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The Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church: A Dangerous Alliance

February 1, 2024

A podcast episode on religion, nationalism, and anti-gay persecution in Russia

In 2013 both houses of the Russian Federal Assembly passed the so-called “gay propaganda” law which was signed by President Vladimir Putin. Formally known as “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating a Denial of Traditional Family Values,” the legislation penalizes individuals, businesses, and organizations that disseminate information that can be perceived as “normalizing” same-sex relationships. In 2020 the government also moved to ban same-sex unions and de-recognize transgender people. In 2022 another bill was passed that expanded the scope of the original “gay propaganda” law. That expansion has enabled the government to formally label lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activists as extremists and [prosecute](#) individuals for queer expression.



Source: Cottonbro Studio via Pexels.

Being Queer and Christian in Russia

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For LGBT people in Russia persecution comes in a double dose. Both the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church find gay people an anathema to a strong Russian national identity. The Russian LGBT community is considered an enemy of both Church and State.

—Maureen Fiedler, host of the *God and Government* podcast.

These aggressive political measures represent the developing alliance between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church against the country’s LGBTQ population. That alliance, its political purpose, and its implications for queer people in Russia are explored in “Being Queer and Christian in Russia,” an episode of the *God and Government* podcast by Interfaith Voices. The program includes interviews from experts in Russian religious and political history as well as members of Nuntiare et Recreare, a multid denominational gay-affirming ministry.

Predictably, the homophobic climate created by the Russian church and government has legitimized anti-gay vigilantism. According to the 2014 Human Rights Watch report “[License to Harm](#),” the gay propaganda law intensified already significantly high numbers of homophobic violence in the country. The authors of that report write:

Although for the past decade activists involved in public LGBT gatherings have faced hostility from Russian authorities and anti-LGBT counter-demonstrators, almost all activists told Human Rights Watch that the

number of attacks on public LGBT events had risen in the past two years and that in 2013 anti-gay activists had attacked just about every public demonstration in favor of LGBT equality of which they were aware.

The interviews by the “God and Government” team substantiate the findings of the Human Rights Watch’s findings. As Lauren Ober reports in the episode, “Bomb threats are a common tactic among anti-gay hooligans: fabricate a threat to disrupt whatever LGBT event is happening, be it a film festival, a conference, or a religious service.” Timothy Sozaev, founder of the LGBTQ ministry in Saint Petersburg, tells Ober that security is a constant concern for the queer Christians that seek his ministry for spiritual refuge.

[Listen to the podcast](#)

The Evolution of the Russian Church-State Relationship

The relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and the Kremlin was not always so ironclad. Under Soviet control from 1917 to 1991, the government had an unofficial policy of state atheism. While religion and religious identity were not banned, the government sought to deemphasize religion in public life. However, in recent years, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the number of Russians identifying with the church, have grown dramatically.



St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow. Source: Ivan Lapyrin via Unsplash.

According to [the Pew Research Center report](#) mentioned in the podcast, about two-thirds of

the Russian population identifies with the church. By aligning with the Church in a crusade to defend “traditional” Russian identity, Vladimir Putin and other far-right politicians have been able to consolidate their hold on political power. In fact, the 2020 anti-gay constitutional amendment was packaged with amendments to extend his presidential term until 2036. In exchange for their support, the Russian Orthodox Church has been able to completely transform itself and its relationship with the general population. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, it has grown from a marginalized institution into the de facto state religion in Russia.