

Gay rights are the new front line in the culture clash between Russia and the West

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*The Sochi Winter Olympics, which began on 7 February, have focused attention on Russia's stance toward homosexuality and gay rights. As **Richard Mole** writes, the issue has been particularly prominent in the country since the passing of the law against 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' last year. He argues that the subject has become a key part of Vladimir Putin's defence of traditional mores, and has been used to define Russian values against the liberal attitudes of the United States and the European Union.*



Despite the best efforts of President Putin to keep the focus on sport, Russia's anti-gay laws and rise of extreme homophobia have threatened to overshadow the Winter Olympics. The Games have become a focal point of international criticism of the law banning the spreading of 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations', with global media coverage of the Olympics **casting a spotlight** on the worsening situation for the country's gays and lesbians.

While the law did not initially contain a definition of what constituted propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations – although this did not stop the police from making arrests – in December the government published the *Criteria of Internet Content Harmful for Children's Health and Development*, which listed the following as examples of homosexual propaganda: (i) information that justified the acceptability of alternative family relations, including any statistics or stories about children adopted by gay or lesbian couples, which might lead to the conclusion that same-sex couples are 'no worse than straight couples at coping with parental responsibilities'; (ii) 'intense emotional images' aimed at discrediting traditional family models and propagating alternative family models; (iii) information that contains 'images of behaviour associated with the denial of the traditional family model' which promotes homosexual relationships; (iv) the depiction of homosexual people as role models, including any mention of famous homosexuals; and (v) anything that 'approves or encourages' LGBT people in their homosexuality. Given that the latter condition is so poorly defined, it effectively means that any content which may be considered offensive by the Russian government can now be deemed illegal and subject to prosecution.

The international backlash has been notable. Numerous world leaders, including Barack Obama, announced that they would not attend the Olympics in protest at the law and, on the eve of the opening ceremony, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon **called** for an end to attacks on and discrimination against sexual minorities: 'We must all raise our voices against attacks on lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender or intersex people. We must oppose the arrest, imprisonment and discriminatory restrictions they face.' As the games got under way, LGBT activists in Moscow and St Petersburg briefly staged protests, before being dragged away by the police. Yet, while Putin appears to have underestimated the strength of international feeling against this law, any criticism from the West will only strengthen his position at home.

For Putin, banning non-traditional sexual relations propaganda serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it must be understood as part of his on-going attempt to clamp down on actual and potential opponents and shore up support among the conservative majority. In addition, it enables him to entrench traditional Russian values in the face of the spread of Western liberal ideas, which he blames for corrupting the nation's youth and fuelling opposition to his rule. Tapping into pre-existing antipathy towards homosexuality, he is also able to use LGBT rights as a lightning rod to divert attention away from political corruption and the weakening economy.

Putin has ensured that the law resonates strongly with society by framing it as a strategy to ensure the survival of the Russian nation (88 per cent of those surveyed by the **Russian Public Opinion Centre** after the bill was signed

into law expressed their support for the move). The survival of the physical nation would require a marked increase in the Russian birth rate, which plummeted following the collapse of the USSR; and to achieve this goal, according to Putin in a TV interview last month, Russia would need to 'cleanse' itself of gay people. And to reinforce its specifically *Russian* identity, the nation would need to define itself against the United States and the European Union, rejecting their liberal values.

The culture clash between Russia and the West was evident from the Kremlin-backed human rights report published in January, in which Moscow lashed out at the European Union for its 'aggressive promotion' of the rights of sexual minorities. It was also apparent in Putin's *State of the Nation* address in December, in which he defended Russia's conservative values as a bulwark against 'so-called tolerance', which was 'genderless and infertile'.

Putin's defence of traditional values chimes with the Russian belief in its national exceptionalism, which can be traced from medieval Moscow's claim to be the 'Third Rome', through the Slavophiles' insistence on Russia's 'special path' and all the way to Lenin's communist messianism. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been searching for its special mission, and establishing itself as the defender of traditional values against Western decadence can be seen as a way for Russia to fulfil its historical destiny.

The construction of homosexuality as both non-traditional and thereby non-Russian, in tandem with Putin's rigorous defence of traditional values as the foundation of Russia's greatness, have thus successfully legitimised the marginalisation of the country's LGBT citizens. Yet, while the international outcry has been vociferous, Putin can simply provide this Western support for gay rights at the expense of Russian national values as further proof that he has been right all along.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Vladimir Putin at the Winter Olympics opening ceremony, Credit: www.kremlin.ru (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

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