

IN BRIEF ...

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

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SUMMARY

- The targeting and repression of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) minorities in the Russian Federation has accelerated since President Putin's return to power in 2012, reaching its peak following the 2023 Supreme Court decision designating the 'International LGBT Movement' as "extremist." While this repression is primarily State-driven it is heavily amplified by religious, societal, and non-state actors.
- The Russian State employs various strategies to normalize human rights erosion, including weaponizing 'traditional values' narratives, securitizing SOGI minorities as societal threats, and leveraging key actors such as the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian police and security services, and nationalist organizations and groups.
- These methods are considered essential components of Russia's 'authoritarian playbook,' leading to a rapidly shrinking civic space and repression of civil society, demonstrating predictive value for potential effects and consequences beyond the Russian Federation, including in the post-Soviet region.
- The Russian State's orchestrated targeting strips SOGI minorities of protection and procedural capacity to contest their erasure, transforming them into 'invisible citizens.' Drawing on extensive research and over twenty interviews with UN representatives, civil society actors and academic experts, 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.

METHODS OF STATE REPRESSION AND THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

Increasingly since President Putin's return to power in 2012, the Russian State has used 'traditional values' narratives and rhetoric to consolidate power and gradually marginalize minorities. This strategy constructs SOGI minorities as politically and morally dangerous, often portraying them as 'foreign agents' and a general threat to Russian family values.¹ This weaponization, despite appearing 'soft' compared to 'hard' legal measures, produces concrete consequences, including violations of multiple articles under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) such as the right to non-discrimination (Article 2) and freedom of expression (Article 19).² Further, this rhetoric legitimizes increased societal violence and hate crimes within Russian society and acts as a precursor to the more serious securitization of SOGI minorities.

Securitization involves presenting SOGI issues as existential threats to society, justifying emergency politics.³ The Russian State has used securitization methods to construct a unifying threat, consolidate domestic power and distract citizens from socio-economic and geopolitical instability, particularly since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The clearest illustration is the 2023 Supreme Court decision labeling the non-existent 'International LGBT Movement' as "extremist," allowing authorities to criminalize SOGI minorities and suppress LGBTQ+ activism using counter-terrorism and counter-extremism legislation.⁴ 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.⁵

Religious, societal and non-state actors play a particularly important role in the repression of SOGI minorities in Russia. These actors work alongside and often in collaboration with the Russian State to amplify 'traditional values' narratives and target LGBTQ+ persons. First, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) uses its influential position and close current relationship with the State to reinforce its rhetoric, framing SOGI as a 'moral disease.'⁶ The ROC has also served as a vector of legitimization for anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and has linked the war in Ukraine to a clash against 'liberal European' values, equating gay parades to an 'anti-civilised' state.⁷ Second, the Russian police and security services actively enforce anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, leading to increased State-sponsored violence, physical abuse, and arbitrary detention. Police have used online dating platforms and social media to identify, intimidate, and detain LGBTQ+ persons, contributing to increased mistrust and underreporting of hate crimes.⁸ Finally, nationalist organizations and groups like the Russian Community (*Russkaya Obyschina* (RO)) champion 'traditional values' and operate as a "parallel policing structure with unofficial state backing."⁹ RO activists have collaborated with law enforcement in raids on LGBTQ+ venues, signaling a striking visibility in enforcing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and promoting hypermasculine nationalism.¹⁰

Russia's strategy of scapegoating domestic LGBTQ+ communities and weaponizing 'traditional values' is being mirrored in neighboring states, including Hungary, Georgia, and Bulgaria, reinforcing the need to recognize these tactics as part of a broader 'authoritarian playbook.'

KEY FINDINGS

LGBTQ+ communities in the Russian Federation face severe rights violations due to the continued use of repressive measures by the State. The weaponization of national identity, securitization of SOGI minorities and mobilization of non-state actors contributes to a landscape that has gradually pushed LGBTQ+ persons into invisibility. While this process is not unique to Russia, these methods are an inherent part of Russia's 'authoritarian playbook,' replicated in the region and abroad, and signaling important early warning signs for further minority group repression. Several key findings have emerged from our research.

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. This repression has led to an erasure of visibility of SOGI minorities and an attempt to control and silence LGBTQ+ voices as illustrated through the 2023 Russian Supreme Court decision to recognize the ‘International LGBT Movement’ as “extremist.”¹¹

Second, our research 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. This process has been exacerbated by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 2022.

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**. A common strategy within Russia’s ‘authoritarian playbook,’ civil society repression is one of the first methods used in the broader strategy to maintain political control and an indicator of the global erosion of accountability and human rights backsliding. 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.

Finally, we highlight 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**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on research analysis and interviews conducted, the following recommendations suggest ways to protect LGBTQ+ voices in the Russian Federation and support Russian civil society defending LGBTQ+ communities, both within the Russian Federation and the region.

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. **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.

3. **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.

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.¹² 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).¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵
- 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.

END NOTES

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