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Russia: Rising Toll of LGBT ‘Extremism’ Designation

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Administrative, Criminal Charges Used in Crackdown

- Russian courts have issued over 100 convictions for “extremism” for participating in the “International LGBT Movement” or displaying its alleged symbols.
- Russian authorities weaponize and misuse the justice system as a tool in their draconian crusade to enforce “traditional values” and marginalize and censor LGBT people.
- Russia’s international interlocutors should call on the Kremlin to end its persecution of LGBT people and their supporters; governments should provide safe haven and meaningful protection to those fleeing Russia for fear of prosecution.

(Berlin, June 30, 2025) – [Russian](#) courts have issued 101 “extremism”-related convictions for allegedly participating in the “International LGBT Movement” or displaying its alleged symbols, Human Rights Watch said today. The prosecutions, approximately 98 of them for administrative, or minor misdemeanor, offenses and three for criminal liability, demonstrate Russian authorities’ determination to penalize, persecute, and silence lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and their supporters.

In 2023, Russia’s Supreme Court designated the “International Public LGBT Movement” an “extremist” organization: a legal and factual mischaracterization of a diverse, decentralized global human rights cause. The ruling entered into force in January 2024, [opening the floodgates](#) for arbitrary prosecutions of individuals who are LGBT or perceived to be,

along with anyone who defends their rights or expresses solidarity with them.

“Russian authorities weaponize and misuse the justice system as a tool in their draconian crusade to enforce ‘traditional values’ and marginalize and censor LGBT people,” said [Hugh Williamson](#), Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “They are flagrantly violating Russians’ rights to free expression, association, and nondiscrimination.”

Human Rights Watch identified the 101 cases through court websites and other official channels. Russia’s 2013 “gay propaganda” law made any positive or neutral depiction or discussion of nonheterosexual relations an administrative offense. The 2023 Supreme Court designation enabled authorities to pursue a broader range of arbitrary charges including, for the first time, criminal prosecutions against LGBT people and their supporters.

Human Rights Watch found that between January 2024 and June 2025 at least 20 people faced criminal charges due to their alleged participation in the “International Public LGBT Movement.” One of the accused died by suicide in pretrial detention. Courts sentenced two to prison. Seventeen cases are pending, or their outcomes are unknown.

On May 15, 2025, investigators [charged](#) three staff from two publishing houses with allegedly “running an extremist organization” (article 282.2 of the Russian Criminal Code) by selling fiction exploring LGBT themes and thereby “[recruiting](#)” readers into the “International Public LGBT movement” organization. They face up to 12 years in prison.

Human Rights Watch also identified 81 people in 98 court cases, who since January 2024, had been found guilty of administrative offenses for displaying the symbols of the LGBT movement, such as the rainbow flag, most on social media. Human Rights Watch identified the victims by examining courts’ information and rulings in cases under article 20.3 of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses for displaying banned symbols, news releases by courts and law enforcement, and reports by media and human rights organizations.

Some people had multiple administrative convictions. The repeated display of any banned symbol is punishable under the criminal code with up to four years in prison. One person was convicted of criminal charges and sentenced to six months of compulsory labor after posting the rainbow flag on a social media page.

Many people convicted for administrative offenses deleted their social media accounts, apparently for fear of criminal prosecution.

In 2023, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk [condemned](#) the Supreme Court’s “LGBT-extremism” ruling.

Independent UN experts [warned](#) that the designation enables arbitrary and abusive application of the law and jeopardizes a wide range of activities protected under international human rights law.

The prosecutions for both criminal and administrative offenses that Human Rights Watch examined blatantly violate the right to receive and impart information and ideas guaranteed by article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Russia is party, and its prohibition on discrimination. They also violate the rights to association, liberty and security of the person, and to privacy, among others.

In May 2025, two leading Russian LGBT rights organizations, [Coming Out](#) and [Sphere](#), [documented](#) that after the Supreme Court decision, LGBT support groups “experienced a substantial rise in requests for assistance with departure, processing humanitarian visas, seeking asylum and emergency evacuation under circumstances of persecution.” They also emphasized that the ruling “severely constrained the operational capabilities of support organizations, leading to the closure of queer spaces and events, forcing them into clandestine modes of operation.”

“Russia’s international partners should call on the government to end its persecution of LGBT people and their supporters,” Williamson said. “Other governments should also provide safe haven and meaningful protection to those fleeing Russia for fear of prosecution based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and their public expressions of support for LGBT rights.”

For additional details, please see below.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch [collected](#) data from official courts’ websites related to cases of displaying banned symbols, focusing on cases dating from November 2023. The researcher then reviewed social media pages mentioned in or identifiable from the court judgments and their archived versions, if available.

To supplement this data, the researcher archived and reviewed Telegram messages from 213 official channels for various branches of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, courts, and Russia’s chief investigative agency. The researcher also archived and reviewed messages from channels run by rights groups and independent [media](#), which mentioned “LGBT,” extremism, banned symbols, and relevant articles of criminal and administrative law. We also reviewed published research findings and databases by prominent civil society groups, such as [Sova Center](#), [OVD-Info](#), and [Political Prisoners Support. Memorial](#).

To avoid creating additional security risks for the people targeted, Human Rights Watch did not link to the court cases cited unless they were previously covered in the media or the defendants' social media pages.

Convictions for Administrative Offenses

Human Rights Watch identified 97 convictions on charges under [article 20.3](#) of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses for alleged displays of LGBT symbols, and one conviction under [article 20.29](#) of the same code for distributing content justifying extremism.

The first conviction under article 20.3, for publishing the rainbow flag on social media, appeared to be on January 25, 2024. Since then, the number of such cases has increased quickly. Thirty-eight of the cases were brought in Moscow, the most for any region in Russia.

Human Rights Watch found one initial acquittal by a court of first instance. In January 2024, a Krasnodar court held that the defendant had not committed an offense because they had published an "LGBT flag" on their social media page before the Supreme Court's 2023 decision. However, the police appealed the ruling and the regional court ruled in their favor finding that the defendant had not deleted the flag after it had been outlawed and committed the offense by omission.

In many court decisions, the illicit symbol is only described in general terms, such as "the symbol of the 'International Public LGBT movement.'" In most cases, it appears to be the six-color rainbow flag identified in the Supreme Court decision as one of the organization's symbols. In at least two instances, people appear to have been prosecuted for displaying a regular seven-colored rainbow. In at least one case, the case related to a blue-pink-white flag, a symbol associated with transgender people's rights.

Seven people were convicted for offline activities. In January 2024, a court in Nizhny Novgorod [sentenced Anastasia Ershova](#) to five days in detention for wearing frog-shaped rainbow-colored earrings, following an apparent politically motivated assault against her and her friend, which was recorded by the assailant and published online.

Another person in the city of Perm was fined for placing the rainbow flag in their window. Two others were charged for taking a picture with the rainbow flag outdoors in the middle of the night in the Moscow region.

In November 2024, a court in Nizhny Novgorod fined a teacher for placing the rainbow flag in the school's space designed to promote tolerance. Also in November, a court in Yakutsk imposed an additional sentence on a prisoner for allegedly showing the rainbow flag to other prisoners. In May

2025, the same court convicted another prisoner who allegedly drew a picture in a notebook, using the rainbow colors.

Ninety convictions have been for online activities; most for posts, images or user profile information published on social media, with 61 on VKontakte, Russia's largest social media platform. Thirteen were based on information law enforcement identified on Telegram. The remaining cases were based on activities on other platforms: Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Odnoklassniki (another Russian social media site), a dating website, a stock photo website, and the official state services portal.

The police also pursued charges for using the rainbow flag in memes sent in public and closed group chats or for displaying it on profile pictures or using the rainbow flag emoji in a post or profile status. In one case, the head of a regional campaign office for an opposition candidate in the 2024 presidential election was [detained](#) for six days for reposting a picture with the rainbow flag in a closed friends' chat of 11 people. OVD-Info, a leading Russian rights organization, said that the police received access to the group after one of the participants' [accounts was hacked](#).

Not everyone targeted had used the rainbow flag in support of LGBT people or a neutral context. In April 2024, a court in Volgograd [fined](#) an administrator of a xenophobic and homophobic Telegram channel for publishing a video showing the Swedish military at the 2023 Pride parade.

In another context, a court in Moscow [fined](#) Aleksandra Marova for including contact information for the psychological support helpline of the [Russian LGBT Network](#), a prominent support group, in a post she published following a devastating March 2024 [armed attack](#) on a concert hall. Her conviction was under article 20.29 of the Code of Administrative Offenses, which punishes distributing materials on the Ministry of Justice's list of extremist materials or "[other](#)" materials "justifying" extremist activities.

In 17 cases, courts sanctioned defendants with detention. The average punishment was 8 days of a maximum of 15 days by law. In 81 cases, courts imposed fines of up to the maximum 2,000 rubles (US\$25).

Repeat Offenses

Under the [2022 amendments](#) to Russia's Criminal Code, repeat displays of banned symbols—after the person has served the first administrative sentence—are punishable by up to four years in prison, even if a different symbol unrelated to LGBT rights is displayed in subsequent cases.

One person wrote on social media: "The issue is of course not a thousand rubles but the [criminal] liability for subsequent violations of the law,

which, as it turns out, can stem from harmless old posts, if so desired [by the authorities].”

The threat of criminal prosecution is far from illusory. According to [Supreme Court Judicial Department data](#), courts imposed 131 convictions in 2024 for repeated displays of banned symbols under article 282.4 of the criminal code. Human Rights Watch identified one criminal case under that provision in 2025, in which the person was convicted following a conviction for an administrative offense for an old social media post displaying the rainbow flag.

The convicted person said in online videos that they were not contesting the charges. The court sentenced them to six months of compulsory labor and banned them from publishing content on social media or participating in group chats. After the judgment entered into force, the victim deleted their social media accounts.

In recent years, Russian authorities have outlawed a variety of organizations as “extremist” or “terrorist,” and banned their symbols.

Prosecutions for displays of banned symbols spiked in 2020, when the Supreme Court designated as “extremist” a popular [subculture](#) related to prison culture. A court in Krasnoyarsk sentenced an [artist](#) under the “extremist symbols” article in September 2024 for making a roly-poly toy with prison tattoos.

In 2024, human rights defender [Alexey Sokolov](#) spent six months in pretrial detention [on charges](#) of repeatedly displaying the Facebook logo on a website (in 2022, Russian authorities designated Meta an “extremist organization”). He was released in January 2025 pending [trial](#).

In recent years, the [list](#) of banned organizations has ballooned with Ukrainian military units, volunteer units fighting alongside Ukraine, anticolonial and Indigenous groups, local and countrywide protest movements and opposition organizations, [Instagram and Facebook](#), and owners of Ukrainian food and beverage conglomerates.

Law enforcement and judicial practice with regard to banned symbols is also constantly expanding. Human Rights Watch has recorded that after the June 2021 designation of organizations led by the [late opposition leader](#) Alexei Navalny as “extremist,” courts issued 194 convictions for administrative offenses. Courts [arbitrarily named](#) as “extremist” symbols, the names, and logos of the organizations themselves, those of related opposition initiatives, pictures of Navalny or his name, and slogans in support of political prisoners or against President Vladimir Putin.

“Erasure”

The broad and ambiguous nature of Russian anti-extremism legislation turned it into a powerful censorship tool that also forces many to self-censor. In a 2024 [survey](#) of LGBT people in Russia conducted by Sphere and Coming Out, 82 percent said they saw personal risks after the movement's "extremist" designation, and 88 percent said they had been "affected by the government's LGBT+ censorship."

In 11 administrative cases reviewed by Human Rights Watch, the convicted individuals deleted their posts or photographs that had triggered the charges. One person deleted many of their posts, including information about sexual health, discussions of history, and links to or mentions of health videos on Instagram.

In 32 cases with convictions, the content had arguably been published before the Supreme Court's 2023 extremism decision entered into force, some as far back as 10 years ago. One person, who received three administrative fines, argued in court that they posted the publications that had triggered the cases in 2014–2015. Three others were convicted for posts dating back to 2016. Russian courts consider "unlawful" online publications a "continuing" offense, indefinitely extending the legal risks.

Current Russian legislation [stipulates](#) that once authorities identify offending content under article 20.3, they have three months to prosecute, or the case must be discontinued. In at least one case examined, the authorities apparently disregarded that requirement. The defendant, Sergei Sosov, who was prosecuted on charges of insulting the memory of veterans, is recognized as a [political prisoner](#) by Memorial, a leading Russian rights group.

People with an active online presence would find it extremely difficult to ensure that nothing they had ever posted could be considered "extremist" at some later time. In 28 cases reviewed, following prosecutions for posting LGBT symbols, people deleted not just the posts that triggered prosecution, but their social media pages entirely, or closed them to the public.

A journalist and LGBT activist [told](#) Sphere and Coming Out, "The key words for 2024 for me are 'isolation,' 'loneliness,' 'fear,' and 'the erasure of queer culture,' unfortunately."

The prohibition on retroactive application of criminal law is a core principle of due process, and enshrined in international human rights law. The ban [covers](#) prosecutions under the Code of Administrative Offenses, because although the offenses are labeled "administrative," they are equivalent to misdemeanor crimes, qualify as substantively criminal in nature, and attract criminal penalties including potential custodial sentences.

The European Court of Human Rights [ruled](#) against Russia in 2024 and 2025 in cases involving convictions under the Code of Administrative Offenses for actions that in part had taken place long before they were punishable under the code. The court, [finding multiple violations of the European Convention on Human Rights](#), [ruled](#) that “imposing a responsibility ... to foresee future designations constitutes an impossible and unreasonable burden” and that such retrospective application of the law [results](#) in a “chilling effect” and violates the right to expression.

Criminal Charges

The first known criminal conviction based on a repeated display of the rainbow flag as an “extremist” symbol was handed down in May 2025.

Separately, authorities opened multiple cases against people accused of “participating in” or “running” the “LGBT movement.” In February, the state news agency [RIA Novosti reported](#) that, according to the Federal Security Service, a person already serving a prison sentence in Kemerovo region [received](#) an additional six-year prison sentence for participating in the “LGBT movement” and “involving” other prisoners in its activities.

In March, a doctor in Ulyanovsk region who faced a maximum punishment of one year in prison for alleged sexual coercion, was also prosecuted for “involving” the other man in the “LGBT movement,” and [received](#) a three-year sentence.

In December 2024, Andrei Kotov died by [suicide](#) in a pretrial detention center where he was held on charges of running an “extremist organization.” The authorities claimed Kotov’s company Men Travel, which sought to market tourist travel to gay men, was a “branch” of the LGBT movement.

The review of media, human rights groups and law enforcement reports from November 2023 to the present found that 17 other people have faced criminal LGBT-related extremism charges, including for running bars popular among LGBT people, dating people of the same sex, and [advocating for](#) LGBT rights.

On May 15, 2025, investigators pressed charges against three staff of two publishing houses. They were [accused](#) of participating in the “extremist” organization “LGBT movement” and recruiting people into it by selling fiction books that included references to LGBT people and same-sex relationships. At the time of writing, they remain under house arrest and each faces up to 12 years in prison.

Many more LGBT people and their allies are at risk of arbitrary and discriminatory prosecutions. Since the November 2023 designation, police have conducted [dozens of raids](#) on establishments popular among LGBT

people, [recorded](#) the clients' personal data, and examined the contents of their devices.

In March 2025, a Moscow court [rejected](#) a lawsuit by an activist, Yaroslav Rasputin, against his designation as a "foreign agent"; a smearing label that imposes absurd [restrictions and penalties](#), incompatible with international law. The court claimed he was "secretary" of "International Public LGBT Movement." In April, a court rejected a similar challenge by Vadim Vaganov to his designation as a "foreign agent," [saying](#) that he is an "activist" of the LGBT movement.

Other LGBT-Related "Offenses"

Prosecutions for displaying "extremist" LGBT symbols are often accompanied by other administrative charges, with "gay propaganda" one of the most common.

The authorities sharply intensified their use of "gay propaganda" charges following December 2022 [amendments](#) to the "gay propaganda" law. The 2013 law banned spreading among children any information that depicted same-sex relations in a neutral or approving manner (article 6.21). The 2022 amendments extended the ban to adults and added a ban on displays and description of "non-traditional" relations and preferences (article 6.21.2).

In 2023 and 2024, courts imposed 257 "gay propaganda" [penalties](#), compared with 22 in 2021–2022. Fines levied in the past two years totaled over 63 million rubles (US\$780,000). Non-citizens can also be detained if convicted on these administrative charges, followed by mandatory deportation. Eight people received short-term detention sentences, and in 14 cases, courts ordered deportation of alleged offenders who were foreign nationals.

Although the "gay propaganda" law does not allow for criminal prosecution of repeat offenders, the fines under its [article 6.21](#) are much steeper than those under the "extremist symbol" law. The maximum administrative fine for publishing the rainbow flag under the "extremist" symbols law is 2,000 rubles (\$25), while individuals can be fined as much as 400,000 rubles (\$4,970) if the authorities [press](#) charges of engaging in "gay propaganda" among children.

One person [received](#) three fines under the "gay propaganda" law and ten fines for displaying the "extremist" rainbow flag in different pictures posted on social media, 320,000 rubles in total (\$4,050). Another person was fined 300,000 rubles (\$3,800) for three counts of "gay propaganda," in addition to 10 days in detention for displaying "extremist" symbols. The descriptions and the dates of these supposed offenses are sometimes identical.

In addition to pressing “gay propaganda” charges against individuals, [TV channels, and streaming services, police have also charged bookstores and online marketplaces](#) that featured books discussing sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as theme bars popular among LGBT people.

In May 2025, a judge in St. Petersburg fined a local bookstore 800,000 rubles (\$10,200) [for featuring](#) books by Susan Sontag and Olivia Lang, internationally revered writers and cultural critics. Also in May, the authorities brought criminal charges against publishers for publishing fiction books that explore LGBT themes. These developments apparently triggered a massive purge on Russian book markets.

In the following weeks, publishers [asked](#) bookstores to return or destroy [dozens](#) of books. On May 29, a prominent Russian book distributor sent a letter to bookstores requiring them to immediately remove 37 books, because they “do not comply with Russian laws.” They included international bestsellers and award-winning titles and touched on a range of topics and views out of sync with the Kremlin’s “traditional values” crusade, including LGBT themes.

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