FSB) and presidential archives that hold records on the repression of homosexual men are not open to scholars (Healey, 2018). Second, the available records are also difficult to examine because, in the same criminal case, a man could often be charged for various offenses (including sodomy) without them being cross-listed (Essig, 1999; Nemtsev, 2008). According to Kon (1997) and Essig (1999), around 831–1,414 men were imprisoned under sodomy charges every year in the period of 1934–93. As Healey (2001) sums it up, this period saw around 26,000 men put in prison. Lesbian relations were not criminalized in the Soviet period. However, women suspected in engaging in sexual relations with women could be forced to submit for psychiatric treatment (Essig, 1999). There is no concrete data on the number of women subjected to this. Overall, the level of state repression on gays and lesbians was extremely high during the Soviet period. “Homosexuality was simply never mentioned anywhere; it became the ‘unmentionable sin’” (Kon, 1993, p. 15). LGBT people had to keep a low profile minimizing their activities mostly to anonymous contacts or close friends or frequenting public meeting spaces like bath houses and public toilets (Essig, 1999). Thus, POS were not favorable for LGBT activism in Soviet Russia.

There was an attempt by LGBT people to organize in the early 1980s when a group of gays and lesbians founded *Gei Laboratoriia* [Gay Laboratory] in Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad). The organization was focused on developing the LGBT community, education, and, most importantly, decriminalization of homosexuality. However, *Gei Laboratoriia*'s activities were quickly repressed by the KGB. The KGB and the police often employed coercive and repressive measures (e.g., blackmail, arrests) to suppress and control members of the LGBT community (Healey, 2018). Until Mikhail Gorbachev's political reforms (e.g., *perestroika*, *glasnost*), the level of state repression was significantly high for LGBT people to engage in activism.

The late 1980s to early 1990s witnessed favorable policy changes such as liberalization and democratization of society. These changes facilitated a decrease in state repression toward LGBT people. In 1993, homosexuality was decriminalized. According to Kon (1997), the state's intentions were to adopt democratic ideas and join the Council of Europe. That implies that changes in Russia's foreign policy directed toward cooperation with the West were the likely reasons for such lessening of state repression on members of the LGBT community.

It should be noted that, since homosexuality was decriminalized in 1993, there were not a lot of other positive legal changes related to LGBT rights in the period the section examines. Same-sex relations (including partnership or marriage) were not legally recognized by civic, family, and administrative laws. Until 1997, criminal law differentiated between heterosexual and homosexual relations with, for example, stricter punishment for homosexual rape. It changed in 1997 when the new Criminal Code (articles 132, 133)

started viewing heterosexual and same-sex relations identically in regard to the age of consent and penalty for rape. As for transgender rights, transgender people were (and still are) required to undergo a psychiatric evaluation to start hormonal treatment and surgeries. Even though it was legally possible to change transgender persons' documentation, the process was complex and slow.¹

In the early 2000s, there appeared a possibility of criminalization of same-sex sexual relations. However, its critics viewed it more as an attempt for publicity rather than a serious legislative initiative (Newsru.com, 2002a). The draft law suggested criminalization of homosexuality with an aim to strengthen public morality, family, and public health as well as to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS (Sutyagin, 2006). The draft was rejected by the State Duma with only 58 votes in its support (the required minimum is 226 votes). In turn, Aleksei Mitrofanov (member of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia) suggested for the sake of "gender equality" to criminalize sexual relations between women as well (Newsru.com, 2002a). These initiatives were criticized by LGBT activists and experts like Igor Kon (sociologist and long-standing supporter of LGBT rights) in the media (Sutyagin, 2006; Baev, 2016). The drafts were also criticized by other Duma members. The following statements of parliamentarians demonstrate the important impact of Russia's direction in foreign policy here. For example, Oleg Morozov (leader of the deputies group Regions of Russia) claimed that Europe would laugh at Russia if the country adopted such a law (Newsru.com, 2002b). Vladislav Reznik (member of Unity, later transformed into United Russia) also maintained that adoption of that law would cause strong criticism by the Council of Europe (Newsru.com, 2002a). Thus, Russia was yet considerate of the West. As such, the draft laws suggesting criminalization of homosexual and lesbian relations were not seriously considered by the Duma.

There is no solid data on the level of police harassment and violence toward LGBT people in the period the section examines. It might be related to the fact that, until the mid-2000s, there was no organization systematically documenting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and identity as well as representing and protecting LGBT people and their rights. At the same time, as a member of the LGBT community observed in the interview to Lenta.ru (2017), the level of police harassment and/or violence against LGBT people was rather low. There were very few incidents of police officers breaking into gay clubs and checking patrons' documents. However, the police often ignored and/or did not actively investigate crimes committed against members of the LGBT community (Essig, 1999).

According to Kondakov (2012), LGBT Russians experienced "wounded attachments" due to the state repression still present in the country that fed into the lack of visibility and the impossibility of public claiming of equal rights. However, as Essig's study (1999) demonstrated, many LGBT Russians felt that the decrease of state repression in the form of decriminalization of homosexuality stopped their fear of state repression allowing them to be open and visible about their sexual orientation and identity.

1. Until 2018, the change of documentation was only possible through a court.

Thus, changes in Russia's foreign policy and its willingness to cooperate with the West facilitated the decrease of state repression toward LGBT people (e.g., decriminalization of homosexuality, lower level of police harassment and violence), and that created positive conditions for LGBT activism. The early Russian gay and lesbian organizations (e.g., Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities [later, Association for Gays and Lesbians], *Fond Chaikovskogo* [Tchaikovsky Fund], and *Kril'ia* [Wings] in Saint Petersburg) appeared in the late 1980s to early 1990s (Essig, 1999). The majority of these organizations were concentrated in Moscow and Saint Petersburg with a few activists organizing in smaller cities. For instance, in the early 1990s, Siberian activists established organizations like the Siberian Initiative in Barnaul and the Siberian Association of Sexual Minorities in Krasnoyarsk (Nemtsev, 2008). Early LGBT activists focused most of their attention on the development of the LGBT community and the abolition of the sodomy law through such tactics as petition gathering (Essig, 1999). Decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993 allowed them to switch their attention to the development of LGBT community through organization of educational and cultural events, providing safe spaces for socialization, founding gay and lesbian press, and work on such issues as HIV/AIDS (Kon, 1997; Nemtsev, 2008). For example, in the early 1990s, Saint Petersburg activists organized cultural events such as an art exhibition titled "Woman as Object and Subject of Art" and festivals like Christopher Street Days with discos and educational seminars on health issues in Saint Petersburg, gay discos in Tomsk, and two Siberian Gay Festivals in 1992 and 1993 (Essig, 1999). Moscow activists organized two conferences on LGBT issues (Essig, 1999; Nemtsev, 2008). Activists also published gay and lesbian press (e.g., *Tema* [Theme], *Risk*, *Impul's* [Impulse], *Omskaia Tema* [Omsk Theme], *Ostrov* [Island], and *Kvir* [Queer]) (Kon, 1997; LGBTRU.com, 2017; Sputniknews.com, 2013).

Overall, it could be reasoned that, during the late 1980s to 1990s, Russia's goals for closer relations with the West facilitated the decrease of repression on LGBT people such as decriminalization of homosexuality. In turn, that provided positive conditions for LGBT activists, groups, and organizations to appear and start organizing various (predominantly cultural) events and activities.

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LGBT ACTIVISM: THE MID-2000S TO LATE 2010S

Since the turn of the new century, the country has witnessed a gradual increase in state repression toward LGBT people. Partly, it has been a response to LGBT activists becoming more visible by organizing public events. Since the mid-2000s, LGBT activists have consistently organized events directed not only at members of the LGBT community but also at the broader public. Russian LGBT activists have organized various street events such as Pride marches, demonstrations, and single-person pickets to challenge discrimination based on sexual orientation and identity and to demand recognition of their rights. Most attempts to organize Pride marches in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and other cities were banned by the local authorities. Other public events were allowed on a more frequent basis. However, since 2013 (the adoption of the federal anti-LGBT propaganda

law), it has become increasingly problematic to obtain authorization to organize most LGBT street events.² The first attempt to organize Moscow Pride deserves to be discussed in more detail since it was the first LGBT street events that attracted wide public and political attention domestically and abroad.

In 2005, Moscow activists announced their plans to organize the first Pride, which attracted domestic and international media attention. Moscow authorities allowed the organization of Pride cultural events because they were to be held indoors. The march through the city center was banned, however. The ban of the march as well as the broad media attention turned Moscow Pride into a visible political affair (Stella, 2013). The official reasons behind the authorities' refusal to authorize the march were traffic disruptions and concerns for participants' safety. In truth, however, LGBT activists' intention to organize a Pride march indicated their change in tactics and strategies into becoming more visible. The political and religious elite, as well as certain parts of society (nationalist, religious, and homophobic), found growing visibility of LGBT activists unacceptable for Russia. Then Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov considered such events "satanical acts" and "propaganda of homosexuality" (Vedomosti, 2007) underlying the overall political stance on LGBT activism and their public events in the country. Interestingly, LGBT activists intended to march along Tverskaia Street, which was usually employed for official street events serving as a symbol of Russia's national identity (Stella, 2013). When activists decided to march despite the ban, they were violently attacked by nationalist groups and detained by the police. Thus, events surrounding the Moscow Pride indicated LGBT activists' intention of becoming more visible in their work.

Undoubtedly, increasing visibility of LGBT activists contributed to the escalation of state repression toward LGBT people. For the most part, however, such an increase of repression was facilitated by significant changes in state policies aiming to promote conservative and anti-Western discourse on national and international levels. First of all, Russia experienced changes in the direction of its foreign policy. Russia's foreign policy became more assertive for several reasons such as advances by NATO and European Union in the post-Soviet region, "color revolutions," and Russia's search for an independent developmental course (March, 2012; Muravyeva, 2014; Stepanova, 2015). These changes manifested, for example, in the introduction of such concepts as "sovereign democracy" and "democratic multipolarity." The concept of "sovereign democracy" was introduced by Vladislav Surkov (formerly of the Presidential Administration) and referred to the state's exclusive right in determining its policies and defending it against any external pressure (Kommersant, 2006). The concept of "democratic multipolarity" was presented as a counterpoint to the US dominance in the international arena. The concept implies the goal of establishing a "system of international relations

2. It is a legal requirement to notify and obtain authorization/approval by the local authorities for street events (Federal Law 19 June 2004 N54-FZ). The organization of single-person pickets, however, does not require authorization, which made them one of the most preferred types of street events for LGBT activists. The law provides the authorities with an opportunity to ban any street event under various pretexts such as a public space listed in a notification as being already booked for the required day.

that would reflect the diversity of the contemporary world with its varied interests” (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000).

The increase of state repression of members of the LGBT community was also influenced by the state’s promotion of conservatism, which was closely connected with anti-Western rhetoric. The conservative discourse was introduced in the mid-2000s in response to the poor demographic situation in the country (Pecherskaya, 2013). However, the state began to firmly promote conservatism since identifying it in 2012 as a necessary measure for the country’s survival and in response to growing Western influence (Wilkinson, 2014). The state’s promotion of conservatism was also connected with the increasing sociopolitical influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (Jarzyńska, 2014). Its leaders vigorously supported the state’s conservative policies and frequently shared their negative views toward LGBT people and activists. For example, Patriarch Kirill supported the 2020 constitutional amendments that allowed Russian authorities to ignore decisions of international actors such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). He disdainfully claimed that the ECHR “is known for several decisions that compel our country to allow parades of sexual minorities” (Patriarchia.ru, 2020). Furthermore, the state’s promotion of conservative discourse was also affected by the 2011–12 protests “For Fair Elections” that mostly involved the well-educated urban population expressing strong support for human rights and democratic values (Dmitriev, 2015). In order to appeal to and facilitate the support of a wider Russian population, the state found it advantageous to promote conservatism and traditionalism (Petrov, Lipman & Hale, 2014).

Anti-LGBT rhetoric fit well in the state’s conservative anti-Western discourse by presenting LGBT people as a negative Western influence and a threat to Russians’ morality and traditional values. For example, a report completed by Russian legal experts and issued by the Strasbourg representative office of the Russian Orthodox Church accused the West of an “aggressive promotion of homosexuality” that should be prevented (Ponkin, Kuznetsov & Mikhaleva, 2011). Moreover, as President Vladimir Putin stated, Russia was to become a leading force on the global level in defending “traditional family values” (Kremlin.ru, 2013). The conservative anti-Western discourse vindicated the increase of state repression of members of the LGBT community.

The escalation of state repression of LGBT people and activists manifested in the following legal changes. The state prohibited propaganda of homosexual or “nontraditional” sexual behavior to children (the anti-LGBT propaganda law).³ Another law banned the adoption of Russian children by foreign same-sex couples and by foreigners from the countries legalizing same-sex marriage (Government.ru, 2014). Besides, the State Duma discussed a draft law proposing to include same-sex relations in the list of

3. The ban was enacted on the regional level first: Riazan (2006), Arkhangel'sk (2011), Kostroma (2011), Saint Petersburg (2012), Novosibirsk (2012), Magadan (2012), Samara (2012), Krasnodar (2012), Bashkortostan (2012), Vladimir (2012), Irkutsk (2013), and Kaliningrad (2013). The federal law was adopted on 29 June 2013. As soon as any federal law is passed, it extends its power over all Russian territory. The law restricts information on LGBT topics that potentially could be accessed by children. Violation of the law is punishable by fines and/or suspension of business, or, for foreigners, expulsion from the country.

conditions (among alcoholism and drug abuse) that would allow the authorities to terminate LGBT people's parental rights. The draft was withdrawn by its initiator, Aleksei Zhuravlev (member of United Russia), for reworking (RIA Novosti, 2013). Therefore, there is still a possibility of its return. In July 2020, the state adopted constitutional amendments that essentially banned same-sex marriage by declaring marriage to be a union between man and woman (Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Article 72). In the same month, the State Duma received the bill that would further infringe LGBT rights by impeding transgender people's rights to get married and adopt children (Zatari, 2020). Moreover, according to that law draft, same-sex marriages registered abroad would not be recognized in Russia.

Since Russia started to become increasingly wary of the West, international instruments had little success in regard to these negative changes. The anti-LGBT propaganda law serves as an example. In June 2017, the ECHR ruled that Russia violated the European convention of human rights on freedom of expression and nondiscrimination, and that the anti-LGBT propaganda law "reinforces stigma and encourages homophobia, which is incompatible with the notions of equality, pluralism and tolerance inherent in a democratic society" (*Baev and Others v. Russia*, 2017). The Russian Ministry of Justice expressed its disagreement with the court's decision arguing that the anti-LGBT propaganda law did not discriminate and forbid homosexuality but was aimed at protecting morals and health of children (Interfax, 2017). Moreover, there is a strong likelihood that Russia will ignore this and other ECHR rulings. In 2015, the Russian Constitutional Court allowed Russian courts to consider decisions of international bodies as "unenforceable" if they contradict the Russian Constitution. In October 2017, Duma speaker Viacheslav Volodin and the Federation Council chairwoman Valentina Matvienko maintained Russia's right to ignore the ECHR's rulings if Russia could not participate in the selection of judges⁴ (Radio Free Europe, 2017). Furthermore, the 2020 constitutional amendments (Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Article 79) allowed Russian authorities to ignore the decisions of international bodies. Thus, Russia's assertiveness toward the West facilitated legal changes prioritizing national law over international law. That complicates LGBT activists' employment of litigation tactics since, for example, the ECHR's decisions could be disregarded by the national authorities.

The Kremlin's anti-Western discourse combined with the growing wariness of opposition activity facilitated further legal changes directed to contain Russia's civil society, which also affected LGBT activism:

- A requirement of nongovernmental organizations receiving foreign funding and being politically active to register as foreign agents (the foreign agent law) (Federalnyi Zakon, 20 July 2012 N121-FZ).

4. Judges are selected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where Russia's voting rights were suspended due to the annexation of Crimea. In response, Russia canceled its payments to the Council of Europe (*Independent*, 2017).

- A ban on NGOs that engage in “political activity,” work “against Russia’s interests,” and receive US funding (the “Dima Yakovlev” law) (Federalnyi Zakon, 28 December 2012, N272-FZ).
- Revision of the definition of treason to include providing advisory, financial, or other aid to foreign states or international bodies that target Russia’s security (Federalnyi Zakon, 12 November 2012, N190-FZ).
- A ban on unwelcome (or undesirable) organizations that threaten the state’s security and public order and health (Federalnyi Zakon, 23 May 2015, N129-FZ).

These policy changes limit LGBT activists’ chances of getting financial support from abroad, impede the development of their networks, and consequently put severe constraints on the development of LGBT activism. The authorities interpret the term “political activity” quite broadly. For example, in 2018, Saint Petersburg HIV organization *Deistvie* [Action] was included in the list of foreign agents for several posts on VK.ru (a popular Russian social media site) (Artemenko, 2019). The authorities claimed these posts to be political and, thus, the organization was severely fined and had to close down. By 2020, several LGBT organizations were included in the list of foreign agents and heavily fined such as the film festival Side by Side, the Saint Petersburg LGBT organization *Vykhod* [Coming Out], the Murmansk LGBT organization Maximum, the Arkhangel’sk LGBT initiative group *Rakurs* [Viewpoint], the Saint Petersburg LGBT fund *Sfera* [Sphere], and the Saint Petersburg HIV organization *Deistvie* [Action]. *Deistvie*, Maximum, and *Rakurs* had to cease their activities as officially registered organizations. Thus, these negative policy changes complicate the work of LGBT organizations and limit their funding opportunities since they rely on international funding (Buyantueva, 2020a).

The state’s promotion of conservatism and the increase in repression toward LGBT people contributed to the growth of public discrimination and violence on the basis of sexual orientation and identity. According to the Russian LGBT Network (2019), in the period since the adoption of the anti-LGBT propaganda law, the cases of discrimination grew from 16.6% to 64.4%. The rate of hate crimes and violence toward members of the LGBT community also grew significantly (Kondakov, 2019).

Such an increasingly hostile sociopolitical environment forced LGBT activists to reconsider their tactics and strategies. In the late 2010s, organization of street events became less favored for several reasons. First, it became problematic to get LGBT street events authorized by the local authorities. Second, LGBT street events were likely to attract attention and attacks of anti-LGBT groups and activists. Third, LGBT street events were likely to be disrupted by the police. Single-person pickets became one of the most preferred forms of street events since organizations of those did not require authorization by the local authorities. However, even single-person picketers did not avoid harassment by the police. For example, in July 2020, the police arrested a few dozen single-person picketers who were protesting in Moscow and Saint Petersburg against the draft law discriminating against transgender people (*Vedomosti*, 2020).

In response to the growing state repression, LGBT activists switched to predominantly organizing indoor events (e.g., educational and cultural events, tea gatherings). However, even such events were under risk of violence and harassment from the authorities, police, and homophobic public. For example, in September 2020, Ekaterinburg LGBT activists organized several indoor events as a part of the Urals Pride Week. Men dressed up in Cossack⁵ uniform began patrolling the streets to harass passersby who “looked gay” (Znak.com, 2020). Moreover, a blogger filed a complaint to the prosecutor office, the FSB, and the President’s Administration to check the Urals Pride Week for LGBT propaganda (Ei.ru, 2020). Cossacks and nationalist activists tracked where the events took place and harassed event attendants (Znak.com, 2020).

The distribution of information on LGBT topics also suffered due to the aforementioned legal changes (e.g., the anti-LGBT propaganda law). Websites and social media content on LGBT themes were regularly targeted, removed, and/or shut down by the authorities. For example, TikTok (a popular social media video platform) admitted to deleting videos with LGBT content at the request of the Russian authorities (Glukhova & Borodikhin, 2020).

As this section demonstrated, the increase of state repression together with the changes in the direction in Russia’s foreign policy negatively affected the development of LGBT activism in the country. LGBT activists’ level of public visibility (e.g., street events, publications in the media and press) suffered due to the anti-LGBT propaganda law as well as harassment and violence from the police and homophobic groups and individuals. Activists’ resources were also affected by negative policy changes (e.g., the foreign agent law, the unwelcome organizations law). Indoor events were also frequently targeted by the police and homophobic activists.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine the dynamics between Russia’s internal and external policies and LGBT activism in the country. The analysis showed that the level of state repression on members of the LGBT community was affected by Russia’s direction in foreign policy. The state’s willingness to cooperate with the West in the mid-1980s to early 1990s contributed to the decrease in state repression toward LGBT people (e.g., decriminalization of homosexuality). That opened political opportunities for members of the Russian LGBT community to mobilize. The turn of the new century, however, indicated Russia’s growing assertiveness toward the West manifesting in the adoption of anti-Western conservative discourse. That also coincided with increased visibility of LGBT activists in the country. LGBT people and activists became a convenient political target for justification of anti-Western stance and protection of traditionalism.

5. Cossacks are militaristic, xenophobic, and religious groups that are present predominantly in the southern parts of Russia (Tayler, 2005). The police and local authorities cooperate with Cossacks by authorizing them to protect public order, patrol the streets, and assist the police.

The state's anti-Western conservative agenda facilitated further increases in state repression of LGBT people and activists. The policy changes that intended to block financial support coming from abroad (e.g., the foreign agent law, a ban of unwelcome organizations) and to impede the circulation of information on LGBT topics (the anti-LGBT propaganda law) were particularly detrimental to the development of LGBT activism.

As a result, Russian LGBT activists faced increasing constraints and shrinking political opportunities. In response to the increasingly hostile political environment, LGBT activists and organizations had to change their tactics and strategies and minimize their public visibility through street events. Instead, they became more focused on further development of the LGBT community, for example, by organizing indoor cultural and educational events. ■

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