

# Abuse of LGBT Rights and Government Legitimacy in Russia

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## Introduction

Rights and protections for LGBT people have advanced at different paces and in different political moments around the world. The 1960s and 1970s saw the beginnings of the LGBT movement in the United States with a strong public reaction and support for the Stonewall Riots. Advances in LGBT protections in Europe were rapid throughout the beginning of the 21st century, with over two dozen countries there now recognizing same-sex marriage. But, in other parts of the world, LGBT people are still routinely killed for openly expressing same-sex attraction or non-cisgender identities. “Honor killings” of LGBT family members are common throughout Europe and Asia, and homosexuality is punishable by death in some places.

When the Soviet Union dissolved between 1989 and 1991, it appeared as if there was an opportunity for the advancement of gay rights in many of the former Soviet states. Democracy was taking

hold in some, and there seemed to be hope for a genuine push for new protections for LGBT people internationally. While some former Soviet states have made significant progress in support of LGBT people within their borders, one state has notably pursued policies that seek to create barriers for gay people in society: Russia. With hope for a genuine transition to democracy less than 20 years ago, it seems that any democratic ideals are absent from the country’s government today. But with other former Soviet states making progress in democracy and in gay rights, there is an important question to ask: Why do LGBT people have fewer rights and protections in Russia than in other former Soviet states and communist states around the world? To answer this, a deeper understanding of domestic political factors that create legitimacy for the Russian government under Vladimir

Putin is needed, along with an exploration of the need for genuine democracy to advance the rights of LGBT people. While democracy may be requisite to advance gay rights, the absence of democracy does not necessarily result in an attack on gay rights. Rather, due to the need for legitimacy in many non-democratic political regimes, I argue that through seeking legitimacy in non-democratic governments, the absence of democracy diminishes gay rights. In other countries that have comparable Freedom House Scores to Russia, gay rights are placed in higher esteem. For democracy to be the decisive factor in the acquisition of gay rights, this comparison creates a serious reason for doubt. Looking to Russia, I argue that a comprehensive understanding of how the Putin regime creates its legitimacy is necessary to understand why gay

rights are under attack. Lack of political freedom, ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, anti-Western rhetoric, and public opinion of gays and lesbians make it imperative that the Putin government subjugate gay people. In order to maintain legitimacy from these other sources, rights of LGBT people have been systematically denied in Russia.

### **Literature Review**

Even in the West, rights of LGBT people have only been recently normalized. As the expansion of gay rights around the world continues, so does the body of research about what actually guarantees these rights. The currently limited body of research into international gay rights provides challenges for relying on past research, while simultaneously providing an opportunity to contribute new and unique ideas to this growing body of work.

Much of the previous work that exists around LGBT rights assesses the impact of religion and wealth on LGBT rights within a country. Looking to Russia specifically, much of this focus is on the impact of religion. Radzhana Buyantueva's article in the *Journal of Homosexuality* looks further into how the Russian state's connection to the Russian Orthodox Church makes difficult the acquisition of rights for gays and lesbians, and Cai Wilkinson comes to a similar conclusion in his article in the *Journal of Human Rights*. As the Russian government has intertwined itself with the Russian Orthodox Church since the Soviet Union's collapse, state policies have been influenced by the desires of religious leaders. These leaders have publically voiced support for anti-LGBT acts committed by the Russian government (Buyantueva, 2017, 469).

In addition to religion, democracy is a less-looked to but also important factor in assessing how rights for LGBT people are obtained. One analysis of gay rights and democracy comes from Omar Encarnación in *Gay Rights: Why Democracy Matters*. Encarnación notes that "the nature of the political regime is a better predictor of gay rights than either economic development or cultural factors such as religion," (Encarnación, 2014, 97). This conclusion comes from comparing regime types in countries to laws on same-sex adoption, military service, marriage, and discrimination. The argument that democracy increases the ability for gay rights to take hold in a country relies on the ability for citizens to advocate for them through civil society, strong rule of law, and evidence from the third wave of democratization, in which countries like Spain and South Africa democratized and adopted laws allowing same-sex marriage shortly after (Encarnación, 99).

Correlation does not necessarily equal causation, and the United States is an excellent example of this when comparing gay rights and democracy. While civil society can be used for LGBT people and their allies to advocate for gay rights, it can be used in the same way by people who seek to hold back rights for gay people. In the United States, individual states are left to implement many laws regarding rights for LGBT people, including non-discrimination laws, gender marker changes on government documents, and conversion therapy (Human Rights Campaign 2018). Understanding how civil society can be used both for and against gay rights is important to understand when assessing how rights of these people can be advanced internationally.

Drawing on past literature, it is clear that

genuine democracy is a necessary prerequisite for LGBT equality due to the necessity for a strong civil society and rule of law. All legislative gains for LGBT people have come as a result of advocacy campaigns by LGBT people and their allies, while rule of law has created an avenue through judicial systems to advance gay rights as well. However, due to the experiences around gay rights in the US, it is understood that democracy alone cannot secure gay rights. As outlined below, legitimacy related to political freedom, religion, public opinion, and Russia's role in the world against the West create conditions for LGBT rights to be pushed aside.

### The Status Quo of LGBT Rights

The 21st century has seen a rapid expansion of rights for LGBT people. Marriage equality has passed in many places, along with rights for adoption, gender designation on government documents, and health care for members of the LGBT community. However, almost all of these advances have come from western democracies. Some were guaranteed through the legislative process and others through the court system, but they all fell back on the principles of democratic forms of governance.

The Global Barometer of Gay Rights provides an analysis of the current status of gay rights around the world. This analysis takes into consideration 29 factors, giving each a score of either "+1" or "0". The total score out of 29 is then divided by 29 to create a percentage. The percentages for each category, persecuting through protecting, can be seen in Figure 1.

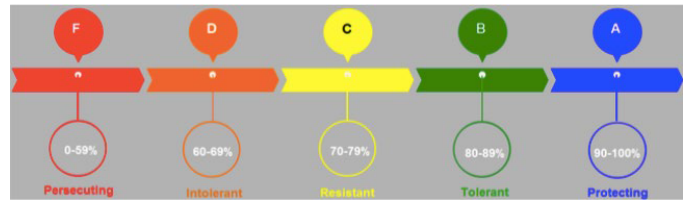


Figure 1- Categories of the Global Barometer of Gay Rights (Dicklitch et al. 2016)

Some of the 29 items taken into consideration include the presence of a death penalty for homosexuality, whether homosexuality is legal, civil unions or marriage for homosexuals, whether a majority of citizens are accepting of homosexuality, if gays are allowed to organize, whether there is anti-discrimination legislation for housing, and if there are known acts of violence or murders against homosexuals (Dicklitch et al. 2016). In Figure 2, these countries can be seen geographically. The scale follows the same coloring as Figure 1.

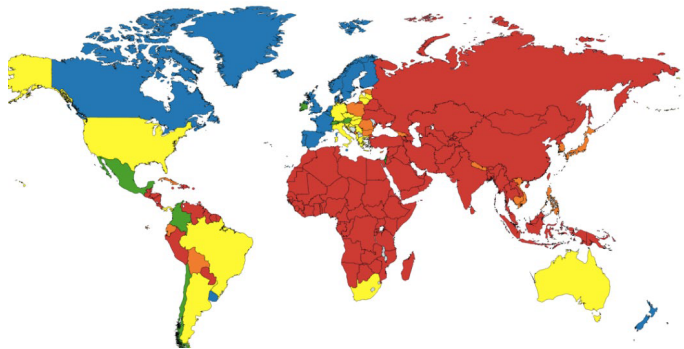


Figure 2- Map of Global Barometer of Gay Rights Categories (Dicklitch et al. 2016)

Perhaps the most striking part of this image is the concentration of red, the persecuting classification, in African and Asian countries.

While religion and government type may account for part of this geographic divide, other less obvious factors also appear to cause an impact.

### Democracy and LGBT Rights

To further correlate regime and government type with gay rights, I have compiled a comparison between Freedom House Scores and the Global Barometer of Gay Rights for former Soviet Union States. I briefly touch on Western democracies and communist states in this section to provide a comparison to the former Soviet Union states.

#### Western Democracies

Intuitively, Western democracies have strong civil society, a strong rule of law, and, correspondingly, strong protections for LGBT people overall. Out of the three groups I have considered, these countries have the strongest protections for LGBT citizens. These countries all have many protections in place for LGBT people, with Canada receiving a perfect score for their national laws. With the exception of the US and Germany, almost all Western democracies are considered to be “protecting” gay rights, whereas Germany and the US are “tolerant”.

#### Communist States

A comparison between current communist states’ Freedom House and Global Barometer of Gay Rights scores provides a different perspective on how regime type impacts the rights of LGBT people. The rights of LGBT people in communist states are greater than those in almost all former Soviet Union states. Much of this difference can likely be attributed to the absence of murders and death penalty for gay people in communist states today. While these states are all considered to be

“persecuting” gay people by the Global Barometer of Gay Rights, they are not places where LGBT people are killed for their sexual orientation. For these countries and the former Soviet Union states, I have reworked the Freedom House and Global Barometer of Gay Rights scores to more clearly show how they compare to each other. The Freedom House Scores in this section are inverted, where a 7 is most-free and a 1 is least-free (8-Original Freedom House Score= Scores Presented). The Global Barometer of Gay Rights scores are originally out of 100 percentage points. To better compare these scores, I have scale this percentage to be out of 7 as the Freedom House Scores are. For example, a GBGR score of 100% become a score of 7.0, and a score of 50% becomes a 3.5 ( $[(GBGR/100)*0.7]$ ). Scores for the

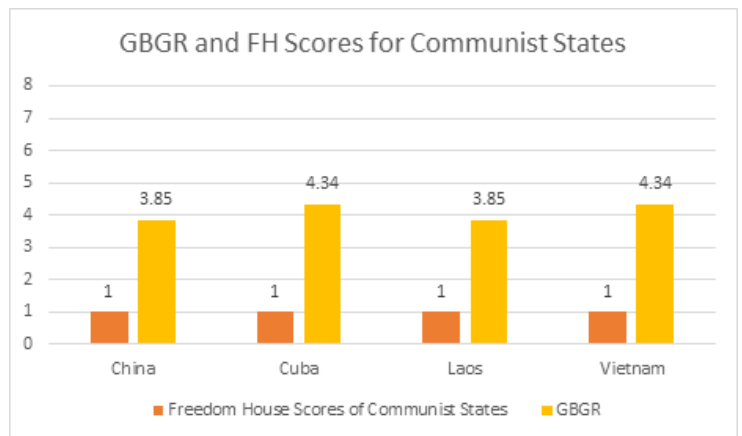


Chart 1- Global Barometer of Gay Rights and Freedom House Scores: Communist States

communist states can be seen in Chart 1. Although all four current communist states have the least-free rating from Freedom House, their Global Barometer of Gay Rights Scores stand relatively well compared to other “Not Free” states, as can be seen in the following section on former Soviet states. This evidence lends to the idea that regime or government type is not the only important factor in

assessing rights for LGBT people.

### Former Soviet States

Perhaps the most complicated picture comes from looking at the 15 states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. In nearly two decades of transitioning away from communism, these states have taken different paths and have been influenced by different international and domestic pressures. Chart 2 shows the comparison between the Freedom House and Global Barometer of Gay Rights scores for each of the former

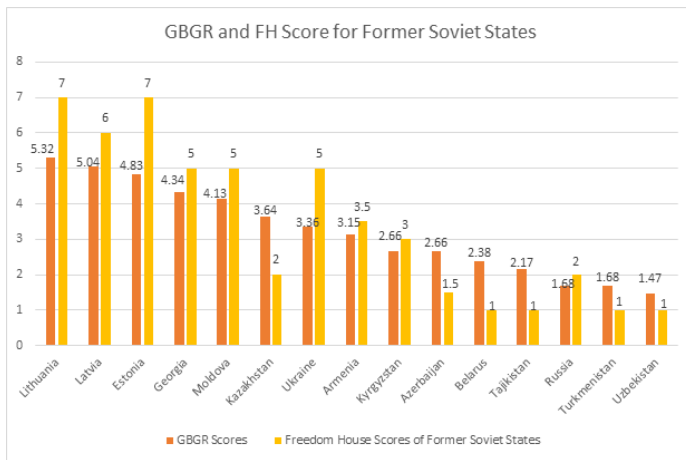


Chart 2- Global Barometer of Gay Rights and Freedom House Scores: Former Soviet States

Soviet Union countries. This data paints a more complicated picture about how LGBT rights have been handled in the post-Soviet era in former Soviet states. At the left of Chart 2, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia noticeably have higher scores in both categories. This is likely due to influence from other European countries and the requirement of human rights standards through the European Union. Similar European pressures are likely present in both Georgia and Moldova, and to some extent in Ukraine. Russia has one of the lowest Global Barometer of Gay Rights scores at 24%, adjusted to 1.68 in Chart 2. Understanding

this comparison between gay rights and government type is important to fully understand Russia's treatment of LGBT people. Compared to how free Russia is, it treats its LGBT citizens disproportionately badly compared to other former Soviet states. While democracy plays an important part in securing rights for LGBT people, the absence of it cannot fully explain why rights for this group of people are not supported in a country. Looking to Russia, political legitimacy needs to be considered as an important factor in understanding the rights of LGBT people.

### Putin's Political Legitimacy

Maintaining legitimacy in a non-democratic form of government is something leaders of non-democratic states need to put considerable effort into. According to Bo Petersson of Malmö University, legitimacy, in the traditional sense, is "a solid and widespread belief within a political entity that the current arrangement of power is appropriate, proper, [and] just," (Petersson 2017, 236). He expands to include the idea of traditional authority, in which a leader is around for so long that no one can imagine their political system without them, and charismatic authority, where certain traits about a leader make them exceptionally supported by their citizens (Petersson, 237). These concepts of legitimacy are important in this analysis of Putin's political motivations because of the methods he has used to gain legitimacy for himself and his government. In particular, the actions and priorities of the Putin government's actions have had a negative effect on gays and lesbians.

In 2008, under the presidency of Dimitri Medvedev, Putin worked to expand presidential term limits to six years after Medvedev's term was completed (Sefanov 2008). While Putin is within his



Constitutional bounds to serve four nonconsecutive terms, he has consolidated power of the government into the executive as created a “personalization” of power, resulting in a country under authoritarian rule and rated a 6.0, or “Not Free,” by Freedom House (“Freedom in the World 2018”). However, even with these barriers to legitimacy in place, Vladimir Putin has stunning approval ratings. According to the independent polling organization Levada-Center, Putin’s approval sat at 82% in April of 2018 (Levada-Center 2018). In an authoritarian state, this type of broad approval can best be explained by a government exploiting and politicizing issues that citizens have strong feelings towards. This also serves well to understand the ideas of traditional and charismatic authority, ways in which Putin is able to maintain legitimacy in his government.

This is where the question of violations against gays and lesbians in Russia comes into the picture. As I will explain, Putin capitalizes expertly on the opinion of Russian citizens. Russia is almost 81% ethnic Russian, creating an extremely salient in group for Putin to cater to (Russia Population 2018). In order to do this, he turns to religious and anti-western sentiment. Unfortunately for gays and lesbians, these both conflict directly with their rights in Russia.

### *Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church*

Religion has made a remarkable recovery in Russia. The early Soviet era is marked by highly regulated religious policy, as religion was considered a potential threat to the Communist state. Religion, however, was still able to survive at an institutional level during the Soviet era (McTernan 1990, 19). Beginning with perestroika, ordinary Russians began to have fewer restrictions

on practicing their faith (McTernan, 23). In 2000, 56% of Russians identified as religious, and that number increase to 68% by 2012, three times the level it was in 1989 (Buyantueva 2017, 470). Russian Orthodoxy is the dominant religion in the country, and the Orthodox Church has advocated for the violent dispersal of the 2011 Moscow Gay Pride Parade, as well as several anti-gay laws in regions around Russia (Buyantueva, 471). For Vladimir Putin, this growing religiosity is something to capitalize on and create more legitimacy for his own government. By supporting legislation that is anti-gay and aligns with traditional religious values, Putin is able to connect himself better to the church, thus gaining more support from Russians. The rising push for “traditional values” in Russia is closely tied to this revival of religiosity in the country. As early as 2002, officials in the Russian Duma sought to enforce these types of values by making sodomy illegal (Wilkinson 2014, 367). Throughout the next decade, attempts to create other laws restrictive of gay rights in Russia emerged in the Duma as well. When he was elected to his third term in 2012, Putin further sought to solidify his alliance with the Orthodox Church. He has asserted “that it is the state’s responsibility to protect and uphold traditional values and their principal institutions ... for the survival of the nation-state,” (Wilkinson, 368). In his address to the Federal Assembly in 2013, Putin said, “the destruction of traditional values ... is fundamentally undemocratic,” further seeking to gain legitimacy for his own regime by putting the rights of the LGBT minority at risk (Putin December 2013). He was able to do this while catering to the church and religious Russians, simultaneously calling into question the Western view of democracy as something where everyone, regardless of their values, is treated the same. At the Meeting of the

Valdai International Discussion Club in September of 2013, Putin also attacked the West's non-traditional values in democracy. He mentions that the West is "implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships," and that "people are seriously talking about registering political parties whose aim is to promote pedophilia," (Putin, September 2013). Putin started his third term as president without a strong alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church. Through these addresses and others, he was able to employ rhetoric that helped bring the Church closer to him, creating more legitimacy for his political regime through this alliance.

### *Capitalizing on Anti-Western Sentiment*

While traditional values in Russia are tied closely to Russian Orthodoxy, there is a strong connection between preserving tradition and being anti-Western in Russia. This can be seen through rhetoric from the state, as well as public reaction from Russian citizens as their government has stood toe to toe with the West in recent years.

As political and religious elites further tie traditional values to Russian culture, they create a divide between Russian and Western cultures. In this case, Russian culture is about "traditionalism and morality," compared to Western culture of "liberalism and individualism," (Buyantueva, 471). With this view of Russian culture, political and religious elites are able to advocate against Western liberal and individual values. By adopting laws that defy Western norms that are largely accepted in the international political realm, Russia is able to "acquire a meaningful place in the international arena as a protector of traditions," (Buyantueva, 472). This geopolitical interest of combatting the West through cultural means creates legitimacy for

the Putin government among its citizens, but it puts LGBT people in a very dangerous situation in Russia.

A clear example of anti-Western sentiment in Russia can be seen in the case of Pussy Riot, a punk group that supports feminist and pro-LGBT policy. These women were protesting the Putin regime in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior by screaming "Mother Mary, please drive Putin away," (Smith-Spark, 2012). The government-controlled media quickly labeled the protest as being orchestrated by the West (Storch, 2014, 59). Not only does the dismissal of these women's ability to be free-thinking and speaking members of society directly attack democratic values, blaming the West for the protest helps the government further solidify a divide between Western values and Russian values. From the Russian Orthodox Church's perspective, this demonstration was regarded to be part of "the West's plan to destroy Russia by undermining its spiritual values... leading to the collapse of its statehood," (Storch, 62). While Western figures like Madonna, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned the arrest of Pussy Riot members, the Russian state media characterized this support for the punk group as pressure from the West and something that Russia must resist. This incident shows a clear desire from the Russian government not only to regulate its citizens' access to free speech, but also to contrast Russia with the West, casting itself as the protector of values.

The Russian population is extremely receptive to anti-Western rhetoric and responds positively to both the state's rhetoric and actions against the West. During the 2012 Russian Presidential election, Putin used harsh anti-NATO and anti-US language despite knowing he would need to work with these actors in Syria once elected (Guriev 2013). The electoral tactic employed by Putin in this case was to capitalize on an

already-existing anti-Western sentiment by casting NATO and the US as enemies of Russia. “[F]irmly rooted in the Russian public mind is the idea of an ideological war waged by the West against Russia,” and the Russian government is able to capitalize on this idea to create an advantageous political environment for itself (Storch, 82). In this environment, any idea that is hostile to the government can be labeled as “Western,” and this gives legitimacy to the government to silence any dissidence in its population.

To further understand the anti-Western sentiment among the population, looking to the annexation of Crimea provides valuable insight. According to Levada-Center, Putin saw a 15% increase in approval ratings between the beginning of 2014 and March of 2014, just after the annexation of Crimea, resulting in an 80% approval rating (Levada-Center, 2014). On top of this, a majority of Russians see the sanctions placed on Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea as aiming to “weaken and humiliate Russia,” not as a tactic to end the conflict in Ukraine (Nardelli et al., 2015). Taken together, this data shows clear public support for Putin against the West, as well as strong suspicions of Western motivations toward Russia. While some in Russia who oppose the Putin regime doubt the findings of these surveys, claiming results may be manipulated, “most Western polling firms arrive at similar figures,” (Birnbaum 2016). Levada is well-respected in Russia, and “there’s no reason to doubt... Putin’s aggressive, anti-U.S. stance over Crimea [resonated] with a lot of ordinary Russians,” (Taylor 2014). Whether or not the numbers are exactly accurate, Putin’s actions against the West have clearly garnered him a large amount of support.

### *Traditional Values and Gay Rights*

This section seeks to better explain exactly what the state of LGBT rights in Russia is, and how current laws and actions have helped Putin maintain political power and legitimacy. While homosexuality is legal in Russia, there are no hate crime laws in place, resulting in one of the highest rates of murders of LGBT people in the world (Gay Travel Index 2018). And in Chechnya, the most dangerous place in the world for gay men, the murders of gay men are being used to maintain power and legitimacy over Chechen citizens.

To understand the state of gay rights in Russia, it is necessary to understand the importance of speech and protest for LGBT people throughout history. One of the most visible and important forms of protest and celebration for LGBT people are Pride parades. Dating back to 1970, these parades started as a form of protest against the subjugation of LGBT rights in the US, and have since spread around the world. In some places, they serve as a form of protest, and in others as a form of celebration. LGBT activists in Russia have tried to organize Pride parades in Moscow for over a decade. Starting in 2006, these parades were announced, banned, and then organized and conducted under circumstances that lead to the arrest and injury of many protesters each year (Persson 2014, 8). The 2011 Pride parade in Moscow was violently dispersed, and Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin thanked the Moscow authorities for this violent response to the parade. He said that “the majority of Russian citizens do not in any way accept propaganda of sexual perversions,” and continued to say that Russian authorities need to create laws based on cultural and moral values (Chaplin 2011). The next year, Moscow City Council banned gay Pride parades for 100 years (Wilkinson, 367). To suppress the expression of LGBT people and activists in Russia, the government has created barriers to one of the most historically important and powerful forms



of expression for the LGBT community. For Putin, this creates legitimacy for the government by drawing on both religious sentiment among Russians as well as public opinion of gay people more broadly. Most Russian citizens approve of anti-gay policies, and putting these policies in place is a necessary step for the government to sustain its popular and religious legitimacy.

The most prominent policy issue impacting LGBT rights in Russia is the 2013 “anti-homopropaganda,” or anti-gay propaganda, law. Passed on June 11th, 2013, this law amends the Russian law “On Protection of Children from Information Harmful to their Health and Development” to include the words “which propagates non-traditional sexual relations,” (The Russian State Duma 2011). The law’s effect is to prevent any propaganda, meaning any imagery or text, regarding LGBT lifestyles to anyone under the age of 18. This creates a massive barrier LGBT advocacy, as “any public representation of nontraditional sexual relations that is not explicitly negative could be considered ‘homopropaganda,’” (Wilkinson, 366). The justification of this law is largely related to concerns about demographics, making the issue about “survival of the nation through the protection of children from harmful information,” (Buyantueva, 366). While demographic concerns are real for Russia as they have an estimated -0.02% growth rate for 2018, the impact this law will have does not adequately address this concern (Russian Population 2018). While the state may assert that is about demographics, this law is clearly much more about casting Russia as a protector of traditional values and taking advantage of anti-gay sentiment that is present throughout the Russian population to gain support for the Putin government.

The most critical situation for gays in Russia is their treatment by the government in Chechnya. Ramzan Kadyrov is the current Head of the Chechen Republic, and Putin is able to keep control over Chechnya through Kadyrov’s loyalty to him. Kadyrov has said he hopes Putin will run Russia “for life,” essentially swearing absolute loyalty to the Putin regime, while Putin himself completely ignores the atrocities committed against gay men in Chechnya by the Kadyrov government (Arutunyan 2017). Chechnya’s post-Soviet history is marked by resistance to the Russian government. For Putin to have someone loyal to him in the most powerful position in the Chechen government is essential to maintain control over the region, regardless of the human cost. Chechnya’s violent recent history and its predominately Muslim population has created a situation in which gay rights are easily infringed upon without popular opposition. The horrendous treatment of gay men in Chechnya is extensive, and includes beating, torture through electrocution, humiliation, and death in at least three cases, according to Novaya Gazeta (Milashina and Gordienko 2017). This has been described by many as a blatant anti-gay purge, where men are taken captive, and all suspected gay contacts in their cell phones are also taken captive and abused. And while Kadyrov asserts that gays “do not exist in the republic,” government agents are abducting these men and encouraging their families to carry out “honor killings” once they are released (Osborne 2017). This campaign against gay men in Chechnya is supported by the Putin government, and this support sends a clear message across Russia as well: abducting and torturing gay men is acceptable, and there will be no consequences for it.

*Public Opinion on Gays in Russia*

As a country that is composed of over 80% ethnic Russians, Putin has a clear group to cater his policy to (Russia Population 2018). Combining religious preferences and anti-Western sentiment, laws against gay people are a logical policy choice for the Russian government. Putin has created a sense of purpose for Russia: the protector of tradition. The alignment between the Russian Orthodox Church and the government presents this clearly, and framing Russia's contrast with the West in a positive way allows the government to harness anti-Western sentiment for its own political gain. Unfortunately for LGBT people in Russia, gay rights are seen as liberal and Western, and they also conflict directly with church doctrine.

Public opinion on gay people in Russian further cements Vladimir Putin's need to allow persecution against them. The Levada-Center has compiled public opinion data on gays and lesbians since the Soviet Union began to break apart in 1989. Some of the most striking data shows that, as of 2015, a majority of Russians believe that homosexuals should be either eliminated or isolated from society (Levada-Center Oct. 2015).

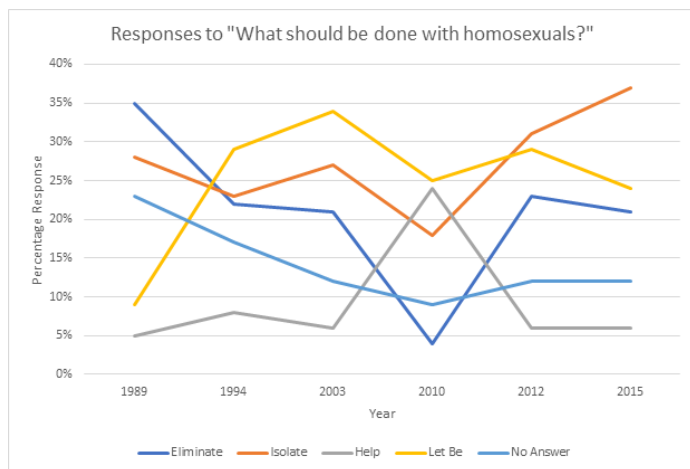


Chart 3- Russian public opinion on what to do with homosexuals (Levada-Center Oct. 2015)

This data shows that, overall, Russian citizens are not sympathetic toward gays and lesbians. There is outlying data point in 2010, where only 4% of respondents chose "eliminate," and a spike in "help" responses went up to 24%. Data collected in 2010 followed four years of violent crackdowns on Pride parades in Moscow, and this data change could be a response to violence against gays and lesbians seen in the city. Related to this data on what to do with homosexuals is similar data collected about what homosexuality actually is. This data can be seen in Chart 3.

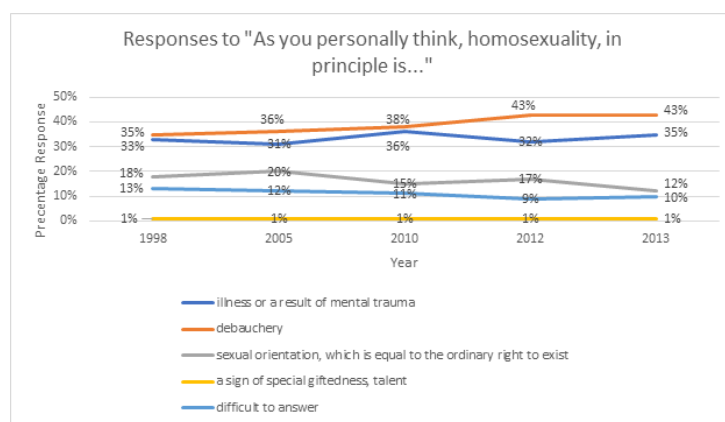


Chart 4- Russian public opinion on the nature of homosexuality (Levada-Center 2013)

Most Russians see homosexuality as "debauchery" or "illness or result of mental trauma", responses that paint homosexuality in the most negative light possible (Levada-Center 2013). As of 2015, only 5% of respondents to Levada-Center's survey reported having someone who was gay or lesbian among their close friends, while 91% said they did not know any homosexuals (Levada-Center May 2015). This adequately explains why LGBT people are targeted in Russian society. Overwhelmingly, Russians do not approve of or know any LGBT people, and the Russian government is able to capitalize on this

sentiment accordingly. Passing laws that cast Russia as protecting traditional values, like the anti-gay propaganda law or banning Pride parades, allows Russia to further cement its image as a state aligned with the Russian Orthodox Church and opposed to the liberal values of the West.

Furthermore, without catering to the demand of the Russian people's religious and anti-Western views through these anti-gay laws, the Russian government could actually create a legitimacy problem for itself. As it has cast itself as the protector of traditional values, the Russian government under Putin has no choice but to uphold these values in all ways that it can domestically. For the government to support the LGBT community in any way would go against the image it has created for itself. This type of action would directly contrast with the rhetoric of the Orthodox Church, go against public opinion, and subjugate Russia to the Western liberal values it has worked so hard to fight against. For Putin and his government, creating protections for LGBT people could pose a serious risk to the stability of the regime.

## Conclusion

While Putin's legitimacy stemming from religion, anti-Western sentiment, and public opinion is certainly a factor in the treatment of LGBT people in Russia, these factors alone may not paint the entire picture. Factors such as GDP per capita, average level of education, rural population, and internet access can also have substantial impacts on public opinion on LGBT people. When paired with democratic forms of government, these factors can sway the rights of LGBT toward acceptance. Another important factor to consider is democracy itself. While I outline the difference

democracy can make for LGBT rights, this paper focuses on how non-democratic governments, and specifically Russia, need different sources of legitimacy, often creating a difficult political environment for LGBT rights to advance. While this is true in most non-democratic governments, the same can be seen in some Western democracies like the US. LGBT rights are certainly worse off in Russia than in any democratic nation in the world, but ignoring the subjugation of LGBT rights in Western nations overlooks an important part of the global LGBT movement.

In Russia, LGBT people are caught in an unfortunate place as the Putin regime seeks to acquire legitimacy. While religion is a clear and influential factor in creating public opinion against LGBT people, the government compounds this issue by aligning itself closely with the Orthodox Church. In a country with a government outside of religious pressures, government can guarantee the rights of those who might be persecuted under religious pretense. However, because the Putin regime draws on its connection to the Russian Orthodox Church for much of its legitimacy, the government cannot secure rights for LGBT people without going directly against the Church. Further complicating the picture is the anti-Western rhetoric employed by Putin and the Russian government. By rejecting all progressive and liberal values of the West in principle, any attempt to secure more rights for LGBT people would result in the state going back on its own rhetoric against the West, showing weakness in the message it is conveying to its citizens. And, as Russia carves its place in the international realm as the protector of traditional values, rights for LGBT people are an unfortunate casualty in the role Russia is creating for itself.

Whether or not Putin and the Russian government have an interest in protecting the rights of

LGBT people no longer matters. Putin has created for himself a situation where granting rights to LGBT people directly conflicts with the role he has created for Russia. While the opinions toward gays and lesbians among the Russian population hold as they are, this grasp on legitimacy can be maintained. But, looking into the future, if public opinion does shift in favor of gays and lesbians, it could put pressure on the government to secure rights for LGBT people, potentially creating legitimacy issues for what the Russian government stands for.

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