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Sexual rights and the internet

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Introduction

The protest was not large – some 50 people at most, who had stuck red masking tape across their mouths to symbolise how Russia’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movement is being silenced. As they made their way from St. Petersburg’s Vosstaniya Square to Kazansky Cathedral this April, the abuse started. Beer was thrown; pepper gas sprayed. Their posters were snatched and burnt with the warning: “This is what is going to happen to those who support faggots.”

Such intimidation was expected by the marchers. Since 2013, when Russia’s internal political discourse became dominated by the need to “return to traditional values”, attacks on the LGBT community and its supporters have become all too common. What made the April rally in St. Petersburg noteworthy was not the harassment, but what those present were protesting against: the repression against Russia’s LGBT community, now also occurring online.

Policy and political background

The federal legislation “For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values” – more commonly known as Russia’s “anti-gay propaganda” law – was signed into force by President Vladimir Putin on 30 June 2013. It bans the dissemination among children of “propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships”, which in practice means lesbian, gay and bisexual relationships.

As a result, Human Rights Watch has warned that the law has created an environment that “openly discriminates against LGBT people, legitimizes anti-LGBT violence and seeks to erase LGBT people from the country’s public life.”

No safe haven

In a social and political environment where admitting to be gay risks stigmatisation, the threat of physical violence and state discrimination, there are few places Russia’s LGBT community can turn without fear of reprisal. Increasingly required to hide and even deny their sexuality in public, one such place – at least until recently – was the internet. Svetlana is an example of someone for whom the anonymity of the online world provided an important and rare opportunity to voice her fears and worries. Aged 16 and living in a small town in central Russia where a man had been killed for being a homosexual, she posted: “I am scared that they will find me and lynch me. Sometimes I want to cry out: ‘Accept me for who I am!’”

1 QueerRussia. (2015, 19 April). Clashes and Flashmobs on the Day of Silence in St Petersburg. QueerRussia. queerussia.info/2015/04/19/19492/#sthash.USS1ofIH.dpbs
3 pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&vkart=card&nd=102337335&rdk=\&intelsearch=135-%D4-%C7
5 McCormick, J. P. (2013, 12 May). Russia: Tortured and killed gay man was ’raped with beer bottles’. PinkNews. www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/05/12/russia-tortured-and-killed-gay-man-was-raped-with-beer-bottles
8 Ibid.

ONLINE AND UNDER ATTACK: THE INTIMIDATION AND STIGMATION OF RUSSIA’S LGBT COMMUNITY
The site where she made this plea is Deti-404. Since the passing of the anti-gay propaganda law it has become one of the country's most important online havens for the LGBT community, and particularly for teenagers seeking help from professional psychologists or wishing to share their experiences about bullying and homophobia. Deti-404 means “Youth-404” in English. The name is a reference to the common web error message for a link that does not exist – “404 Page Not Found” – and was intended by its founder, Russian journalist and LGBT activist Lena Klimova, as a comment on Russia’s desire to deny the existence of its LGBT youth. Initially existing primarily on two social networks – Facebook and its Russian equivalent VKontake – its forums became an online community filled with letters and photos from LGBT Russians looking to express themselves.

When she started the site in March 2013, Klimova did not realise how important it would become. At first it was intended as merely another forum for conversation, advice and assistance. It was only when the anti-gay propaganda law was passed that it became a much-needed refuge. She tells of the reaction the legislation provoked: “Many youngsters got very upset. Many were scared. Many are seriously discussing the possibility of emigrating abroad to study.” She explains that “their lives are far from easy. Coming-outs are associated with many and serious risks. In the worst cases, parents can go so far as forcing their children to leave, beating them, blocking phone and internet use, sending them to be ‘treated’ by a psychologist, placing them in a psychiatric hospital, or subjecting them to threats and harassment.” In a survey she conducted of LGBT teenagers, she found that a number had considered suicide, and fewer than half had come out to their parents. Svetlana, the 16-year-old quoted above, has told how her mother called all homosexuals “mutants” and how her father said he would like to get out his gun and kill them. That is why, as part of the Deti-404 project, Klimova helps at-risk LGBT teenagers to get to talk to a specially trained psychologist if they wish.

It was in November 2014 that the Russian authorities turned their attention to Deti-404 in what has become the most symbolic example yet of how the limitations being placed on the country’s LGBT community in the “real world” are now also being imposed online. The country’s media watchdog, Roskomnadzor, opened a case against Klimova for breaking the anti-gay propaganda law. “The information uploaded onto the community site is mostly geared towards creating a positive image of non-traditional sexual relations in the eyes of children, to make them seem equivalent and, in some cases, superior to traditional ones,” its report said. Klimova was fined 50,000 rubles (USD 857, or twice the average Russian monthly salary). An appeal against the fine was meant to be heard on 6 April but, on arriving at court, Klimova found it had already been upheld at a secret session on 25 March to which she had not been invited. St. Petersburg lawmaker Vitaly Milonov has already demanded that the site be shut down. Now that Klimova has been tarred through the failure of her legal appeal as someone spreading “gay propaganda”, the path is clear for Roskomnadzor to block her site whenever it wishes.

Nor is Deti-404 alone in finding itself under attack. In some cases the limitations being placed on the LGBT community in the digital sphere border on the farcical. The game The Sims 4, for example, was banned in Russia from being sold to anyone under the age of 18, as it historically allows same-sex relationships in-game. Then there was the denouncing of the new U2 album distributed free by Apple as part of its iTunes update – the cover image was criticised for being gay propaganda as it showed a man with a shirtless 18-year-old boy. It was in fact the group’s drummer, Larry Mullen, embracing his son, Elvis. But the ridiculous nature of such examples should not hide the increasingly ubiquitous nature of what is occurring. The newspaper Molodoi Dalnevostochnik (“Young Dalnevostochnik”) was fined for publishing a story about a gay teacher as in it he was quoted as saying that “homosexuality is normal.”

10 www.deti-404.com/
15 Malberg, E. (2014, 10 May). The Sims 4 gets adults only rating in Russia because it depicts same-sex relationships. GameSpot. www.gamespot.com/articles/the-sims-4-gets-adults-only-rating-in-russia-because-it-depicts-same-sex-relationships/1100-6419552
a gay dating app was banned. But, like Deti-404, these are just the high-profile cases. Perhaps the most disturbing element of the online LGBT repression occurring in Russia today is the daily, usually unreported and often highly organised hunt for anything, however large or small, appearing on the internet which could be tarred as “non-traditional”.

Late last year a cartoon started to spread on Russian social networks of a long-haired, bearded man clutching a rainbow flag being crushed by a giant hand, while a little boy in green overalls looked on. Its caption read: “Any virus must be crushed instantly! LGBT, drug dealers and the propaganda of perverts are calling for the destruction of our future.” The cartoon was created by Mediasguardia, a new pro-Kremlin youth organisation whose stated aim is to purge the internet of anything that could “corrupt” children. It quickly recruited 4,000 online volunteers to monitor any new material appearing. So far this digital army has filed complaints against 18,767 sites and successfully had 2,475 of them closed. It was MediaGvardia that mobilised the opposition to Deti-404 that enabled Roskomnadzor to act.

And then there are the trolls. It is hard to quantify the scale of this problem but the anecdotal evidence is not only extensive but disturbing. LGBT activists all report receiving regular online abuse. Anti-LGBT groups have also used social media to connect with gay men, posing as potential love interests, before luring them into situations where they will be attacked, a process they refer to as “safari”. The recent cartoon by MediaGvardia, a pro-Kremlin youth organisation whose stated aim is to purge the internet of anything that could “corrupt” children, has prompted online volunteers to monitor any new material appearing. So far this digital army has filed complaints against 18,767 sites and successfully had 2,475 of them closed. It was MediaGvardia that mobilised the opposition to Deti-404 that enabled Roskomnadzor to act.

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homophobic aggression, both online and offline. Then there could be an answer to the question that one 15-year-old wrote on Deti-404: “What should I do? How to find love if you have to hide?”

**Action steps**

In this context, the following action is recommended for civil society activists:

- Lobby Western media companies present in the Russia market, such as Facebook, to have a zero tolerance policy on anti-LGBT abuse by users of their products and platforms.
- Support Deti-404 through public information campaigns and financial assistance.
- Disseminate the legal work that has already been done that demonstrates how the “anti-gay propaganda” law contravenes existing legislation on the Russian statute book.²⁶
- Gay rights, human rights and internet freedom groups should lobby Russian businesses and politicians to publicly denounce online anti-LGBT repression.
- Social media engagement with Russia’s LGBT community to ease the sense of isolation felt by many LGBTs would offer some measure of support.

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.