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## **Russian Cabinet rejects bill outlining changes to the Family Code impacting children's and transgender rights**

Meduza (20.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3814zVF> - Russia's Government Commission on Legislative Activities has rejected conservative Senator Elena Mizulina's draft law "aimed at strengthening the institution of the family." The commission believes that the changes outlined in the bill would tip the balance "towards the rights of parents" at the expense of children's rights. A draft of the cabinet's decision was obtained by TASS on Tuesday, October 20.

A group of senators submitted the package of amendments in question to the State Duma in June. It included changes to the country's Family Code that would prohibit social services from removing children from their families without a court order.

The bill also contained changes that would have major repercussions for transgender people in Russia, including prohibiting them from changing the gender markers on their identity documents (effectively preventing them from legally changing their gender) and restricting their ability to get married.

Earlier today, the country's Presidential Human Rights Council also issued a negative opinion on the bill, the council's head Valery Fadeev told RIA Novosti. Again, on the grounds that it would infringe on children's welfare.

"We prepared an opinion on Mizulina's draft law, it's negative. The main idea is that such significant changes to the legislation can't be carried out in a hurry, without broad expert and public discussion. The topic of taking children away is very delicate. And how can this not be made worse?" he said.

Fadeev added that cases such as these should be handled on an individual basis; each family needs to be assessed separately to determine whether or not a child is being abused or put in life-threatening danger. If this is indeed the case, "[it] should lead to some kind of decisive action, for which it is necessary to involve public institutions and NGOs," he said.

"Here too the question arises: how deeply can public institutions be involved in the family? This all needs to be balanced. And at the center, of course, should be the rights of the child," Fadeev concluded.

This summer, Mizulina's bill prompted a series of single-person protests outside of the State Duma opposing the amendments to Russia's Family Code.

State Duma Deputy Oksana Pushkina called the proposal on complicating the procedure for removing children from abusive families a “primitive prohibition.” She also said that the amendments on the status of transgender people contradict the constitution and pave the way for discrimination.

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

By Kaela Roeder

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 sentencing 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 crushes 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.

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## **YouTube takes down anti-gay ad after outrage in Russia**

***Russian clip on constitutional referendum that attacked LGBT+ adoptions removed from YouTube after outcry.***

By Umberto Bacchi

Thomson Reuters Foundation (03.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3cCQIJ6> - An online video suggesting Russians back constitutional reform or see gay couples win adoption rights was taken down by YouTube on Wednesday after LGBT+ groups said it incited hatred.

The clip, posted online this week, shows a boy going from joy to heartbreak as he discovers his new parents are men.

The ad had created an online furore that experts said could help garner support for the reform vote, which could let President Vladimir Putin extend his long rule.

It plays on deep-seated anti-gay sentiment in the country, where activists say violence against gay people has been on the rise since the adoption of a 2013 law that banned the dissemination of "gay propaganda" among young Russians.

Only heterosexual couples can adopt children in Russia.

"Here's your new mum. Don't be upset," one of the new adopting parents tells the child as he introduces his partner, who promptly offers the boy a dress. A woman working at the orphanage watches on, then spits on the floor in disgust.

"Will you choose such a Russia? Decide the future of the country - vote for amendments to the constitution," a voiceover says, suggesting a vote for Putin protects traditional values.

Russia is to hold a nationwide vote on constitutional reforms that include resetting Putin's presidential term tally to zero, which could extend his rule until 2036.

Another proposed amendment spells out that marriage means a union between a man and a woman - and nothing else.

During two decades in power, Putin has closely aligned himself with the Orthodox Church and sought to distance Russia from liberal Western values, including attitudes toward homosexuality and gender fluidity.

The video drew a torrent of criticism.

Opposition politician Alexei Navalny wrote on Twitter that Putin officials had gone "completely crazy" over homosexuality.

Russian LGBT+ group Stimul said it had filed a complaint with law enforcement agencies, asking for the clip to be removed and an investigation opened.

"This video incites hatred and hostility towards a group of people on the basis of belonging to the LGBT community, it degrades the dignity of a person (and) is frankly discriminatory in nature," the group said in a statement on Tuesday.

Patriot Media Group, the firm that produced the clip, said the video was not "campaigning against homosexuals" but aimed to explain the content of the July vote.

"The main point is ... the defence of the family institution as a union of a man and a woman," the group's head, Nikolai Stolyarchuk, said in a statement, adding the company produced the footage with its own money.

On Wednesday, the video was taken down from YouTube, where it had racked up tens of thousands of views, and replaced with a message saying it violated the company's policy on hate speech.

The clip is still available on Russian social media VKontakte, where it has more than a million views.

Russia's investigative committee and the general prosecutor's office did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

On its website, Patriot lists Evgeny Prigozhin, a businessman dubbed "Putin's cook" for his close ties to the president, as the head of its board of trustees.

Ben Noble, a Russian politics professor at University College London, said the video seemed designed to stir controversy - possibly to draw attention to the vote.

"It strikes me as being deeply homophobic," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone. "It's really important for the Kremlin that the turnout is as high as possible."

Critics have dismissed the vote as a constitutional coup which they fear will be rigged and urged voters to stay away or to reject the proposed changes.

The Kremlin has said authorities will take all necessary measures to ensure voters' safety.

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## **Russia lifts house arrest of LGBT activist facing pornography charges**

By AFP

The Moscow Times (16.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2J7qTiC> - Russia on Monday lifted the house arrest of an LGBT rights activist accused of distributing pornography for posting drawings of vaginas on a body-positive social media page.

Yulia Tsvetkova, 26, has been under house arrest since November in the remote Far Eastern city of Komsomolsk-on Amur, some 6,000 kilometers (3,800 miles) east of Moscow.

Amnesty International said the case was absurd and labeled her a prisoner of conscience.

A district court ruled she can now leave her home but must comply with a travel ban, Tsvetkova said.

"Today they will take off my bracelet," she wrote on Facebook after the hearing, calling the ruling an encouraging sign.

"The investigation has big plans. But perhaps we had a small victory today," she said, noting the case had not been closed.

Tsvetkova faces up to six years behind bars over the pornography charges. She was previously fined for violating a controversial Russian law against gay propaganda.

"She still risks a real prison sentence," Amnesty International's Russia director Natalia Zvyagina said in a statement after the ruling, calling for "the lifting of all charges against Yulia and an end to her persecution."

As part of her activism, Tsvetkova hosted lectures for the LGBT community and held classes on sex education, which is prohibited at Russian schools.

She has reported receiving death threats from a homophobic group.

She told AFP earlier that she had maintained a social media page called "Vagina Monologues" for six months as a "hobby."

She said she believes the authorities are using the pornography charge as a pretext for cracking down on LGBT activists because it is easy to pin on people and carries a long sentence.

The prosecution asked for her house arrest to be lifted because she has still not been charged, reported OVD-Info, a website that tracks detentions at political protests.

It is unclear when the trial will begin.

Her arrest prompted pickets and an online flash-mob where artists posted works of art depicting vaginas.

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