

Russia: Why Putin has joined the global attack on the trans community

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Trans Russians face more danger as Kremlin's war on LGBTIQ community ramps up with ban on trans healthcare

Russia has banned gender-affirming surgery and health care in a landmark bill that threatens to further endanger the country's already marginalised and persecuted trans community, as part of the Kremlin's increasingly aggressive anti-LGBTIQ agenda.

The bill was unanimously [approved](#) by Russia's State Duma, the lower house of parliament, on Friday. Once it is signed by Putin and approved by the Senate, the upper house, it will become law.

The new legislation also bans changing gender markers and names in official documents, and prohibits transgender people from adopting children. Marriages are also automatically annulled if one partner changes their gender markers; this practice already [occurred](#), but it is now official.

The bill was introduced by all 450 Duma deputies – a tactic the Kremlin used to showcase the unequivocal unity of all the “people's representatives” on this topic. The same ploy was used on the [bill](#) banning “LGBT-propaganda”, which became law last December.

It has been obvious for years that the Kremlin is trying to turn the LGBTIQ community into a scapegoat in its campaign to promote ‘traditional values’. LGBTIQ Russians often engage in anti-war and anti-Kremlin activism, so this is also a factor.

The process has become increasingly evident in the decade since Russia's first “gay propaganda” law was signed in 2013. It has become part of the Kremlin's intensifying repression spiral: adopted as part of the response to the epoch-defining pro-democracy [Bolotnaya rallies](#) a year before Russia annexed Crimea.

As with most of the Kremlin's repressions, the cruelty has been intensifying over time. In 2021, there were six cases of “LGBT-propaganda”, all of them minor offences. In 2022 that jumped to 16 and this year there has already been more than 40.

The new anti-trans bill has both global and domestic purposes.

Putin is keen on signalling to the global transphobic movement that Russia is a bastion of traditional values (remember the surreal moment when he [defended JK Rowling](#) in a 2022 national address about ‘cancel culture’) and queerphobic forces from all over the world are willing to listen and learn. Arizona state senator Wendy Rogers [supported](#) Russia's invasion of Ukraine, calling for “more tanks, less trannies” at a far-right conference in 2022. American right wing lobbyists were also instrumental in [shaping](#) the Russian state's initial queerphobia back in the early 2010s.

On the domestic front, the Kremlin is constantly searching for new scapegoats and the powerless,

already marginalised LGBTIQ community makes a perfect target. The Russian regime is expert at this: creating enemies, directing public attention away from real problems and further marginalising defenceless groups for “state security”. This is what happened with human rights defenders, opposition politicians, Crimean Tatars and religious minorities. It is what the Kremlin does best.

Persecution of trans people

Even before the transphobic bill materialised, the Kremlin’s official queerphobia has already hurt trans people.

The trans community is diverse: it includes doctors, politicians, activists, Russians, foreigners and ethnic minorities. It is also geographically diverse, not concentrated solely in the larger cities. Many trans people are impoverished, and face more poverty as state persecution destroys their income.

For example, in May, trans woman Alice Femina was verbally [harassed and forced to undress](#) in front of several police officers in Moscow – all for shouting a pro-Ukraine slogan in the street. She was later sentenced to 15 days of prison and then fired from her job. The police even threatened to send her to the frontlines to ‘service’ Russian soldiers.

Other trans people have been persecuted for displaying “Western symbols”. Former FSB employee Katerina Mayers was [detained](#) in Moscow for two days in 2022 after being arrested for [displaying a US flag on her backpack](#). Local police refused to allow her to take her hormone therapy while in detention.

[Michelle Krivetskaya](#), a trans woman based in the small town of Bryansk, spent months in a local male detention centre in 2019 on pornography charges for posting a Japanese manga online. Initially she was sentenced to three years in prison, but was released temporarily after a public pressure campaign.

Once released, Michelle returned to the children’s infectious diseases hospital where she worked as a doctor. The authorities forbade her employment due to the pornography charges, so Michelle worked for free on the frontline of the Covid-19 pandemic. She was later sentenced to a year and seven months of community service for the same “crime”.

Trans sex workers have also been [fined](#), arrested and [deported](#) from Russia if they don’t have Russian passports. Even a visibly trans dating app profile is grounds for deportation – with months spent in appalling conditions in a temporary detention centre prior to deportation.

The new legislation is also stifling the country’s political life, which is already suffocated. Take Yulia Alyoshina, the first openly transgender politician in Russia. She has just [dropped out](#) of the election for governor in Altai Krai, a large Russian region bordering Kazakhstan, because candidates needed to collect 502 signatures from municipal deputies and village heads. Only 19 people were willing to support Alyoshina; those who refused said they did so because of the impending anti-trans ban.

While some may associate the new bill with innate Russian transphobia, it is an astroturfed creature of the Kremlin – that doesn’t rely on popular support but is influenced by pandering to international transphobia and by looking for convenient scapegoats. The Russian [Ministry of Health](#) and [numerous medical professionals](#) have openly criticised it. There were no grassroots anti-trans campaigns, and some trans Russians have spoken of the [unexpected empathy](#) they have received.

Support needed

As the trans community finds itself in the state’s crosshairs, things will only get worse as the

brutality of persecution increases. Leaving the country is not an easy option, even for ordinary Russians, bearing in mind the visa bans, banking sanctions and income inequality. But for trans people, it's twice as hard. Many will probably try to flee now, but many will have to stay – and face what comes.

We stand in solidarity with the courageous organisations that provide targeted support for trans and LGBTIQ people, working in increasingly dangerous conditions.

Despite harassment and legal troubles, they save people daily. And now, they need your support more than ever – be it donations, raising awareness or anything else – don't hesitate to help them.

Organisations supporting trans rights in Russia:

[CENTRE-T](#) provides psychological support to trans* and nonbinary people:

[Delo LGBT](#) provides legal aid.

[Russian LGBT Network](#) provides psychological, legal and urgent care.

St Petersburg-based [Coming Out](#) provides psychological and legal support:

[Sphere](#) provides psychological, legal and urgent care.

[TRANS*COALITION](#) is a platform for trans* and nonbinary activists from the countries of the Caucasus, Central Asia and eastern Europe.

Russian only:

[North Caucasus SOS](#) helps LGBT+ people and their family members facing danger in the North Caucasus.

[T-Action](#) helps trans people in St Petersburg.

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P.S.

Open Democracy

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-putin-trans-gender-affirming-surgery-ban-transphobia/>