

Russian Democrats' Stance on the LGBT Community: An Attitudinal Shift

Written by Artem Patalakh

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ARTEM PATALAKH, MAY 11 2020

One normally expects to read about appalling incidents or oppressive measures when seeing the words 'LGBT' and 'Russia' in one headline. Chechen anti-gay purges, the spread of gay hunting communities, the censorship of gay scenes and characters in movies, the 2013 'gay propaganda' ban – this is hardly a complete list of what makes Russia one of the least LGBT friendly places in Europe; ranking higher than only Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey in the Rainbow Index. Nonetheless, there is an encouraging – and seemingly under-discussed – a political trend which might fail to reverse the unfavorable status quo today, but it lays the foundation for future progress in this regard: the increasing adoption and support of the LGBT agenda by the Russian democratic opposition.

Changing Political Trend

Before Putin's third term, the LGBT community was largely neglected or denounced by Russian democrats. As the founder of Moscow pride Nikolai Alexeev said in 2010:

a phobia of homosexuality is, unfortunately, peculiar not only to the Russian authorities, but also the Russian opposition and Russian human rights activists, that is, the people who are supposed to fight for the rights of all citizens.

Indeed, in 2010, the late opposition leader Boris Nemtsov offered to arrange and lead a straight pride parade to make the gay pride parade which, in his view advocated 'a provocative standpoint,' 'look like a comedy.' At a meeting of the liberal Solidarnost movement, the people who rose a rainbow flag were labelled 'provocateurs' and expelled. A year before, one of the movement's leaders Vladimir Milov told the LGBT community: 'We aren't a human right organization. Our goals don't include human rights protection.' He confirmed this viewpoint in 2012 by calling himself 'a decisive opponent to the inclusion of LGBT themes in the political agenda of the opposition.' Both Milov and another Solidarnost activist Ilya Yashin publicly stated that they saw no particular abuses of LGBT people's rights in Russia.

Currently, Milov is an associate of Alexei Navalny, an opposition leader whose views on LGBT issues seem to have undergone a positive evolution in the recent decade. Commenting on LGBT pride parades in 2009, he derogatorily wrote that gay people could be allowed to "gambol" on a cordoned stadium. Four years later, as a Moscow mayor candidate, Navalny formulated that position more amicably, describing the gay pride parade as people's constitutional right and explaining his suggestion to organize it on a stadium by pointing to his concern for its participants' security. During his electoral campaigns of 2013 and 2017, he proposed to allow regional referenda on same-sex marriages, adding that he would have no personal problem with legalizing them unless they provided for adoption rights. Remarkably, he spoke in favor of their legalization not only in his interviews given in Moscow, but also while meeting his supporters in Samara, a more conservative city. In media interviews, some of Navalny's close associates expressed their personal support of LGBT rights. Leonid Volkov and Lyubov Sobol spoke in favor of same-sex marriages. Sobol also backed adoption rights for same-sex couples on the grounds that 'the orphanage is the worst option for a child.' As for such 'sensitive issues' as same-sex marriages and the LGBT pride parade, in her opinion, should be put to a referendum – even if 'as a mother,' she shows little enthusiasm for the latter.

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Navalny and his team are not the sole democratic politicians who, in recent years, have become more sympathetic for the LGBT community. In 2011, the journalist Ksenia Sobchak doubted the need for same-sex marriages, deeming them an excessive requirement of same-sex couples which 'is in no way related to love.' Yet, seven years later, as a presidential candidate, she included same-sex civil unions in her political program – despite being dissuaded by some of her associates, as she said in her recent interview. Similarly, in February 2019, the foundation of the ex-mayor of Yekaterinburg, Yevgeny Roizman publicly declared its support of a local center assisting LGBT people. However, in 2006 and 2009, Roizman had compared gay people with 'normal' ones and aggressively opposed the gay pride parade as an 'extremist prank' that 'demonstrates and imposes' homosexuality.

Perhaps the most visible progress on LGBT rights is that of the liberal Yabloko party. Until a few years ago, this party's support of the LGBT agenda was mostly limited to the occasional statements by some of its members who, were outweighed by their more conservative – and more senior – members. During the 2013 Moscow mayoral election campaign, the then Yabloko leader Sergei Mitrokhin argued LGBT rights in Russia had not been infringed upon before the 'gay propaganda' law, calling same-sex marriages unacceptable and opposing LGBT pride parades:

I'm not an advocate of gay parades. The people who organize them are provocateurs. They are provoking a counter-wave in society, and these minorities which they are supposedly defending only have it worse. My position is this: each person has the right to do what is not forbidden by the law. But now a law has been passed about propagandizing homosexuality, and I will not violate the law, although I consider it incorrect.

Nevertheless, in subsequent years, the party increasingly adopted LGBT rights into its political agenda. Yabloko's Gender faction established a working group on LGBT issues which regularly organizes events and discussions on this topic. The party's members and associates – including prominent ones like Maksim Kats – started expressing their resolute support of LGBT rights too. Already in 2016 and 2018, Yabloko inserted same-sex civil partnerships in its manifestos for the parliamentary and presidential elections. In March 2019, Yabloko confirmed this stance by issuing a special statement on LGBT discrimination which was signed by the party's then-leader, Emilia Slabunova. Importantly, the statement obliged all party members to support LGBT rights, noting that: '[o]n their part, the expression of any opinions aimed at the excitation, dissemination and maintenance of hatred, the violation of the human dignity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is flatly inadmissible.'

A few recently elected Yabloko members of local and regional parliaments are particularly ardent advocates of LGBT rights. For instance, Darya Besedina, a deputy of the Moscow City Duma, put a rainbow flag on her working table when she entered her office. She also made strong supportive statements of LGBT rights and pride parades, saying 'the liberals opposing them are no different from radical conservatives.' Another vivid example is Sergei Troshin, a district council member from St. Petersburg, who expressly positions himself as an LGBT activist. He got famous by promising, in his electoral address, to raise a rainbow flag over the residence of the city government and, since he was elected, he has frequently been raising LGBT-related issues at the district council's meetings.

This list of relevant examples may not be comprehensive, but it is enough to show the tangible progress on LGBT rights made by Russian democrats. Of course, the degree of their involvement in the discussion on these issues is still lower than that of Western liberals. Russian democrats do not always have pronounced, well-thought-out positions on LGBT issues. Many Russian democrats address them on an *ad hoc* basis, reactively rather than proactively (that is, only when asked by journalists), confuse LGBT-related terms (for instance, by saying 'homosexuality' instead of 'homosexuality'). Yet, what is hardly deniable is that, over the last decade, Russian democratic politicians have been treating the LGBT community with progressively more sympathy and less archness and neglect.

What Happened?

To some extent, this attitudinal shift seemingly reflects an ongoing global tendency of liberals to take up the LGBT agenda. For example, Yabloko's statement on LGBT discrimination explicitly refers to the favorable opinion on this issue expressed by the Liberal International, of which the party is a member. Yet, in Russia's case, the growing sympathy to the LGBT community emerged partially a rebounding effect of the government's oppressiveness.

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First, the state-led discriminatory campaign – the 2013 'gay propaganda' law – and the wave of social violence it provoked transformed the LGBT community from a group experiencing a rather *implicit* unequal treatment to one subjected to *overt* legal discrimination. Consequently, in the liberal camp, LGBT rights turned from an issue perceived as marginal into a socially significant one, which entailed a wave of sympathy toward the LGBT community. Tellingly, even the politicians, who had denied the fact of particular discrimination against LGBT people as a social group, made statements in their support. Those statements range from that of Nemtsov, who wrote a powerful post in support of LGBT teenagers, to the much more moderate remarks of Mitrokhin and Yashin who slammed the 'gay propaganda' law as retrograde in media interviews.

LGBT activists have well felt the effect of this growing support. The director of the LGBT film festival 'Side by Side' Gulya Sultanova argued that the state-led persecution eventually engendered the politicization of LGBT issues, thanks to 'the part of society that critically assesses what is happening has become more open-minded on LGBT topics.' Likewise, the head of the Russian LGBT Network Igor Kochetkov mentions the gay propaganda law among the reasons which have bettered the attitude of human rights advocates to LGBT activists. Perhaps the best illustration to his words is the fact that in 2018 he received the Yegor Gaidar Foundation's award for 'fostering civil society development.' This was the first time in Russian history that a prestigious human rights award was granted to an LGBT activist.

Second, Russian officials and the pro-Kremlin propaganda widely use LGBT-related topics to try to discredit Western countries (by ridiculing their LGBT-friendly practices and laws) and Russian opposition politicians (by mocking their, often overstated, association with the LGBT community) in conservative people's eyes. This impels liberally-minded people to take a friendlier approach to LGBT rights, since opposing them in this situation would indirectly imply siding with the Kremlin. As the LGBT activist Igor Yasin puts it:

LGBT people have become a favourite target for the Russian authorities. So when leftists or liberals come out against LGBT, then they place themselves on the side of the authorities. Over the past few years, the activities of LGBT people have given the Russian opposition a choice: either you're on the side of the authorities in their policies against LGBT, or you're on the side of LGBT.

In view of this, it is hardly surprising that Navalny in 2017 said his support of LGBT rights would not damage his reputation among his voters – quite the contrary. Sobol recently went even further, arguing that even in the Caucasus, people might favor same-sex marriages, especially if a secret vote were to be held. Such conclusions may appear still premature if applied to the Russian society at large, yet, they do appear to grasp the present-day trend. Indeed, some LGBT activists note that the public and media support of LGBT activism is growing. Last year's opinion polls revealed a change of public opinion in favor of LGBT rights, which sociologists attributed to the gradual diminution of the effect of the government's homophobic campaign. This trend is especially pronounced in 16-18-year-olds, 81% of whom reported a friendly or calm attitude toward LGBT people and 33% reported having LGBT acquaintances (these shares are 42% and 8% respectively among the public at large). In his recent publication, Dmitrii Tolkachev, a Moscow-based queer researcher, observed that homophobia is getting 'untrendy' and 'LGBT is gradually transforming from an oppressed group to one that is apologized to more and more.'

It seems it will take some time for these positive social trends to get converted into political ones. Russia has yet to reach a point where LGBT support is *necessary* for a democratic politician. However, it is already desirable and certainly not shameful. Most importantly, the perceived close association of opposition to LGBT rights and the Putin regime can make progress in this area in the post-Putin Russia easier than one could expect.

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Artem Patalakh holds a PhD in Political Studies from the University of Milan. He has published a number of academic articles on soft power, democracy and human rights promotion, Russian and EU foreign policies and the

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