

State-Led Persecution of LGBTIQ+ Communities in Russia: Imposing Targeted Sanctions and Strengthening EU Protection Mechanisms

The situation regarding LGBTIQ+ rights in Russia has escalated from systemic discrimination to an existential threat. Russia has had discriminatory legislation specifically targeted at LGBTIQ+ since 2013. However, recent developments, including the total ban on gender-affirming care and the designation of the 'movement' as extremist, have essentially criminalized the group's very existence. This has resulted in the near-eradication of self-organization and the full-scale systemic oppression of the community in both public and private life. While official demographic statistics on LGBTIQ+ individuals in Russia are non-existent, and census results in general are not very accurate, based on international LGBTIQ+ demographic benchmarks we can roughly estimate that around 7 to 14 million people in Russia are affected by this persecution.

Key Issues

The Russian Supreme Court decision, commenced on 10 January 2024, declaring the "international LGBT movement" extremist, has created a legal basis for mass criminal and administrative cases. This has resulted in systematic persecution, with 15 criminal cases opened in 2024-2025 against 20 accused, carrying an average sentence of 6 years and a maximum of 12 years, one of whom, Andrei Kotov, committed suicide in a pre-trial detention center after spending a month in custody (Moscow court issued a posthumous guilty verdict). Other brutal repressive practices include taking custody of children from LGBTIQ parents and the forced psychiatric treatment of LGBTIQ adolescents (application of conversion practices).

Persecution is also administrative: fines and penalties are issued both for "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" and for 'participation in the "international LGBT movement"' or 'the demonstration of [its] symbols'. The latter has already been used for over a hundred cases. Penalties in administrative cases have been issued, for example, for rainbow-coloured frog-shaped earrings (a 5-day detention), public coming-outs, or even "likes" on social networks. Since the "extremist" designation, there have been more than 50 raids on queer venues, such as gay clubs. During these raids, those present often faced violence and humiliation and were sometimes served military draft notices. Even two major publishing houses that publish books with 'undesirable' content were targeted.

These raids led to the destruction of the public infrastructure of the LGBTIQ community. Furthermore, lawyers representing LGBTIQ activists are under constant pressure. Since extremism cases are often classified, defense lawyers need clearance to work on them, which under the current Russian law, creates a threat of being barred from leaving the country. This persecution fuels an increase in hate crimes, with radical groups harassing and de-anonymizing LGBTIQ people, often with the tacit consent of law enforcement, which in some regions uses the practice of fake dates to blackmail victims. Overall, LGBTIQ rights in Russia are under systemic threat, forcing many to leave the country.

Despite mounting state pressure, Russian queer activism persists. While many older organizations have been suppressed, a new generation of young volunteers and activists is organizing highly motivated underground online and offline initiatives to fill the gaps. These groups provide vital mutual support, psychological, and legal aid across Russia, often with significant assistance from their colleagues outside the country, including the financial one. The environment is so restrictive that crowdfunding is almost unfeasible, and regranting from abroad remains the only option. The continued work demonstrates that the community survives both inside the country and in exile, making secure, dual-focused support for activists both home and abroad, critical to the community's survival.

Recommendations and Requests

In response to this systemic persecution, the European Commission is invited to consider leveraging its external and internal mechanisms. Firstly, it would be beneficial to call for Magnitsky-style sanctions targeting the specific institutions and individuals, including judges, prosecutors, and police officers, responsible for the persecutions of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Since the suppression of civil society directly enables the state's ability to wage war, it would be highly effective for the EU to ensure that the 'middle management' of the repressive apparatus faces direct consequences."

The EU could also intensify financial and protective support for exiled and underground Russian LGBTIQ+ civil society organizations. Given the total criminalization of the movement, it is critical to implement flexible funding mechanisms that ensure the anonymity and safety of recipients inside the country. Additionally, support is needed for mobility and rehabilitation programs to facilitate experience exchange, education, and recovery for activists continuing their work in Russia. Furthermore, to ensure continuous, informed action, establishing a more focused monitoring and reporting framework on LGBTIQ+ rights in Russia would be beneficial.

Secondly, the EU is requested to consider action in the framework of its mechanisms concerning asylum. Crucially, the Commission should encourage the EU Agency for Asylum to prioritize, explicitly document, and highlight the systemic persecution of LGBTIQ+ people in Russia within its country of origin reports, personnel training, and guidance to the Member States. It's essential to ensure that Russia is excluded from all 'safe country of origin' lists, as the total criminalization of LGBTIQ+ identities makes any 'fast-track' procedure for Russian claimants inherently dangerous.

Regarding accommodation, queer refugees arriving in the EU are often placed in temporary accommodation centres where national rules may fail to guarantee a safe environment. The Commission might initiate research into this situation of queer migrants in temporary accommodation centres across all Member States, synthesize the data by engaging civil society experts, and subsequently formulate recommendations for Member States to account for the various vulnerabilities of asylum seekers when accommodating them.

In summary, the European Commission is respectfully encouraged to consider drafting targeted sanctions against key perpetrators, establishing a permanent monitoring mechanism, intensifying financial and protective support for Russian queer civil society, and considering Russia as an unsafe country for LGBTIQ+ asylum claimants within EUAA guidance and training. Addressing the systematic criminalization and persecution of the LGBTIQ+ community in Russia requires a resolute and multilateral response.

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