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Russia: Homophobic bill will harm those it claims to protect

An eleventh hour call to halt legislation that would enshrine homophobia and transphobia in law has been launched by Amnesty International, urging St Petersburg Governor Georgy Poltavchenko not to sign the discriminatory bill into law.

The bill claims to protect young people by banning “public actions aimed at propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality, transgenderness amongst minors”. It passed the final reading in the St Petersburg Legislative Assembly on Wednesday.

Anyone found guilty faces fines of between 5,000 and 500,000 rubles (approximately €126 - 12,600).

By restricting the publication of any materials related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) rights, this bill would severely restrict access to information about health, support networks or social activities for young people who are, or who think they might be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex.

The bill violates the rights to freedom from discrimination, equality before the law, and freedom of association, that are guaranteed by numerous international human rights treaties to which Russia is a party, as well as Russia’s Constitution.

At public hearings on the bill held on 24 February, documents stating that “homosexuals spread infections”, “homosexuals lead perverted lives”, and “homosexuals commit many crimes” were distributed, and supporters of the bill called for the forced treatment or isolation of LGBTI individuals.

This followed comments made by various members of St Petersburg’s Legislative Assembly during and following the first reading of the bill on 16 November 2011, who had called for a prohibition of LGBTI organisations’ websites, and for the use of the word “rainbow”, and images of rainbows to be classified as “propaganda for homosexuality” under the legislation.

Under the bill, freedom of assembly and expression for LGBTI groups would be prohibited anywhere where children might be present. This would rule out nearly all public events carried out by or on behalf of LGBTI people and organisations.

The publication of anything relating to LGBTI rights or providing assistance or advice – including informative leaflets as well as publications in the media and on the internet – would also be severely curtailed.

The regions of Arkhangelsk and Riazan have already introduced such legislation, and other Russian cities are reportedly planning to introduce similar legislation.

Although consensual same-sex activity was decriminalised in Russia in 1993, LGBTI people still face widespread discrimination and violence throughout the country.

LGBTI activists' attempts to organize Pride marches, cultural festivals and other events in major cities, including in St. Petersburg, have frequently been met with official red tape and violence from anti-gay groups, among them people associating themselves with the Orthodox Church.

Violent attacks against LGBTI activists often go unpunished.

Background

The Bill was originally proposed in November 2011, but further hearings were postponed at that time. It passed the third and final hearing in the St Petersburg Legislative Assembly on 29 February, following public hearings on 24 February. During the first reading of the law on 16 November, various members of the Legislative Assembly of St Petersburg called for a prohibition of websites of LGBTI organisations, and called for the use of the word 'rainbow', and images of rainbows, to be classified as propaganda for homosexuality under the legislation.

Amnesty International has issued an Urgent Action on this case:
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR46/008/2012/en>