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WORKING PAPER

INVISIBLE CITIZENS: HOW TARGETING AND REPRESSION OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY MINORITIES IN RUSSIA IMPACTS HUMAN RIGHTS

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INTRODUCTION

The 2023 Russian Supreme Court decision to designate the 'International LGBT Movement' as "extremist" is the latest most notable sign of Russia's targeting and repression of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) minorities in the Russian Federation.[1] In the past decade, members of LGBTQ+ communities have faced increasing discrimination and violence in Russia, with significant consequences for the realization of their human rights writ large.[2] Since 2022, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, has played a central role in monitoring and reporting on the deteriorating human rights situation for minorities in Russia, including LGBTQ+ communities. The Special Rapporteur has included examples of LGBTQ+ targeting and repression in several reports, and expanded on the use of anti-terrorism and extremism legislation as an effective strategy for targeting national minorities.[3] As one interviewee put it: "there is no other issue that permeates Russian society as much" as the targeting and repression of LGBTQ+ communities.[4]

This working paper examines the targeting and repression of SOGI minorities in the Russian Federation. It aims to explore how the Russian State weaponizes 'traditional values' narratives, securitizes SOGI minorities as societal threats, and leverages religious, societal and non-state actors to normalize human rights erosion. The paper considers the legal consequences of SOGI repression under international human rights law and reflects on these targeting strategies as a key element of Russia's 'authoritarian playbook,' with effects and consequences beyond the State itself.

A crucial starting point for this paper is the recognition that SOGI repression in the Russian Federation is not a recent phenomenon but rather an issue that has evolved over several decades, involving gradual changes in the legislative and geopolitical landscape. The paper addresses several questions, including: what are the primary methods of SOGI repression used by the Russian State and what are their effects on LGBTQ+ communities? How has the Russian State's use of 'traditional values' narratives and national identity rhetoric evolved and how do these intersect with the regulation of 'extremism' and 'propaganda'? What role have religious, societal and non-state actors played in amplifying these state narratives and reinforcing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation? How has Russian civil society, particularly LGBTQ+ groups and activists, adapted to the increasingly tightening environment?

This working paper is based on 23 interviews conducted by the authors between September and December 2025 with representatives from the UN human rights system, including former and current UN Special Rapporteurs, leaders and representatives of Russian LGBTQ+ organizations operating inside and outside the Russian Federation, LGBTQ+ activists, regional and international non-governmental organizations, researchers and academic experts on the topic.[5] These discussions aim to ensure that the authors' analysis remains grounded in the realities faced by civil society actors and resonates with broader human rights debates. The research team has also drawn on the significant reporting of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, including her recent reports to the UN General Assembly (GA) and the Human Rights Council (HRC).[6]

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION

Sexual orientation and gender identity rights, as understood today, in the Russian Federation have evolved significantly over the past fifty years, particularly following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.[7] While the collapse of the Soviet Union led to an initial liberalization of society and decriminalization of consensual same-sex conduct between men in 1993, this was largely undone in the following two decades. Indeed, SOGI rights deteriorated following the consolidation of Russian President Vladimir Putin's power in 2012 and ensuing restrictions over the public expression and visibility of SOGI.[8]

Prior to 1991, individuals who would currently be described as LGBTQ+ faced long-term discrimination

in Russia, notably as a consequence of the earlier criminalization of male same-sexual conduct in Czarist Russia, and despite being decriminalized during the 1917 October Revolution.[9] Bans related to homosexuality began as early as 1716, and as the Soviet Union increasingly blurred the boundary between public and private life through the politicization of social, personal and commercial spheres, non-normative sexual behaviour and gender expression were correspondingly subject to repression.[10] While no official stance on homosexuality existed between 1917 and 1933, the introduction of a more conservative approach under Stalin saw the recriminalization of male same-sex sexual conduct in 1934 and a marked increase in arrests of either known or suspected homosexual men.[11] However, following the fall of the Soviet Union and general liberalization within the region, consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults was once again decriminalized in 1993 through an amendment to Law No. 4901-1, and from 1997 transgender individuals were allowed to legally change their gender on official identity documents.[12]

Regardless of the initial move to a more progressive approach towards SOGI minorities in the post-Soviet Union period, widespread homophobia remained in place throughout Russian society, with a steady growth in nationalist, conservative and anti-SOGI discourse endorsed by the Russian Orthodox Church.[13] This period also included the first regional bans against 'homosexual propaganda' in 2006.[14] Putin's return to power in 2012 saw homophobic and transphobic rhetoric become increasingly prevalent under the guise of the 'traditional values' narrative.[15] The invocation of 'traditional values' as a means to emphasize an 'us versus them' rhetoric is borrowed from the Russian Orthodox Church and is inherently conservative in nature, adhering to a 'hypermasculine' and patriarchal approach that seeks to separate Russia from Western culture and assert a gender binary conception of SOGI onto Russian citizens.[16]

Putin has been a persistent champion of the 'traditional values' narrative, enshrined in formal legislative changes under his rule, which have since become key to the State's broader crackdown against opposition and civil dissent, including towards LGBTQ+ communities. In a speech to the Federal Assembly in 2012, Putin asserted that Russia would stand for the "spiritual" and "moral foundation" of civilization.[17] Ten years later, the President signed a decree that instrumentalized the concept of "spiritual and moral bases," legally solidifying the notion that such values represent Russian 'cultural sovereignty' and are necessary to protect itself from the "decadent and liberal" West.[18] In this way, the rights of LGBTQ+ people have been used as a geopolitical tool in the Russian Federation both as a marker of alignment with, and departure from, international human rights norms.

The decriminalization of consensual same-sex sexual conduct in 1993 occurred in the context of broader post-Soviet legal and political reforms, as well as Russia's engagement with European human rights standards, including its aspirations to join the Council of Europe. More recent repression against the rights of LGBTQ+ people led by Putin has coincided with the growing distance between Russia and the West, as well as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[19] Ultimately, this evolution demonstrates that SOGI repression within the Russian Federation is not a recent phenomenon but rather a longstanding issue marked by legislative changes and evolving geopolitical landscapes.[20]

Three key legislative changes have contributed particularly to the worsening of SOGI rights within the Russian Federation over the past decade.[21] First, the adoption of the 'gay propaganda law' in 2013, banning the distribution of information about LGBTQ+ relationships to children and aimed at the 'protection of minors' had a chilling effect on public expression of identity and gave tacit State approval to discrimination on the grounds of SOGI.[22] Second, the total ban on 'gay propaganda' in 2022 extended the previous 2013 law to all circumstances and mediums, including media, books, film, culture and Internet.[23] Third, in 2023, the Russian State labelled the non-existent 'International LGBT Movement' as "extremist," which has further endangered all forms of LGBTQ+ activism in Russia, including exposing LGBTQ+ individuals and pro-LGBTQ+ voices to intimidation, harassment and arbitrary detention.[24] Other changes which have affected SOGI rights in the Russian Federation include a 2020 amendment to the Russian Constitution stating that marriage is the union "of a man and a woman," as well as the labelling of many LGBTQ+

civil society actors and organizations as "foreign agents" under the Russian foreign agents law adopted in 2012, illustrating the use of public safety and national security legislation as a means to control and oppress dissent.[25] State-orchestrated targeting and repression efforts of SOGI minorities, justified under anti-SOGI legislation, have been heavily supported by religious, societal and non-state actors, including the Russian Orthodox Church, a trend which continues to this day (see 3. The Role of Religious, Societal and Non-State Actors).

Beyond the Russian Federation, similar trends have emerged in the Eastern European region. Poland, Hungary, Georgia, Belarus, Bulgaria, among others, have experienced a similar increase in political repression against SOGI minorities, showcasing similar tactics whereby domestic LGBTQ+ communities are scapegoated and 'traditional values' narratives weaponized.[26] Several interviewees also highlighted the connections between anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and nationalist, far right movements across Europe.[27] Indeed, while Russia seems to have had a leading voice against SOGI minorities in the past decades, its targeting strategies likely form part of a broader authoritarian playbook, with effects beyond the Russian Federation. The widespread reach of non-state actors, as mentioned above, has also had a significant impact on the trajectory of targeting and repression of SOGI minorities, both within the Russian Federation and the broader region.[28]

Ultimately, LGBTQ+ communities are minorities that are particularly vulnerable to repression, and ones that are repeatedly used by authoritarian regimes as a means to consolidate power and ideas of 'national identity.' Ideology and political strategy are instrumentalized as a means to justify repression and create a sense of identity that hinges on a 'common enemy,' which SOGI minorities often conveniently represent.[29] Despite the fact that SOGI minorities are typically some of the smallest minority groups and are often limited in their capacity for large-scale mobilization, they are often the first to be targeted.[30] The historical evolution of SOGI rights in Russia demonstrates the unique vulnerability LGBTQ+ communities face, including ever-deteriorating protections, highlighting how their weaponization and securitization by the Russian State erases their identity and legitimizes severe human rights violations at all levels of society.

METHODS OF STATE REPRESSION

1. WEAPONIZATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND 'TRADITIONAL VALUES'

The weaponization of national identity and 'traditional values' in the Russian Federation refers to the process by which so-called 'traditional values' and State-imposed ideas of Russian identity are used in public discourse and leveraged as a political tool to consolidate power and marginalize minorities, including non-normative SOGI. In other words, this weaponization involves the deliberate use and calculated political strategy of scapegoating minorities which, in the Russian context, has expressed itself through a series of legal measures taken by the State to discriminate against LGBTQ+ communities.[31]

The weaponization of national identity and 'traditional values' has become a primary method of State-led repression in Russia, particularly of SOGI minorities. Since Putin's return to power, the 'traditional values' narrative and moral rhetoric surrounding these so-called values have seen a turn towards ideas of 'sovereign morality,' where human rights have been reframed as foreign.[32] Morality-based 'traditional values' are used to present a sense of security, including through the promotion of sovereignty and national unity.[33] Indeed, the weaponization of national identity and 'traditional values' refers to the construction of SOGI minorities as politically and morally dangerous.[34] This includes associating individuals perceived to belong to LGBTQ+ communities as 'foreign agents' under 'Western influence,' or as a general threat to family values and what it means to be 'Russian.' In turn, this has involved the instrumentalization of national security and public safety legislation, as highlighted in the UN Special Rapporteur's reports.[35]

Much of this process of weaponization has been orchestrated through State-supported social media campaigns, misinformation and disinformation, with the broader objective of silencing and erasing civil society and LGBTQ+ identifying or sympathizing voices.

The framing of SOGI minorities as the 'other' in Russia largely coincides with the need to maintain public support for Putin and the Russian State.[36] The attempted, and largely successful, identification of LGBTQ+ communities as a threat to Russian society and its security has allowed the Government to direct hate and discrimination to its own benefit. The result is a binary mindset that separates 'us' and 'them,' legitimizing discrimination, exclusion and violence across Russia and its regions, and providing justification for extreme legal measures such as the 2013 and 2022 'gay propaganda law' and the use of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism legislation.[37] As one interviewee noted, anti-SOGI legislation in Russia has often been preceded by soft law instruments.[38] For example, the initial document outlining family policies and identifying 'traditional values' appeared for the first time in 2013 in the "Concept of Russian Traditional Values and Modern Families," composed by Russian State Duma deputy Elena Mizulina, followed by hard legal provisions passed by the Government shortly after.[39] Similarly, November 2022 saw the signing of the non-legally binding "Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values," which established the use of 'traditional values' as an ideological framework at the State level and has since become a key justification for further legislative changes, including the 2023 Supreme Court decision on the 'International LGBT Movement.'[40]

The weaponization of SOGI minorities through so-called 'traditional values' rhetoric has significant human rights implications and is particularly problematic given the ethnic, cultural, religious and regional diversity of Russian society. Indeed, while this weaponization may appear 'soft' in nature compared to when such minorities are securitized through legal measures taken against them, it nonetheless produces concrete legal consequences under international human rights law. In particular, the promotion of exclusionary language creates an environment conducive to discrimination and state inaction, raising a number of obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Weaponization in this way risks violating Article 2 (right to non-discrimination and equal protection), Article 7 (prohibition of torture and ill treatment), Article 17 (right to privacy), Article 19 (freedom of expression) and Articles 21 and 22 (freedoms of assembly and association) under the ICCPR.[41] Prior to Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe in 2022, equivalent protections under the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) could be similarly invoked. Overall, State-led narratives that stigmatize SOGI minorities contribute to a discriminatory legal and social environment, undermine equal protection and may facilitate further rights-restricting measures for groups beyond SOGI minorities.

The international jurisprudence further confirms this point. While Russia has left the Council of Europe and, therefore, the ECHR, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has repeatedly illustrated the connection between Russian weaponization and human rights violations. Notably, the cases *Alekseyev v. Russia*,[42] *Nepomnyashchiy and Others v. Russia*,[43] and *Bayev and Others v. Russia*[44] have demonstrated the ability for international human rights law to be invoked in reference to the weaponization of SOGI minorities. These cases, particularly *Bayev and Others v. Russia*, have demonstrated that the treatment of LGBTQ+ persons in the Russian Federation, the ban on pride marches and the introduction of the 2013 'gay propaganda law' are contrary to the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals within Russia.[45] Relevant to these decisions include ECHR Articles 11 (freedom of assembly) and 14 (prohibition of discrimination).[46]

The UN Human Rights Committee has also repeatedly expressed concern about the treatment of SOGI minorities in Russia, deciding most recently in its 2022 Concluding Observations under Article 40 of the ICCPR that there was reason for serious concern regarding the institutionalized discrimination and stigmatization of LGBTQ+ persons.[47] Despite clear findings of violations by the Russian State under various human rights law bodies, comparable legislation has since been enacted in other States in the region. For example, Hungary has followed similar legislative changes to Russia despite the ECtHR's 2017

Bayev decision, demonstrating the limited deterrent effect of these judgements and the wider diffusion of SOGI-restrictive policy and legal models beyond the Russian Federation.[48]

Weaponization of language surrounding SOGI minorities has also created societal threats, legitimizing an increase in violence, including hate crimes 'from below.'[49] These acts of violence are often committed by individuals or groups within society, reflecting grassroots hostility that is reinforced by state rhetoric and public discourse. As Russian LGBTQ+ groups and initiatives such as Coming Out and the Grey Rainbow project have highlighted, hate crimes have steadily increased in recent years, particularly following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[50] Cases of hate speech and discrimination have also increased, in large part due to the lack of ability to show support for LGBTQ+ communities following the extremism decision in 2023, which has also led to an increased risk of detention.[51] While hate groups have more or less dissipated following a boom in the mid 2010s, Russian discourse surrounding 'traditional values' and anti-LGBTQ+ communities has permeated society, leading to both societal and extrajudicial violence, largely encouraged by the Government.[52]

The connection between increased violence against SOGI communities in Russia and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is in fact no coincidence. On one hand, the intensification of LGBTQ+ repression has served as a political tactic to divert public attention from the challenges and setbacks of Russia's protracted invasion. On the other hand, anti-SOGI narratives have been used to rhetorically justify the invasion itself, framing it as a defense of Russia's 'traditional values' against Western influence. Several interviewees also highlighted the correlation between the targeting of SOGI minorities and the Russian State's strategy of creating a 'common enemy' to distract Russian citizens from ongoing socioeconomic issues.[53] As one interviewee put it, since 2022, (Putin) needed serious support from below and for this "the anti-LGBT card was very effective."[54] In fact, SOGI minorities act as an easy scapegoat whereby the Russian State is able to capitalize on a historically-grounded sense of homophobia within areas of Russian society and attribute a group to Western culture from which the Regime is intent on distancing itself.[55] A key method has been for the State to employ social media, misinformation and disinformation to spread hateful rhetoric that negatively affects public opinion of LGBTQ+ communities, including through social media campaigns, TV networks and radio.[56] Thus, LGBTQ+ minorities, given their historical marginalization in Russia, as well as patriarchal and hypermasculine narratives which the State has been pushing, form a unique minority group that is particularly vulnerable to scapegoating and discrimination, exacerbated in times of political crisis, as Russia currently faces.

Ultimately, the weaponization of national identity and 'traditional values' in Russia has acted as a precursor to the more sinister securitization of SOGI minorities, pushing hateful rhetoric that legitimizes not only discrimination and violations of fundamental rights but also violence and hate crimes. Weaponization of national identity and 'traditional values' in Russia operates primarily at the rhetorical and societal level through the construction of SOGI identities as incompatible with Russian 'traditional values.' Once this perception becomes embedded within the public discourse, it becomes easier for the State to justify securitizing these minorities, instrumentalizing public safety and national security legislation in particularly worrisome ways. This strategy has also been projected at the international level, with Russia taking on the mantle of defending so-called 'traditional values' at fora such as the UN Human Rights Council, including through the promotion of resolutions emphasizing the primacy of national moral frameworks over individual human rights.[57]

2. SECURITIZATION OF SOGI MINORITIES

Securitization refers to a process originally coined by academics and political scientists Buzan, Waever and de Wilde via the Copenhagen School involving the presentation of issues as existential threats to society, justifying emergency and panic politics, producing fear and distrust within a given population.[58] This process is more extreme than the politicization of an issue or weaponization of a group.[59] Under

this theory, no issue exists itself as an existential threat but rather is cultivated as one through social construction.[60] In the Russian context, the securitization of SOGI minorities has occurred by virtue of processes related to nation-building and geopolitical competition.[61]

The process of securitization has helped further weaponize language and enabled the Russian State to construct a unifying threat, consolidating domestic power and distracting citizens from socioeconomic and geopolitical instability the country is facing. This helps to rationalize the uptick in securitization measures and narratives towards SOGI minorities following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, by presenting LGBTQ+ communities as a 'Western' idea, distancing itself from Europe, often nicknamed as "Gayropa," the Russian State simulates an environment for nation-building and social cohesion.[62] This is tied to the movement towards hypermasculinity, with President Putin as its embodiment, and a capitalization of pre-existing homophobia within Russian society due to its historical context.[63]

The Russian State has taken political, administrative and legal measures to discriminate against SOGI minorities, including legislative acts such as the 2013 'gay propaganda law,' ID restrictions, annulment of marriages, adoption or fostering bans and foreign agent and public safety laws.[64] However, the Supreme Court's decision to label the 'International LGBT Movement' as "extremist" in 2023 is a true illustration of the Russian Government's securitization of SOGI minorities.[65] With this extremist labelling, authorities are now able to target and criminalize SOGI minorities and any groups associated with supporting these as extremist, often followed by the use of counter-terrorism legislation and criminal proceedings to further silence and suppress LGBTQ+ activism. Meanwhile, Russia has rejected several international obligations pertaining to upholding fundamental human rights, including those related to SOGI minorities, expanded its lists of 'foreign agents' and severely tightened the implementation of propaganda legislation.[66]

Since February 2022, Russian authorities have increasingly repressed the rights of LGBTQ+ people, alongside civil society, activists and other types of dissenters within the country.[67] The use of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism legislation has further jeopardized LGBTQ+ activism.[68] As the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Russian Federation highlighted in her recent report, anti-terrorism and anti-extremist legislation is often paired together by stacking charges, creating explicit and indistinguishable overlaps between counter-terrorism and counter-extremist frameworks, as well as contributing to securitization narratives and societal legitimacy.[69] By using anti-extremist legislation and mobilizing rhetoric of counter-terrorism, the Russian State enables an environment where acts as simple as displaying the rainbow flag can now be criminalized and such individuals prosecuted under criminal law.[70] These prosecutions have serious implications for the respect of fundamental human rights, including freedom from torture and mis-treatment.

Indeed, the securitization of LGBTQ+ issues and SOGI minorities in Russia illustrates the State's continued violation of international human rights law and (mis)use of the justice system as a tool for repression. In particular, this type of securitization raises issues for the rights of freedom from discrimination, of assembly and association. The Human Rights Committee's detailed assessment of the situation in Russia in 2022 expressed deep concern regarding legislation restricting the right of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, as well as the risk of torture for SOGI individuals convicted under extremism charges.[71] Since the Supreme Court's decision in 2023, there have been over 100 convictions for alleged participants of the 'International LGBT Movement' and/or their use of any associated symbols, including the rainbow flag.[72]

These prosecutions, both administrative and criminal in nature, highlight the blatant disregard for human rights, particularly under the ICCPR (to which Russia continues to be a party to), including the prohibition of discrimination, rights to association, liberty and expression.[73] The situation has deteriorated further, in particular following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and human rights violations remain increasingly concerning for SOGI minorities within the State. The increase in hate crimes and hate speech has also been met with very little support from Russian authorities, despite the existence of Russian law providing liability for inciting hatred or enmity under Art. 20.3.1 of the Russian Administrative Offenses

Code and Art. 282 of the Russian Criminal Code.[74] This signals a continuously dire situation for SOGI minorities in Russia, by virtue of their securitization via the legislature and executive.

3. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS, SOCIETAL AND NON-STATE ACTORS

Religious, societal and non-state actors in the Russian Federation have played a crucial role in amplifying state-led anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and rhetoric in Russia. While a panoply of state and non-state actors exists in the Russian Federation, this paper focuses on three specific actors whose contribution to SOGI repression deserves further analysis. These include: the Russian Orthodox Church; Russian police and security services; nationalist organizations and groups. Whether by reinforcing 'traditional values' through consistent messaging that opposes deviations from so-called 'traditional' family structures; enabling the implementation of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation through arbitrary arrest and detention of LGBTQ+ activists, human rights defenders and pro-LGBTQ+ civil society voices; amplifying discriminatory, exclusionary discourses or inciting hate crimes, these actors have supported the Russian State's targeting of SOGI minorities. This has further entrenched Russia's evasion of accountability and the erosion of the rule of law, with severe consequences for SOGI rights.

The Russian Orthodox Church

While its existence long predates the concepts of 'sexual orientation' or 'gender identity,' the Russian Orthodox Church has served as a 'promoter' of State-led anti-SOGI narratives under Putin's rule since 2012.[75] In 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on States "to treat Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Orthodox hierarchy as an ideological extension of Vladimir Putin's Regime complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity."[76] Leveraging its influence as a pillar of tradition and spirituality in Russia and close relationship with the State since Putin's return to presidency in 2012, the Russian Orthodox Church has been a key amplifier of 'traditional values' discourses and a vector of legitimization for the Government's anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and legislation.

First, the Russian Orthodox Church has frequently amplified narratives of LGBTQ+ persons as undermining traditional family values, as well as the institution of marriage.[77] While the discourse of 'traditional values' was orchestrated by the Russian State upon Putin's return to power in 2012, it was articulated long before then by several parties and entities, including the Russian Orthodox Church (see 1. Weaponization of National Identity and 'Traditional Values').[78] This discourse enforces a gender binary conception of Russian society that aligns with the traditional family unit made up of a man and a woman. In contrast, members of LGBTQ+ communities pose a threat to these 'traditional values,' which the Russian Orthodox Church have referred to as a 'moral disease.'[79]

The construction of SOGI as a 'disease' which threatens the preservation of 'traditional values' has become even more apparent in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, the Russian Orthodox Church has amplified Putin's rhetoric of protecting 'traditional family values' in Ukraine to justify its military invasion in February 2022. In a sermon one week later, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, declared that the Donbas faced a test for its "rejection of the so-called values that are offered today by those who claim world power. (...) The test is straightforward and, at the same time, terrible – this is a gay parade."[80] As one interviewee put it: "the issue of gay pride(s) had never been on the table," before then and was now being equated to an 'anti-civilized' state.[81] Since 2022, the Russian Orthodox Church, in line with the Regime, has also presented the war in Ukraine as a clash between 'Christian/Slavic' and 'liberal European' values, thus linking homophobia and nationalism.[82] As one academic suggested, "to be properly Russian is to be Orthodox Christian and against homosexuality."[83]

Second, the Church has served as a vector of legitimization for the Russian State's anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and legislation. While difficult to assert, several interviews pointed to the high likelihood of the Russian State working with the Russian Orthodox Church on SOGI repression.[84] This connects to

the broader political realignment between Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church since 2012, where the Church, under Patriarch Kirill, has become a key partner in the "Kremlin's soft-power strategy" and a "legitimizing arm of state power."[85] At the national level, the Russian Orthodox Church has shown strong support for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation established over the past decade, notably the total ban of "gay propaganda" in 2022.[86] The Russian Orthodox Church's support for anti-SOGI rhetoric has awarded both parties (the Church and the State) with political gain. In November 2025, President Putin presented the Presidential Award for "contributing to the unity of the Russian nation" to Patriarch Kirill, who argued that continued cooperation between the Church and the State would further strengthen traditional family values.[87] Similarly, in a public message earlier that year, Putin praised the Russian Orthodox Church and other Christian denominations for its "meaningful contribution to strengthening the institution of the family, to educating young people and to affirming in society such intransient moral ideals and values."[88]

The Russian Orthodox Church has also legitimized anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric emerging from nationalist organizations and groups. One notable example is the Russian Community, or Russkaya Obshchina (RO), which has grown into an increasingly powerful nationalist organization and political movement in defense of Russian 'traditional values.' A key difference from other nationalist organizations and groups is the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, in 2025, RO was blessed by an archbishop on behalf of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.[89] In return, the Russian Community requires its members to profess Orthodoxy, has endorsed conservative moral and religious values, and displays steadfast support to the State. It is also worth noting that the Russian Community was established in 2020 by TV channel 'Spas' host, Andrey Afanasyev, among others, a channel owned by the Church (see Nationalist Organizations and Groups below).[90]

Beyond the Russian Federation, the Russian Orthodox Church has also played a significant role in legitimizing similar anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric within neighbouring states. In Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church, a trusted institution with strong connections to the Russian Orthodox Church, has been at the forefront of promoting opposition to SOGI rights in the country, including by inciting violence against the community during pro-SOGI rights marches.[91] In Ukraine, while the 2019 decision by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to grant autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the declared autonomy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in 2022 marked historic ruptures in Russia's claim over Ukrainian Orthodoxy, the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, including the OCU and the UOC, had successfully promoted discriminatory bills and blocked legislation and policies protecting persons from discrimination based on SOGI.[92]

Overall, it is clear that the Russian Orthodox Church is integral to the State-led architecture that discriminates against SOGI minorities in the Russian Federation and the wider region. By using LGBTQ+ persons as a convenient scapegoat to further amplify traditional values narratives and leveraging its symbiotic relationship with the State, the Russian Orthodox Church is a key contributor to the ever-deteriorating human rights situation of SOGI minorities in the Russian Federation.

Russian Police and Security Services

The Russian police and security forces have been a key enforcer of the Russian State's legislation targeting LGBTQ+ persons in Russia. Relevant forces include the Police of Russia under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Federal Security Service (FSB) for domestic security and counter-terrorism, and the National Guard supporting the police and handling large-scale riots. LGBTQ+ persons across the country have increasingly encountered physical abuse and mistreatment from government officials, which has significantly worsened since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and continued to deteriorate.[93] Key legislative developments inside Russia include the 2022 gay propaganda law and the 2023 Russian Supreme Court's designation of the 'International LGBT Movement' as "extremist," leading to increased state-sponsored violence across the Federation, perpetrated by police and security forces. Further, targeting of LGBTQ+ persons by police and security forces has been particularly acute in the North

Caucasus region, including in the semi-autonomous republic of Chechnya, and dates back prior to the 2022 war in Ukraine.[94] Notably, in early 2017, Chechnya's law enforcement and security officials launched a systematized 'anti-gay purge,' conducting arbitrary arrests, detention, and enforced disappearances of dozens of men on suspicion of being gay.[95]

The majority of the targeting of LGBTQ+ persons and/or pro-LGBTQ+ voices by Russian police and security forces in the Russian Federation has taken place online. Whether a social media post including a rainbow flag or an individual wearing a symbol related to, or commonly associated with, LGBTQ+ communities and/or a prohibited organization, police forces have used these as proof of either spreading 'gay propaganda,' affiliation with or propagation of the condemned 'International LGBT Movement.' Police officers have also been found to weaponize the criminal status of LGBTQ+ persons, identifying "potential extremists" harassing, intimidating and threatening them with prison time, as well as using online dating platforms to identify, intimidate and detain LGBTQ+ persons, for example in the Russian Republic of Dagestan.[96] Online targeting has enabled the Russian State to significantly broaden its targeting reach. As of June 2025, Russian courts had issued 101 convictions for 'extremism' for participating in the 'International LGBT Movement' or displaying its alleged symbols against individuals across cities and regions, including Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod and Perm (western Russia), among other locations.[97] Punishment has included fines, administrative arrests and expulsion in the case of foreign nationals.

Russian police forces in the North Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya, have also manipulated, threatened and incited individuals, including families, to target LGBTQ+ persons or family members, a trend that several civil society organizations have been documenting.[98] From 2020, and particularly in the last several years, local authorities, including police forces, have increasingly collaborated with families in targeting LGBTQ+ persons. Indeed, civil society organizations have documented cases of abuse of LGBTQ+ persons within families by order of local authorities.[99] In other cases, LGBTQ+ persons have been forcibly detained and families requested to either pay ransoms or forcibly recruit LGBTQ+ family members to support Russia's war effort in Ukraine.[100] Both the incitement of violence by family members and police raids at places commonly visited by LGBTQ+ persons have instilled fear and mistrust within LGBTQ+ communities in Russia, as well as communities surrounding LGBTQ+ persons.[101] A growing level of mistrust in the police force has meant that fewer persons who have experienced hate crimes have notified relevant authorities.[102] Overall, the number of hate crimes recorded against LGBTQ+ persons across Russia has substantially increased since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Several civil society organizations have documented a sharp rise in abuse and hate crimes against LGBTQ+ persons, varying from physical abuse, threats and harassment, sexual and domestic abuse, to conversion therapy, property damage and theft, blackmail and extortion, among others.[103]

The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (known as Roskomnadzor), a government agency responsible for monitoring, controlling and censoring Russian mass media, equally monitors social media and online streaming platforms for LGBTQ+ content. While not strictly under the purview of Russian police and security forces, Roskomnadzor's monitoring (specifically the Main Radio Frequency Center, a unit of the Federal Service) is linked to Russia's leading security and law enforcement agencies, including the FSB, Federal Protective Service, National Guard, Prosecutor-General's Office and the Interior Ministry.[104] Further, the 2022 gay propaganda law gave Roskomnadzor the authority to monitor and block entities distributing "prohibited information."[105] As a result, the majority of cases against LGBTQ+ persons under Russia's gay propaganda law have been initiated by this agency.[106]

The agency has also relied heavily on filed complaints of LGBTQ+ online content, most famously in 2023 when a complaint was filed to Roskomnadzor about a K-pop music video featuring the rainbow flag.[107] In turn, Roskomnadzor has urged online platforms to independently label content, including films and TV series, featuring LGBTQ+ persons.[108] The Federal Security Service has also initiated cases against LGBTQ+ persons under the gay propaganda law. One case in Slavyansk-on-Kuban (North Caucasus

region) involved a supermarket clerk who had been fined nine times under the gay propaganda law, all initiated by the FSB.[109]

Nationalist Organizations and Groups

While nationalist organizations and groups have existed in Russia for decades, recently formed groups such as the Russian Community signal the increasingly important role of political movements in championing Russian 'traditional values,' which have been "cautiously welcomed by the Government."[110] This is particularly true for the Russian Community, Russia's largest far-right movement with 140 chapters in cities across the country and a large social media presence, whose key objectives include "promoting the protection of motherhood, childhood, and fatherhood" and "the prestige and role of the family in society."[111]

RO has become instrumental in "channeling grassroots nationalism in support of traditional values, patriotism and opposition to the West."[112] Indeed, the organization's logo and official emblem features a black silhouette of Alexander Nevsky, known for his leadership in defending Russian territories against foreign invasions, and a symbol of Orthodox faith and patriotism that encapsulates Russia's hypermasculine nationalism. The organization actively promotes hypermasculine nationalism in its activities, for example via organized sport competitions and outreach activities to university students centered on "patriotism, family values, [and] the importance of spiritual life."[113]

Furthermore, since 2020, the Russian Community has operated as a "parallel policing structure with unofficial state backing," including for enforcing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.[114] While coverage of the organization's activities has traditionally focused on police raids targeting migrants from Central Asia and other ethnically non-Russian groups, the RO has collaborated with Russian police and security forces in targeting LGBTQ+ persons, as well as LGBTQ+ related spaces.[115] In March 2024, Russian Community activists from the southwest city of Orenburg joined local law enforcement in a raid against a gay club known as 'Pose.'[116] The club owner and several employees were arrested, marking the first LGBTQ+ related 'extremism' case.[117] Several months later, the Russian Community chapter of Yaroslavl (northeast of Moscow) joined law enforcement officers in raiding a "satanic," "Halloween-style costume party for gay people" at a nightclub, an event publicly recorded on the RO's Telegram channel.[118] Although participants were charged under the 2022 gay propaganda law, the Russian Community of Yaroslavl explicitly called on the Chairman of the Investigative Committee of Russia, Alexander Ivanovich Bastrykin, to "ensure that the organizers of the sabbath do not get away with administrative fines, but receive real punishment for promoting LGBT."[119] Cultural figures such as Russian rapper Roma Zhigan have also supported the Russian Community's activities, calling on the organization to continue to conduct raids in clubs and fight against the "corruption of women."[120]

As one interviewee argued, repression of LGBTQ+ communities is focused on "making (these communities) less visible."[121] The Russian Community justifies its support to police and security forces under its broader mission to unite Russian people and provide "all kinds of mutual assistance" to one another, as well as helping to counter personnel shortages as a result of the war in Ukraine.[122] Meanwhile, Russian police benefit from additional support from the organization in targeting common enemies, not only LGBTQ+ persons but immigrants, members of the opposition, and any individuals or groups opposing Russia's war in Ukraine.[123] The RO has also partnered with other nationalist organizations and groups, including the Sorok Sorokov Movement and the Northern Man, founded in 2013 and 2022 respectively, although these groups have to date focused on coordinated anti-immigrant actions and provocations.[124] Ultimately, while extreme nationalist groups in Russia are not new, the level of cooperation between the Russian Community and Russian law enforcement remains striking, including its visibility.

THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK: CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESSION IN RUSSIA AND EFFECTS IN THE REGION

Previous research has highlighted how institutionalized discrimination within authoritarian regimes erodes human rights, enables violence and reinforces authoritarian rule.[125] A key finding is that the targeting of minorities, including SOGI, is often a key early warning sign of the loss or gradual erosion of human rights, particularly within highly centralized, authoritarian settings.[126] While not unique to the Russian Federation, the targeting and repression of SOGI minorities, whereby LGBTQ+ persons are scapegoated as part of a strategy to create an 'internal enemy,' is part of Russia's broader 'authoritarian playbook.'[127] One key consequence of this repression includes the shrinking of civil society space. In recent years, the targeting of LGBTQ+ organizations, groups, rights defenders and activists, backed by anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, has severely constrained advocacy and human rights monitoring activities in the Russian Federation, shifting the majority of activism abroad, with deep-seated human rights consequences within and beyond Russia.

Authoritarian practices, including legal reforms and security narratives that contribute to institutionalizing control and normalizing repression, are adaptive and resilient.[128] This is true in the Russian Federation, where anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has been incremental in eroding human rights, underpinned by 'traditional values' rhetoric which has facilitated the weaponization and securitization of SOGI minorities. However, Russian civil society has been, and continues to be, equally adaptive and resilient, despite the risks incurred. In spite of the tightening environment and State restrictions against LGBTQ+ organizations and groups, LGBTQ+ organizations have showcased an extraordinary ability to adapt to geopolitical changes, including the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In particular, smaller grassroots organizations such as Queer Svit, established within weeks of Russia's invasion in 2022, and the Sphere Foundation formed in 2011, have adeptly adapted activities to this increasingly restrictive environment.

One notable example is Queer Svit, a grassroots initiative focused on the intersection of race and sexuality which provides support to LGBTQ+ persons, including Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), for evacuation and relocation through legal advice, psychological support, medicine, food and temporary housing.[129] Following the July 2023 Federal Law No. 386 eliminating legal and medical transition pathways for transgender persons, Queer Svit developed and led a project to support over 400 transgender persons from across Russia with travel to enable changes of legal gender markers.[130] As one civil society representative argued: "Because of how small we are we are able to easily adapt. We identify opportunities and have the ability to be flexible."[131] Meanwhile, the Sphere Foundation, which has traditionally focused its activities in the North Caucasus, reoriented its work in 2022, expanding its support across the country (albeit through hybrid assistance) to adapt to the deteriorating situation of LGBTQ+ persons in Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.[132]

Several civil society representatives and policy experts also noted that the increasingly tightening environment inside Russia has forced local organizations to become creative in how they provide support and connect with LGBTQ+ voices.[133] For example, LGBTQ+ human rights organization Coming Out provides legal assistance, psychological support, advocacy, and community programs to combat SOGI discrimination and violence in the Russian Federation. In 2020, the organization shifted its work online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and, since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has fully relocated outside of the country while continuing its services online. As a civil society representative noted, shifting activities online has allowed Coming Out to provide support to LGBTQ+ individuals beyond Saint Petersburg and in a wider number of regions. The organization is now able to provide services across Russia, notably individual consultations with psychologists, lawyers, career advisors, including transgender persons.[134] Coming Out has also invested efforts in targeting young people through online advocacy (e.g. videos, press articles), emphasizing human rights and values.[135] Meanwhile, other organizations and groups have reduced their online presence, including in the media, to protect individuals they work with and avoid

being criminalized for exposing LGBTQ+-related symbols in the digital space.

Those civil society organizations and groups either currently operating in the Russian Federation or which have maintained some presence in the country are a crucial source of information on violence against SOGI minorities. Non-governmental organization and think tank the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, based in Moscow, tracks hate-motivated violent crimes, vandalism and criminal convictions under all articles of the Criminal Code targeting extremism via an open database, as well as administrative violations under the Code of Administrative Offenses, including against LGBTQ+ persons.[136] As one civil society activist and academic expert argued, documenting human rights violations against SOGI minorities is necessary for any future accountability efforts.[137] In the short term, collected data enables organizations to tailor advocacy campaigns within and outside Russia.[138] These groups are also key barometers of evolving trends in SOGI repression, as for example increasing repression of LGBTQ+ individuals within families, often with the support of Russian police and security forces (see Russian Police and Security Services in 3. The Role of Religious, Societal and Non-State Actors).

However, key challenges remain for continued support and protection of LGBTQ+ voices in Russia. First, Russian civil society supporting LGBTQ+ individuals in Russia faces severe funding challenges, notably as a result of the expanded 2025 'foreign agents law' which has led to the labelling of an increased number of organizations, including LGBTQ+, as "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations," severely restricting their funding access and opportunities.[139] While not unique to LGBTQ+ organizations and groups nor the Russian Federation, funding shortages have been compounded with a general decline in donor engagement in LGBTQ+-related initiatives. In the United States (US) funding for LGBTQ+ groups and organizations dropped by 22 percentage points between 2022 and 2023, with even higher decreases for initiatives related to intersectional Black LGBTQ+ communities.[140] In Europe, similar trends are taking place whereby corporations and donors have scaled back contributions to LGBTQ+ initiatives such as Pride celebrations as a result of increasing political polarization and pressure from far-right political groups.[141] The effect of this has been decreasing attention towards the erosion of the rights of LGBTQ+ people and declining protections, including in Russia. Overall, interviewees expressed pessimism and a low level of hope for continued external support for civil society activities in Russia moving forward.[142]

Second, Russian civil society supporting LGBTQ+ voices in Russia faces an increasing challenge of information access. This is partly due to the majority of defenders and activists for the rights of LGBTQ+ people leaving the Russian Federation, the majority from the North Caucasus region. This has meant that organizations have struggled to maintain access to information on the continuing repression of LGBTQ+ persons, among other minorities.[143] As interviewees noted, most cases of targeted attacks against LGBTQ+ individuals are now recorded through assistance requests, with often limited visibility beyond these.[144] This is compounded with a growing sense of fear of exposure to potential surveillance, reprisal and/or criminalization when communicating with human rights groups.[145] Others have highlighted deteriorating relations between organizations and law enforcement actors, including for information access. Particularly since the 2012 and expanded 2025 'foreign agents law,' organizations have found themselves increasingly limited in their ability to communicate with law enforcement actors, making information collected often partial, as well as any cooperation with other organizations potentially dangerous.[146]

Similar challenges have been experienced beyond Russia, particularly in neighbouring States where similar narratives, including 'traditional values,' have been used. Notable examples include Georgia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Belarus and Hungary, among others. In Georgia, President Mikheil Kavelashvili is a former member of the 'Georgian Dream,' the previous ruling political party which in 2024 adopted a law on "family values and protection of minors" imposing discriminatory restrictions on education, public discussion and SOGI-related gatherings.[147] Similarly in Bulgaria, recently founded far-right political party 'Revival' also employed 'traditional values' narratives in enacting its own gay propaganda law in 2024, which not only mirrors Russia's anti-SOGI rhetoric but has caused a sharp decline in funding for LGBTQ+ organizations.[148] Serbia, with strong links to the Orthodox Church and general alignment with

the Russian Federation, has long used rhetoric on 'traditional values' to counter anti-discrimination legislation, including as pertaining to the rights of LGBTQ+ people, with evidence of its use in political discourse found as early as 2009.[149] In Belarus, President Alexander Lukashenko has embraced the concept of hypermasculinity as a sign of power, similar to the rhetoric embraced by Putin and Russian nationalist organizations.[150] Finally, in Hungary and despite its EU status, the adoption of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation raises serious concerns over the erosion of the rights of LGBTQ+ people in the country, a trend reported on by the Human Rights Council in recent years.[151]

The examples above underscore how anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, narratives and weaponization of SOGI minorities are not a unique process but rather part of a broader 'authoritarian playbook' in Russia and the broader region. While it is important to recognize the individual contexts in which these processes operate, regional similarities and common strategies for targeting and repressing SOGI minorities demonstrate the connections between SOGI minority repression, authoritarian backsliding and loss of civic space. This ultimately creates an environment conducive to human rights violations and vulnerable to replication further afield.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the research analysis and interviews conducted, the Government of the Russian Federation, UN Member States, the United Nations and the international donor community should consider the following recommendations to protect LGBTQ+ voices in the Russian Federation and support Russian civil society defending LGBTQ+ communities, both within the Federation and the region. These include:

GOVERNMENT OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

1. **Uphold core obligations under international human rights law.** As enshrined under international law, the primary responsibility for addressing human rights violations against any group or individual, including violations against SOGI minorities, lies with the State. The Russian Federation must uphold its obligations under the ICCPR and take effective measures to prevent, investigate and remedy violence and discrimination against SOGI minorities. This includes repealing legislation and judicial decisions found in blatant violation of international human rights law, as has been reiterated by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Russian Federation.[152]

UN MEMBER STATES

1. **Hold the line on the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people.** Amid an unprecedented pushback against human rights writ large, rising authoritarianism and an ongoing reconsideration of the UN's role, practices and capacities, pushing the envelope of issues relating to SOGI rights may be both unproductive and unrealistic at this time. Instead, holding the line on the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people, which requires significant effort, engagement and political will, is as urgent as ever. This could start with identifying a group of UN Member States supportive of SOGI rights willing to champion the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people, as well as middle ground States who could reinforce existing human rights standards.

2. **Tone down political rhetoric.** Political rhetoric against the rights of LGBTQ+ people, including the securitization of LGBTQ+ communities as an 'easy' scapegoat, is increasingly prevalent, with Russia as a prime example. It is also important to recognize the increasing polarization of SOGI, often combined with a broader narrative according to which rights of LGBTQ+ people fall outside the scope

of fundamental human rights. Toning down this rhetoric and reiterating the universal applicability of fundamental human rights is key to ensuring SOGI minorities are not sidelined in human rights conversations and receive dedicated attention. For example, making inroads with actors who may be pushing strong rhetoric against SOGI rights all while securing some national protections for the SOGI community may be a useful starting point.

3. **Push back against 'traditional values' narratives.** While using 'traditional values' narratives to justify the targeting of the rights of LGBTQ+ people is not unique to Russia, the Russian State provides a blueprint for employing the protection of children and family rights as a strategy to repress LGBTQ+ individuals and members of LGBTQ+ communities. Pushing back against these narratives is not only a moral imperative but a strategic one for countering the rise of right-wing rhetoric across the globe, including within traditionally pro-LGBTQ+ settings. Member States should consider these narratives critically, including their own, specifically their effects on the erosion of human rights.

4. **Vocalize support for UN Special Procedures mandates.** In light of reforms discussed under the UN80 initiative, and where the UN human rights pillar stands at particularly severe risk of defunding, Member States' support for UN Special Procedures mandates may be more crucial than ever. Vocalizing this support both within and outside the UN may seem underrated but can go a long way in ensuring the continuity and legitimacy of Special Procedures' work. This could include vocal support for the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Russia, as well as financial and logistical assistance, where possible, to ensure that the mandate withstands increasing political pressure moving forward.

5. **Secure support for LGBTQ+ organizations, groups, activists and rights defenders inside Russia.** The majority of interviewees argued that securing a solid civil society presence advocating for the rights of LGBTQ+ people inside the Russian Federation matters both in the short-term and the long-term. In the short-term, supporting LGBTQ+ groups, including those established recently in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, means securing a civil society presence in Russia when the war may eventually come to an end, and where opportunities for internal policy changes may arise. This includes controlling negative collateral effects of sanctions on Russia on LGBTQ+ organizations (e.g. restricted bank account and/or visa access), removing or mitigating these barriers to ensure continued activities inside Russia. In the long-term, keeping local Russian civil society alive may be critical for reversing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in a post-Putin era.

6. **Engage with and support local and regional organizations outside Russia for protection of Russian LGBTQ+ persons.** Several civil society organizations highlighted serious safety concerns and cases of targeting and repression of LGBTQ+ persons once individuals have left Russia. As counter-terrorism and counter-extremism legislation is increasingly used against LGBTQ+ persons, who may appear on extremist and terrorist lists, transnational repression by the Russian State makes LGBTQ+ persons vulnerable even once they have left the country. Human rights organizations such as SOS North Caucasus rely on local and regional connections to continue supporting those individuals who have escaped Russia. Engaging with these local and regional organizations is crucial to ensure the sustained protection for SOGI minorities. This could take several forms, including supporting social assistance shelters in neighbouring states, processing visa requests from Russian LGBTQ+ persons (many continue to be rejected by asylum processes, particularly the EU) and acknowledging the human rights vulnerabilities LGBTQ+ individuals face both in countries of origin and in transiting and destination states.

7. **Consider universal jurisdiction.** Drawing on universal jurisdiction could offer another possible avenue to address the accountability gap for persecution based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This would involve States strengthening their domestic frameworks to explicitly include SOGI-related persecution within universal jurisdiction mandates and adopting SOGI-sensitive investigative practices for future investigations, including in Russia. The added value of universal jurisdiction has been previously demonstrated in Germany through its investigations in Syria, Iraq, Chechnya and Belarus.[153]

UNITED NATIONS

1. **Go back to basic human rights principles.** At a time of heightened polarization of human rights based-rhetoric, returning to the foundational commitments of the right to freedom from discrimination, violence and the principle of non-discrimination may be more necessary than ever. Regrounding SOGI issues in line with these universal norms and as an integral part of the rule of law can help ensure that a baseline of SOGI protection is respected, particularly within changing political environments. The UN is uniquely placed to encourage Member States to engage on these issues in a good faith manner, anchored in the UN's shared and founding principles.

2. **Focus on incremental recommendations that have some chance of implementation.** The UN's human rights system, including Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies reporting, already provides recommendations for specific country settings, including the Russian Federation, as highlighted in the Special Rapporteur on Russia's reports. While recommendations to the Russian State are largely unrealistic, focusing on incremental recommendations to support LGBTQ+ grassroots organizations in Russia, foster connections between local LGBTQ+ networks and secure space for LGBTQ+ organizations on the international stage may hold better chances of support and implementation in an increasingly tightening environment.

3. **Recognize existing neocolonial dynamics in the region.** The global backlash against SOGI rights intersects with a powerful neocolonial political logic which involves framing universal human rights as an imposition of 'foreign,' 'Western' values and norms.[154] This calculated use of 'traditional values' rhetoric allows authoritarian leaders to assert 'cultural sovereignty,' consolidate domestic power by creating an internal enemy and reject international accountability mechanisms. This is true in the Russian Federation, where SOGI rights are framed as a neocolonial imposition (i.e. of 'Western ideals' in Russia, juxtaposed with Ukraine).[155] Moving forward, the international community, as well as international donors, should reflect critically on the power dynamics between Russia and its neighbouring region and how these have shaped support and interventions with regards to SOGI rights protection. Support must be tailored to individual states, without collapsing them into Russia's shadow, while still acknowledging the structural influence Russia continues to exert within these.

4. **Include and actively listen to LGBTQ+ voices in discussions on the future of Russia**. The UN as well as international platforms, policy and academic institutes offer crucial spaces to discuss the future of Russia, yet these often exclude LGBTQ+ perspectives. The UN remains a key platform where some of the convening of LGBTQ+ voices and perspectives can take place. As these spaces debate visions on the future of Russia, international organizations, platforms and institutes must actively invite and provide platforms for LGBTQ+-led organizations, including those addressing intersectionality, where their perspectives, concerns and needs can be heard and tabled in current and future decision-making processes.

INTERNATIONAL DONOR COMMUNITY

1. **Include the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people in donor agendas.** Many LGBTQ+ organizations operating inside or from outside the Russian Federation rely on funding severely affected by recent US policies, which have also impacted European foundations' funding streams and, in turn, Russian civil society organizations and initiatives. This funding shortfall compounds existing structural challenges, as highlighted by a 2020 survey conducted by Georgian NGOs which found that LGBTQ+ individuals were rarely considered in the agendas of civil society organizations, leaving their needs largely unmet.[156] Ensuring that the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people is included in donor agendas, despite the current stringent financial environment, requires deliberate efforts by international donors and an understanding that the rights of LGBTQ+ people form an inherent part of the broader human rights agenda. Human rights organizations in Russia are already doing this: for example, Coming Out collaborates with other NGOs, including beyond LGBTQ+ organizations, on how these can include LGBTQ+ campaigns into their work and media presences.[157]

2. **Incorporate intersectional considerations into funding agendas and initiatives**. LGBTQ+ persons of colour (POC), from indigenous communities or with other intersectional identities in Russia face increased risks of targeting and repression. Local grassroots organizations such as Queer Svit have worked tirelessly to support LGBTQ+ Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and amplify their experiences at the national and international level. However, these voices are generally missing from local, regional and international advocacy spaces. Donors must be more aware of the intersectional experiences faced by LGBTQ+ persons and organizations and incorporate intersectional considerations into funding agendas and initiatives. Beyond ensuring that beneficiaries lead the agenda-setting, recognizing the lived realities of individuals and communities at the intersection of different minority groups, donors should actively engage with local queer POC voices to avoid reproducing existing exclusion and to reflect the diversity of LGBTQ+ communities in regions in which they operate.

3. **Support LGBTQ+ grassroots organizations inside Russia.** Prioritizing flexible funding and sustained support for small, grassroots organizations is crucial, particularly as these often have the best understanding of community risks and needs. These organizations are well-positioned to understand local dynamics, often have flexibility which allows them to adapt activities quickly, making their interventions effective and trusted. Donors should limit the bureaucratic burdens that disproportionately disadvantage smaller initiatives and help ensure longer term resilience of such groups.

CONCLUSION

This working paper demonstrates that the targeting and repression of SOGI minorities in the Russian Federation has had, and continues to have, severe implications for the enjoyment of human rights under international law. Methods of repression employed by the Russian State, including the weaponization of national identity through rhetoric and narratives, the securitization of SOGI minorities through legislative changes and mobilization of religious, societal and non-state actors, create an environment where LGBTQ+ persons and communities are gradually erased from Russian society and rights protections have become near non-existent. These methods are an essential part of Russia's 'authoritarian playbook,' with mirrored effects in the region and abroad, and signalling important early warning signs for further minority group repression.

First, SOGI minorities represent a unique group particularly vulnerable to human rights-based attacks seen in the Russian Federation, with the rights of LGBTQ+ people deteriorating at an alarming rate. SOGI minorities increasingly occupy the position of 'invisible citizens,' where their existence is acknowledged but whose rights are progressively withdrawn to erase, control and silence LGBTQ+ voices through repressive legal and political structures. The starkest illustration of this is the 2023 Russian Supreme Court decision to recognize the 'International LGBT Movement' as "extremist" which remains impossible to challenge given that the movement does not have an actual legal entity.[158] This effectively transforms SOGI minorities into 'invisible citizens,' stripped of protection and procedural capacity to contest their erasure.

Second, our research, informed by over twenty interviews with civil society, human rights activists and UN representatives, highlights that the targeting and repression of SOGI minorities in the Russian Federation is first and foremost State-driven. However, several religious, societal and non-state actors, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian police and security forces, and far-right nationalist organizations such as the Russian Community, have been key levers for amplifying 'traditional values' narratives and enforcing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine since 2022 has provided further impetus to the State, as well as these actors, in framing LGBTQ+ communities as a 'Western' project.

Third, our research points to the targeting and repression of civil society as a key early warning sign of violations of the rights of LGBTQ+ people. Civil society repression is a common strategy within Russia's 'authoritarian playbook,' yet is not unique in scapegoating SOGI minorities as part of a broader strategy to maintain political control. Although civil society actors continue to adapt with remarkable creativity in the face of shrinking civic space, the international community must act to mitigate the erosion of the rights of LGBTQ+ people by ensuring that LGBTQ+ organizations and groups remain functional. Further, SOGI minority repression is one manifestation of a wider global erosion of accountability. This paper demonstrates how closely attacks on SOGI minorities are tied to human rights backsliding, reinforcing the need for renewed engagement and strengthened accountability mechanisms at both national and international levels.

Finally, this paper underscores the need to support and protect LGBTQ+ organizations, groups and individuals, challenge narratives that enable repression and discrimination like 'traditional values,' and reinforce the rights of LGBTQ+ people as universal human rights.

ANNEX 1.0

Table 1.0: Key anti-LGBTQ+ legislative changes in the Russian Federation (1934-2025).[159]

Date	Title of the Law/ Amendment	Key Changes Introduced	Human Rights Significance
1934	Article 121 of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic Criminal Code (Soviet Union).	Criminalized male homosexuality ("muzhelozhstvo"), punishable by up to five years imprisonment. Women's homosexuality was not mentioned.	Institutionalized state persecution of LGBTQ+ people. Thousands of Russian citizens were prosecuted during the Soviet era, reinforcing long-term social stigma and State control over sexuality.
27 May 1993	Repeal of Article 121 - Decriminalization of male homosexuality in Russia.	The Russian Federation abolished Article 121 under pressure relating to its accession to the Council of Europe in 1996.[160]	Marked the formal end of criminal penalties. However, no anti-discrimination protections were created and State rhetoric continued to treat LGBTQ+ people with suspicion.
2006-2013	First regional "propaganda" laws were adopted in 11 regions, including Arkhangelsk, Ryazan, Kostroma and Saint Petersburg.	Related to bans on "propaganda of homosexuality" for minors, including restrictions on public events and prohibition of statements concerning "homosexuality" in the public sphere.	Served as a legal testing ground for Federal 2013 law (see below). Normalized censorship and discrimination at the sub-national level.
29 June 2013	Federal Law No. 135-FZ - Introduction of Article 6.21 ("propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors").	Administrative offence banning the distribution of information presenting "non-traditional sexual relations" as socially equal or acceptable to minors.	Institutionalized nationwide discrimination. Provided the legal basis for censorship, police harassment and shutdown of LGBTQ+ events moving forward.
July 2020	Article 72 Constitutional Amendment - Definition of Marriage.	The Russian Constitution was amended to state marriage is "the union of a man and a woman."	Foreclosed the possibility of equal marriage rights, elevating heteronormativity to the constitutional level.

5 December 2022	Federal Law No. 389-FZ "On the Protection of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values."	Embedded the requirement for state policy to protect "traditional family values," culture and historical memory. Also strengthened State oversight over educational, cultural and media content.	Served as the ideological and legal foundation for anti-LGBTQ+ policy. Elevated the notion of "traditional family" as a State norm and empowered censorship and monitoring of any "non-traditional" ideas (including by State and non-State actors).
5 December 2022	Federal Law No. 479-FZ - Expanded 2013 "propaganda" ban (Federal Law No. 135-FZ).	Extended "propaganda" ban to all ages; banned "propaganda of gender reassignment" and LGBTQ+ visibility across media, books, film, culture and Internet.	Escalated censorship dramatically, effectively criminalizing any positive or neutral depiction of LGBTQ+ identities nationwide.
24 July 2023	Federal Law No. 386-FZ - Ban on gender-affirming care and repealing Article 70 of the Law on Civil Status Acts.	Banned most gender-affirming medical interventions; restricted legal gender marker changes; allowed the annulment of marriages post-transition.	Marked Russia as one of the world's most restrictive anti-transgender regimes, eliminating legal and medical transition pathways for transgender persons.
30 November 2023	Supreme Court Ruling – 'International LGBT Movement' declared "extremist."	'International LGBT Movement' designated as "extremist," meaning criminal liability was introduced for the participation, organization or display of symbols including the rainbow flag.	Historic criminalization: LGBTQ+ identity became equated with extremism and terrorism, enabling arbitrary arrests, raids, and prosecution of activists and organizations.
23 Nov 2024	Law banning the adoption of Russian children by citizens of countries where gender transitioning is legal.	Citizens of specified countries (where gender transition is legal) are no longer allowed to adopt Russian children, along with a law banning materials encouraging people not to have children (e.g. abortion pamphlets, content deemed to promote "non-traditional lifestyles").	Integrated anti-LGBTQ+ policy into family and child-adoption legislation, framing gender transitions as a 'danger' to Russian 'traditional/family' values.
1 Sept 2025[161]	Draft law criminalizing deliberate online searches for content labelled "extremist" (including LGBTQ+-related content).	Anyone who "intentionally" searches for banned content (including LGBTQ+ movement material) may face fines, even with a VPN.	Would further expand repression in the digital sphere and restrict public expression as well as the pursuit of information, further isolating LGBTQ+ individuals and allies in Russia.

END NOTES

1 International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), 'LGBT persecution in Russia: Ministry of Justice moves to designate the entire LGBT movement as an "extremist organisation",' *International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)*, 29 November 2023, https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/russia/lgbtqi-persecution-in-russia-ministry-of-justice-moves-to-designate/.

2 This working paper uses the term "LGBTQ+" as an inclusive umbrella term to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other sexual and gender minorities. The "+" acknowledges the diversity of identities that may not be explicitly listed but are similarly affected by the legal and social issues discussed in this paper.

3 The mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation was established under HRC Resolution 51/25 at the Human Rights Council's 51st session in October 2022. See UNHRC Res 51/25, 11 October 2022. The mandate was most recently renewed in September 2025. For all reports by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation see OHCHR, 'Documents Listing,' https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents-listing?field_content_category_target_id%5B182%5D=182&field_entity_target_id%5B8246%5D=8246&view_mode=document-list (last accessed 11 November 2025).

4 Interview with academic expert, online, 16 October 2025 (Interview #18).

5 Note: Some individuals provided written insights as forms of contribution.

6 Latest reports by the UN Special Rapporteur include a report to the HRC on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation and a report to the GA on the abuse of public safety and national security legislation in the Russian Federation as a tool for suppressing dissent and anti-war expression. See Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova on Situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, UN doc A/HRC/60/59, 15 September 2025; Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova on Rule of fear: silencing dissent and anti-war expression in the Russian Federation in the name of national security, UN doc A/80/382, 16 September 2025.

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