

# **RUSSIA: More than 40 LGBTQ activists arrested in Moscow**

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Washington Blade (02.07.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2VXkT2N> – More than 40 people were arrested in Moscow on June 27 for protesting against the arrest of an LGBTQ activist who is accused of spreading “gay propaganda” on her social media page and distributing pornography.

Yulia Tsvetkova, 27, is currently facing a six-year prison sentence for running a social media page called “Vagina Monologues.” The page encouraged people to share artistic depictions of vaginas and bodies as a whole, as well as drawings of same-sex couples with children.

She was initially arrested and charged with distribution of pornography last October, and was placed under house arrest in Komsomolsk, a city in Russia’s Far East, from last November to March of this year as a pre-trial restriction, according to her lawyer, Alexey Kuroptev, the coordinator of legal service at the Moscow Community Center. Authorities last December fined her 50,000 rubles (\$707.35) for distributing pornography.

Authorities on Thursday formally charged her under the “gay

propaganda" law for her drawings of same-sex families and couples. She is under travel restrictions and is not allowed to leave her home city unless police give her permission, Kuroptev said.

Max Olenichev, a lawyer with the Coming Out LGBT Group in Russia that provides legal assistance, psychiatric help, and other resources to LGBTQ people, said Tsvetkova's arrest could be a catalyst for other similar sentencings in the future.

"The authorities are trying to accuse her of distributing pornography," he said in a statement to the Washington Blade. "This tactic of harassment is probably going to be subsequently used against other LGBT people. This is why LGBT organizations and activists are so involved in a campaign against this case."

### ***Reasons LGBTQ activism arrests vary***

Kuroptev said the arrests of the 40 people gathered to protest Tsvetkova's arrest were justified using coronavirus-related crowd restrictions in Moscow.

The reasons for arrests during LGBTQ demonstrations in Russia often vary: Mobilizing without government approval, spreading so-called gay propaganda and other "excuses" are used, Svetlana Zakharova, the communications manager and board member of the Russian LGBT Network, said. Pride gatherings, even if they are for celebration and not a rally, are heavily policed and shut-down, she said, citing how LGBT activists are

arrested frequently in St. Petersburg and other cities.

This arrest tactic of charging protestors with gathering during the pandemic is spreading to other areas, as well, said ILGA-Europe Advocacy Director Katrin Hugendubel.

“Along with Russia, which now crashes any attempts of public manifestations, even the solo ones, we see other countries in the region, such as Hungary, closing down on fundamental rights and freedoms, instrumentalizing the current COVID-19 crisis,” she wrote in an email to the Blade.

Tsvetkova’s initial arrest and subsequent arrests of the 40 protestors on Saturday are used as “scaring tactics” by the Russian government, Zakharova said. Arrests for protesting without government permission usually end with a warning and no further punishment, she said.

The mass arrests of the 40 people protesting against Tsvetkova’s sentencing come with little surprise, according to Zakharova. Protests in Russia are outlawed as of 2014 without government approval, and approvals are difficult to receive by the government, she said. The recent coronavirus restrictions on mass gatherings allow for more frequent police crackdowns in Moscow.

“Tsvetkova’s case and last week’s detentions are textbook examples of arbitrary application of existing laws and regulations for intimidation and prosecution of activists,” Hugendubel said in an email to the Blade.

## ***Activists say propaganda law has been impactful***

The Russian government says the propaganda law that President Vladimir Putin signed in 2013 is meant to protect children from being exposed to homosexuality. This law prohibits any positive depiction of LGBTQ people.

According to the Pew Research Center, only 14 percent of people polled in Russia say homosexuality should be accepted.

The Human Rights Campaign on Thursday sharply criticized this week's passage of an amendment to the Russian constitution that defines marriage as between a man and a woman. Zakharova said anti-LGBTQ attitudes are also reflected in the country's media.

"The community is portrayed in the federal mass media as very dangerous beasts," she said.

Olenichev also said homophobia and hate crimes have increased in Russia since the propaganda law went into effect in 2013.

"Hate crimes and hate speech are almost never investigate," he said. "When the law was passed, the LGBT agenda essentially was pushed out of the public space."

Zakharova also said there was a public poll conducted on schoolchildren in Russia, including questions on the LGBTQ community. A majority of children don't believe in the propaganda, and 44 percent of children believe in marriage equality, she said.

"So this legislation was aimed to protect minors from propaganda, but in fact, they themselves don't believe that such a thing should be used," she said.

Olenichev also said he is hopeful for the next generation in tackling the stigma against LGBTQ people. Although the mainstream Russian media has portrayed LGBTQ individuals in a negative light, he said there is an increasing number of independent agencies and organizations that share positive media.

"[Since 2013], a generation of teenagers who do not share patriarchal values and openly support LGBT people has grown up," he said.