



**Pride and Violence:
A Chronicle of the Events of May 27, 2006 in
Moscow**

Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper

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This briefing paper is an account of the violence that attended Moscow's first public lesbian and gay pride events and the police response to it.

May 27 saw attempts by several dozen Russian lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to hold peaceful manifestations for human rights at two different sites in Moscow. At both sites, large numbers of homophobic demonstrators, drawn predominantly from nationalist and Orthodox groups, engaged in violent attacks.

Police responded similarly in both instances. First, making no initial attempt to separate the sides, they allowed anti-gay protesters to continue an assault on participants in the peaceful demonstrations—pelting them with rocks, eggs, and other projectiles, and beating and kicking them. Then police intervened—at first forcing lesbians, gays and their supporters closer to their violent opponents. The police detained some of the attackers, but also their victims: including people who were speaking to the media, and people who had obviously been injured in the violence.

Prelude: The Banning of the Gay Pride Parade

On May 18, 2006, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's office announced definitively that it would do what it had threatened for months: refuse permission for Russia's first Moscow lesbian and gay pride parade, planned for May 27. The announcement came on the same day that Russia assumed the six-month chairmanship of the Council of Europe, the continent's principal body concerned with human rights. That day, in Strasbourg, France, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov stated that Russia's chairmanship "will be devoted to openness."¹

Documents from the mayor's office shown to Human Rights Watch indicate a centralized campaign in the mayor's office against any attempts to publicly show support for the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgender communities. In one document, dated March 2006, the mayor informed his deputies: "It is necessary to take concrete measures to prevent holding public and mass gay events in the capital." He instructed them to "Organize an active campaign in the mass media ... using appeals from citizens and religious and public organizations."²

¹ Pravda.ru, "Russia to take over as president of Council of Europe," at <http://english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/19-05-2006/80611-lavrov-0> (retrieved May 30, 2006).

² Memorandum from Mayor Yuri Luzhkov to L.I. Shvetsova, V.Y. Vinogradov, A.V. Petrov, G.S. Ponomarev, V.S. Shushkin, and N.V. Kulikov, March 2006.

In a memorandum to the mayor dated March 17, 2006, deputy mayor Liudmila Shvetsova called the event “direct propaganda for immorality, insulting the honor and dignity of the overwhelming majority of Muscovites and inhabitants of Russia of various nationalities, undermining the moral principles of the society.” She suggested the city government would support measures to ban any public advocacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people’s rights:

Homosexuality and lesbianism have always been considered sexual perversions in our country, and previously were even objects of criminal prosecution. At the present time the above-mentioned forms of sexuality are not forbidden by legislation, but propaganda in favor of them, in particular by means of holding gay festivals and gay parades, can be considered propaganda for immorality, which may be forbidden by legislation in future. ...A law can be promulgated to limit the rights or freedoms of people of the above-mentioned category.

Summing up, we recommend that the competent executive bodies should take additional steps toward a comprehensive solution of the problem, and identify concrete measures for banning any actions, including public ones, involving propaganda and holding gay festivals or gay parades.³

In an interview on Russkoe Radio on May 25, the mayor said:

If any one has any deviations from normal principles in organizing one's sexual life, those deviations should not be exhibited for all to see and those who may turn out unsteady should not be invited to do so. I thank the citizens of Moscow as 99.9% of them in recent days also believe it is unacceptable to hold such parades.

The Festival Opens—May 25

In this atmosphere, the Moscow Pride Festival—two days of discussions and lectures preceding the planned march—opened on May 25. In addition to Russian participants, foreign activists and political figures from the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, France, the United States, Poland, Latvia, Moldova, Belarus, and other countries were in

³ Memorandum to Mayor Yuri Luzhkov from L.I. Shvetsova, registration no. 3-6-4986/6, March 17. 2006.

attendance. That evening, homophobic demonstrators disrupted one of its first events, a lecture by Merlin Holland, the grandson of Irish writer Oscar Wilde. More than a dozen people rose midway through the talk, shouting “Russia free of faggots!” and sprayed mace around the room. Private security guards were able to expel them from the room. The attack disturbed festival organizers particularly because the lecture’s time and place had not been publicized and were announced only to registered attendees and security guards, many of whom were off-duty or retired police. Organizers feared their own participants or protectors might be leaking information to their opponents.

On the morning of Friday, May 26, the Tverskoi District Court in Moscow, which had agreed to hear an appeal against the ban, upheld the May 18 mayor’s decision.

Festival organizer Nikolai Alexeyev and other activists decided that May 27 would center around two events. First, as an “expression of opposition to nationalism and extremism,” at 2:30 p.m. participants would lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Alexander Gardens at the north corner of the Kremlin.⁴

Second, participants would assemble for a vigil at 3:00 p.m. in front of the statue of Yuri Dolgoruky (medieval prince of Vladimir and founder of the Moscow Kremlin), facing City Hall. Two human rights activists, Dmitri Makarov and Alexei Kozlov, had applied to the city government to hold a small rally in support of the rights to freedoms of expression and assembly, as well as non-discrimination, at the statue at that time.⁵ Makarov and Kozlov had not received a response to their application by close of business Friday.

Clash at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

At 2:30 on May 27, in heavy rain, the first cluster of participants—including festival leaders Nikolai Alexeyev and Nikolai Baev, Eduard Murzin (a member of the regional Duma of Bashkortostan in central Russia and a supporter of LGBT rights), and several other Russians, along with Merlin Holland and the British activist Peter Tatchell, all holding flowers—approached the gate to the tomb in Alexander Gardens. They were met by a crowd of 200-300 protesters—including both younger and older Orthodox and

⁴ The tomb of a soldier killed in World War II, the memorial commemorates all Soviet soldiers killed in the war against Fascism.

⁵ By law, conditions for holding a picket are far less restrictive than those governing a march. Officials may question the appropriateness of the picket to the stated ends, or may propose alternative times or venues, but strictly cannot deny permission altogether.

nationalist counter-protestors, and contingents of elderly women carrying crosses and icons. Police made no attempt to intervene until the two groups met.

Alexeyev told Human Rights Watch:

I saw a huge group of people gathered there, shouting “death to sodomites,” “out of Russia,” “we will not allow you to put things here, our grandfathers died fighting against people like you.” I said, “My grandfather died fighting against your kind.” I said to myself, I will not stop—I will go on. But the gate was closed. Then the police suddenly appeared out of nowhere. They began pushing all of us back from the gate. Then someone, several officers, seized me from behind and started to shove me from the square and through the crowd. They pushed me very violently through the square and put me in the [police] bus.⁶

While Alexeyev was detained, Holland was kicked by the protesters, and others were punched. Many protesters threw rocks, bottles, and eggs.

The few lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender participants and their supporters withdrew from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in confusion. The anti-gay demonstrators moved back to the northern end of nearby Manezh Square, beside the gardens. From there, however, some of the men from the anti-gay protest kept charging back in groups toward the tomb, pelting bystanders with bottles and eggs. Regular police and riot police, or OMON (*Otriad Militsii Osobogo Naznachenii*), countered, driving the anti-gay protesters across the broad boulevard, Mokhovaia Street, to its intersection with Tverskaia Street. From there, the violent anti-gay demonstrators began throwing flares at the police. Police responded by arresting between 25-50 of them, lining them against a wall, and then hauling them aggressively to police buses parked nearby.

However, the vast majority of the anti-gay demonstrators who had been engaged in violence remained at large. They continued to throw eggs and stones at passers-by whom they suspected of being gay or supporters of the cancelled parade. With little or no interference from police, they moved in groups up Tverskaya Street toward City Hall, the site of the second part of the planned activities.

⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Nikolai Alexeyev, Moscow, May 28, 2006.

Violent Attacks at and around the City Hall Protest

A few LGBT people and their supporters were also making their way to City Hall in small groups. Dimitri Makarov and Alexei Kozlov, who had signed the application for the rally, arrived at the statue of Yuri Dolgoruky. They found the anti-gay demonstrators already present in the square. Nikolai Kurianovich, a Duma representative of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's far right-wing Liberal Democratic Party, had mounted the statue's steps to make a speech. He warned that Russia would become like "putrid America and dying Europe" if it permitted the "gay mafia" to triumph, and led the crowd in chanting "Gays and lesbians to Kolyma"—the Stalin-era prison camp.

Makarov told Human Rights Watch,

The police were standing around the edges of this, doing nothing. I went to the first officer I saw, and asked to be taken to the officer in charge. He led us over to the commander—and it was a colonel who had been at the [Pride] conference in the morning, negotiating with Nikolai [Alexeyev] and myself about police protection. His name was Colonel Viacheslav—he had refused to give us his last name. But he had told us in the morning that everything was fine, that there would be counter-demonstrators but that the police would protect us.

Now we went to him and said that we, Alexei and myself, were the organizers of the planned picket. I showed him our application, said this was a manifestation within the law. I asked him to defend the picketers against the extremists who controlled the square. He pointed to us and said to the officers, "Arrest them. Take them to the bus." He said we had organized an unsanctioned demonstration! ...

I pointed out the demonstration of the nationalists that was already going on: I said, *that* is illegal, shouldn't you stop that? The officers said, "We can't, there is a deputy leading it." I said, "What about the people standing there listening to him?" They said, "Well, they are listening to a deputy."⁷

Meanwhile, in the square, a few LGBT people began arriving. Volker Beck, an openly gay member of the German Bundestag, and a few others stood near the statue and

⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with Dimitri Makarov, Moscow, May 27, 2006.

opened rainbow flags. Immediately, some twenty people, including skinheads, surrounded them and ripped the flags from their hands. A Human Rights Watch representative was shoved to the ground. He witnessed Volker Beck being struck with a rock, then a fist, in his right eye: Beck's partner was also struck in the face. At this point several dozen police intervened. However, instead of trying to separate the two groups they encircled all of them, crushing them tightly together and forming a close cordon within which the violence continued.

While some violent demonstrators were arrested, police also arrested lesbian and gay demonstrators who were engaged in lawful, non-violent activity. Yevgenia Debryanskaia, a longtime leader of Russia's lesbian movement, was arrested while speaking to journalists. She recounted to Human Rights Watch:

When I got there I was appalled. I saw an unsanctioned demonstration, headed by a Duma parliamentarian, who was calling for gay people to be killed, and no one was disturbing him or interfering. So I climbed a few steps to the monument and turned around. The journalists know me; they turned their cameras to me; I started to talk. I said, I came to exercise my civic responsibility, about the unfair ban on gay people. But I did not get to say much. The extremists started to throw things at me, rocks and bottles and soda. A policeman with three big stars on his shoulder broke through the journalists and told me my actions were illegal and I was under arrest. Immediately I was grabbed roughly by the arms, by two OMON people, very painfully, and dragged to the bus. At one point I tripped in a pothole and fell. A friend of mine tried to help me so they grabbed her as well and threw us in the bus.⁸

In other cases, victims of violence were arrested. Volker Beck, bleeding copiously from the wounds to his eye, was arrested together with his partner. They were held in the bus "for more than an hour ... until police figured out who we were." Then police freed them, saying "they had only detained us for our own security!"⁹

A Human Rights Watch representative saw a man beating a journalist while a woman held the victim to keep him from running. The assailants were both detained by the police—along with the journalist.

⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Yevgenia Debryanskaia, Moscow, May 28, 2006.

⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Volker Beck, Moscow, May 27, 2006.

Police harassed and even detained people who were taking pictures of the violence. Maxim Anmeghichean, a Moldovan gay activist who works for the International Gay and Lesbian Association-Europe (ILGA-Europe), told Human Rights Watch:

At one point I saw a policeman talking to a guy who was only taking pictures. He said, “Why are you taking photos?” The guy said, “I’m just taking pictures of the events.” The cop said, “No. You are taking photographs of police officers engaged in their duty and this is against the law.” And he dragged him to the bus.

At another point I was standing with two other people in a part of Tverskaia Street where nothing was happening—we were in front of a bookshop trying to stay out of the fighting. Around five policemen came and started trying to push us toward the skinheads—physically shoving us, violently, with their hands. “You have to go over there!” We said, “We’re not going there!” They were trying to retaliate on us for taking photos.¹⁰

For the following hours, skinheads and other anti-gay protesters were left in virtually uncontested control of the area, and roamed the streets around Tverskaia Street targetting lesbians and gays. One witness told Human Rights Watch that, arriving at the nearby Pushkinskaia metro station—about 500 meters from City Hall—he heard a large group of skinheads saying that they would wait at a McDonald’s restaurant to “monitor the fags’ movements.”¹¹

Continued Violence on May 27

Several people were beaten in random incidents of violence, some severely. Kurt Krickler, an Austrian gay activist, said that near City Hall “I myself was attacked by four youth kicking me with their feet and beating me with their fists. I got a blow on my eye and could escape, and the aggressors ran away.”¹² Pierre Serne, a French participant, was more seriously injured in two attacks. He told Human Rights Watch that he was “so afraid” after the violence at City Hall, he retreated to find his friends and check on their safety. “There were little groups of skinheads all around” on Tverskaia, he said.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Maxim Anmighichean, Moscow, May 28, 2006.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch interview with a man who wished to remain anonymous, May 27, 2006.

¹² E-mail to Euro-Queer list from Kurt Krickler, May 27, 2006.

Suddenly about twelve of them ran at me. They pushed me, I fell down, I was covering my head. They were kicking me with their feet. It was so terrifying, I thought I was going to die. ... I don't know how long it lasted, but they left me. I was bleeding. My face, my hands were covered with blood. I managed to get up, and I tried to walk up Tverskaia to go back toward City Hall. I thought police were still there.

I was asking people on the streets to help me, asking where the police were. People avoided me. And when some skinheads saw that no one was doing anything, they started to follow me again. I saw two Russian photographers who were covering the event. I asked them to call the police. But the skinheads started chasing all three of us, mainly, though, after me. They began hitting me again. Then the police arrived, at last.

They chased some of the skinheads away. They arrested five of them. Then they took me to the bus. I was put in with the skinheads, in the same bus. Those guys were just laughing in the bus, like the others on the street, as if they knew they had no fear of anything.

I wasn't under arrest. They took me with the skinheads to the police station. They asked me if I could recognize the guys, and I said I could recognize one. I called the French embassy and an official came to help. He recommended not to say that I was participating in the gay events, it would only make things take longer. I am flying back to Paris tomorrow, but I want to follow the case and see if anyone is actually prosecuted.¹³

No definitive figure has been released for those arrested in the day's clashes. Human Rights Watch knows the names of six supporters of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender pride events who were arrested. Nikolai Alexeyev, Dimitri Makarov, and Alexei Kozlov were all charged with organizing an unsanctioned demonstration, an administrative offense carrying a 2000-ruble fine (about \$80 US). Others appear to have been charged with participating in an unsanctioned demonstration, an administrative offense carrying a lesser fine. The number of anti-gay demonstrators detained is apparently considerably higher. However, at least some if not most of those who engaged in violence were apparently charged only with the administrative offense of

¹³ Human Rights Watch interview with Pierre Serne, Moscow, May 28, 2006.

participating in an unsanctioned demonstration.¹⁴ All those detained were apparently released by the evening of May 27.

Most of the LGBT participants and their supporters were detained in the same buses and cells as their violent opponents. At the same time, several detained participants confirmed to Human Rights Watch that the skinheads and other violent anti-gay demonstrators were singled out for particular humiliation by the police. Dimitri Makarov told us,

The police knew the skinheads were capable of violence, so they really picked on them; whereas they knew at heart we were nothing to be afraid of. They made them crouch on the floor instead of the seats; they made fun of them and threatened to hit them. Some of us intervened several times and said to the police, “You don’t need to be violent with them.”

At the same time, Makarov, twenty-three years old, but an experienced demonstrator and human rights activist, said that during his hours in detention in a police station, police punched him in the stomach and smashed his hand against a wall. “They threatened me too, saying ‘We can beat you up, we can break your head on the toilets. We’ll beat you with the legal code till you realize what an unsanctioned demonstration is.’”¹⁵

¹⁴ For instance, Dimitri Makarov told us that the man and woman witnessed beating a Russian reporter near City Hall (see above), who were taken to the same police station as he, were charged only with the administrative offense: Human Rights Watch interview with Dimitri Makarov, May 27, 2006.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Dimitri Makarov, Moscow, May 27, 2006.