Commentary by LGBTQ+ group "Coming Out"
To the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

November 2024

Input for the Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on ensuring quality education for peace and tolerance for every child

I. Background of Submitting Organisation

Coming out (comingoutspb.org/en/) is a regional nonprofit initiative group founded in 2008 in St. Petersburg, Russia. It has been protecting the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and helping queer people live more peacefully in Russia. The main goal of the Coming Out LGBTQ+ group is to establish equal legal and social rights for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. The group monitors discrimination to collect evidence of the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in Russia and works with the authorities on cases of discrimination and violence.

II. Introduction

In Russia, LGBTQ+ youth face severe discrimination and exclusion within the education system, driven by both state policies and societal attitudes. The "gay propaganda" laws, reinforced by the broader crackdown on LGBTQ+ rights, have institutionalised hostility towards discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools. This hostile environment prevents LGBTQ+ students from accessing an education rooted in peace and tolerance. In this commentary, we address how these systemic issues undermine educational equity for LGBTQ+ youth and propose actionable steps towards fostering a more inclusive educational space.

III. Russian context: LGBTQ+ rights in Russia

Since 2013, the state of Russia has consistently attacked LGBTQ+ people rights. The most noticeable and recent step is issuance of a ruling of the Russian Supreme Court stating that the "international LGBT movement and its structural units" are "extremist" and therefore banned throughout the country in November 2023. This ruling, which includes a ban on the rainbow flag in any form, has forced "human rights defenders and organisations working to defend the human rights of LGBTQ+ people in Russia . . . to discontinue their activities, fearing criminal prosecution."[1] Those found guilty of "displaying extremist group symbols"

[1] Press Release, U.N. Experts Condemn Russian Supreme Court Decision Banning "LGBT Movement" as "Extremist" (Dec. 7, 2023). https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/12/un-experts-condemn-russian-supreme-court-decision-banning-lgbt-movement.

face imprisonment of up to fifteen days for their first offence and up to four years for their second offence, while "participating in or financing an extremist organisation" faces imprisonment of up to twelve years[2]. Before that, in 2022, Russia also expanded their infamous gay propaganda ban to prohibit any "promotion of non-traditional sexual relations" offline and online to anyone, not only minors as it used to be before.[3] Not only do convictions for distributing LGBTQ+ information come with exorbitant penalties (i.e., fines up to $6,500 for individuals and $81,000 for organisations), but the modification also allows the Russian government to block any website containing information on LGBTQ+ issues, regardless of whether the information is used in art, education, or scientific studies. In July 2023, a law suggesting a total ban on transitioning, both legal and medical, was signed by the President and came into force.[4] It implies a complete ban on gender-affirmative therapy (including hormone therapy and voluntary surgeries) and on the possibility of changing the legal gender marker because of a gender identity mismatch. The effect of all these expansions is an increase in isolation and potential harm for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially considering how spaces that promote LGBTQ+ tolerance and understanding are now universally prohibited. The law banning gender reassignment not only harms the mental well-being of transgender youth but also jeopardises their physical safety. Many transgender young people experience intense stress and depression due to gender dysphoria, and the lack of affirming resources further isolates them. This isolation, coupled with stigma, exposes them to bullying, discrimination, and even violence, making it difficult for them to access safe, supportive educational environments.

A critical issue affecting the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth in Russia is the continued practice of conversion therapy. Despite global scientific consensus that conversion therapy is ineffective and harmful, it remains legal in Russia. At least a dozen clinics in Russia secretly conduct conversion therapy, charging up to 130,000 rubles ($1,420) for their services. These clinics operate in Moscow, the Moscow and Rostov regions, and parts of Russia's North Caucasus. The methods employed in these therapies include isolation from the outside world for several months, forced administration of psychotropic drugs, mandatory prayer sessions, hypnosis, and physical and psychological abuse. Many LGBTQ+ people are forced into these therapies against their will. Some families pay private clinics to abduct their queer children and subject them to conversion therapy. This practice has become more widespread amid Russia's ongoing crackdown on LGBTQ+ rights.

Just in January, 2024 Russian Society of Psychiatrists proposed to the Ministry of Health of Russia a draft clinical recommendations for the treatment of diseases encoded by the F64 Gender identity disorders code, which indicated conversion therapy as a method of "treatment" for transgender people. As of our current knowledge, this project has not been approved by the Ministry and has not been put into mandatory use, but the creation of such a

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[2] Human Rights Watch. (2023). Russia: Supreme Court Bans "LGBT Movement" as "Extremist". https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/30/russia-supreme-court-bans-lgbt-movement-extremist.

[3] Human Rights Watch. (2022). Russia: Expanded 'Gay Propaganda' Ban Progresses Toward Law. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/25/russia-expanded-gay-propaganda-ban-progresses-toward-law.

[4] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2023). "Putin Signs Law Banning Gender-Reassignment Surgery, Hormonal Therapy". https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-gender-reassignment-banned-putin-signs-law/32517157.html.
Human Rights Watch. (2023). Russia: Trans Health Care, Families Bill Violates Rights. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/15/russia-trans-health-care-families-bill-violates-rights.

project fully aligns with the policy of the Russian government towards trans-people; and trans-people under 18 become only more vulnerable in this context as they depend on their parent and are not allowed legally to make their own decisions.

With all its legislation, the Russian Federation creates and fosters inequality among its citizens, thus neglecting Articles 1 and 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When we talk about conversion therapy, it is not uncommon for individuals of all ages, including young adults, to be subjected to such practices without their consent, which also breaches Article 6 of the Declaration and Article 13 of Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our data shows that these repressive developments have had an extremely negative impact on the psychological wellbeing of many Russian LGBTQ+ people: our respondents often express persistent feelings of fear and anxiety, chronic stress, depression and even suicidal thoughts.

IV. Current situation on LGBTQ+ children in Russia

The current situation for LGBTQ+ children in Russia is alarming, characterised by pervasive discrimination, harassment, and systemic neglect. The "gay propaganda" law, enacted in 2013, has been a catalyst for increased hostility, effectively silencing any discourse that promotes LGBTQ+ rights or visibility. This legislative climate contributes to a culture of fear, where many LGBTQ+ youth are bullied, ostracised, or even subjected to violence in schools and communities.

Reports indicate that these children often suffer from significant mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety, exacerbated by the stigma surrounding their identities. Many feel isolated and lack access to supportive resources, such as affirming mental health services or LGBTQ+-friendly educational environments. The absence of inclusive curricula means that LGBTQ+ topics are rarely discussed, perpetuating ignorance and intolerance among peers. According to our research[5], already in 2021, even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, 69 % of our respondents who asked their teachers questions regarding sexuality, gender identity, or LGBTQ+, were refused an answer, and 70.1 % received a negative reaction (meaning they were not only refused an answer but were also affected with some verbal and/or non-verbal form of disapproval or disgust) from their pedagogue.

The repression of freedom of expression in Russia severely impacts LGBTQ+ children, limiting their ability to seek, receive, and impart information related to their identities. The "gay propaganda" law not only criminalises the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights but also creates an environment of fear that stifles open discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity. This results in a lack of access to vital resources and support networks, denying these youth the opportunity to connect with affirming communities. The suppression of media and educational content on LGBTQ+ topics further perpetuates misinformation, leaving LGBTQ+ children vulnerable to bullying, isolation, and mental health issues. Consequently, their right to express themselves and seek information is systematically violated, impacting their overall well-being and development. The urgent need for reforms that uphold freedom of expression and protect the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in Russia

[5] Life of LGBTQ+ Youth in Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad Region. Coming Out, 2021. https://comingoutspb.org/en/books/life-of-lgbtq-youth-in-saint-petersburg-and-the-leningrad-region/.

cannot be overstated, as fostering an inclusive environment is critical for the health and safety of these children.

Furthermore, the societal attitude towards LGBTQ+ issues is largely negative, driven by cultural and religious conservatism, which reinforces discriminatory practices. Family rejection is a common experience, with many LGBTQ+ children facing hostility at home, leading to a heightened risk of homelessness and exploitation.

As a result, these young individuals often feel they have nowhere to turn for support, leaving them vulnerable to self-harm and suicidal ideation. The lack of protective policies and advocacy further complicates their situation, making it essential for both local and international entities to mobilise efforts to promote their rights and ensure their safety. Comprehensive and inclusive approaches are urgently needed to create supportive environments that affirm LGBTQ+ identities and foster acceptance within families, schools, and communities.

IV. Education for peace and tolerance: challenges in Russia

In Russia, the education system faces significant challenges in promoting peace and tolerance, primarily due to the state's increasing use of schools as vehicles for propaganda. Initiatives like the weekly "Conversations about Important Things" indoctrinate students with a nationalistic agenda that vilifies the West and glorifies military action. This environment discourages critical thinking and fosters a culture of silence among educators and students alike, as dissent can lead to severe repercussions, including job loss or legal consequences. The new history curriculum and exam content further entrench state narratives, making it difficult to cultivate a spirit of empathy, diversity, and peace. In September 2024, the Ministry of Enlightenment of the Russian Federation introduced a bill intended to change school educational programs excluding terms ‘gender’, ‘tolerance’, ‘domestic violence and bullying’ from their texts. These terms are to be changed to ‘sex’, ‘mutual respect’, and ‘psychological violence, systematic humiliation of honour and dignity, insult, manhunt’ correspondingly. Consequently, the regime’s efforts to embed militarism into education implicate the entire community—teachers, students, and parents—in perpetuating a climate of obedience rather than fostering a culture of understanding and reconciliation. For instance, just in October 2024, they started to hold weekly "Conversations about Important Things” in Russian kindergartens, thus affecting not just children above 7 but pre-school-age kids as well now, building a streamlined chain of children indoctrination. In such a context, the aspiration for an education that nurtures peace and tolerance is not only hindered but actively undermined by systemic indoctrination.

As the “Coming Out” 2021 study on the lives of LGBTQ+ youth in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region shows, LGBTQ+ youth regularly face discrimination and restrictions on their rights. One third of respondents who came out (intentionally or unintentionally) to their school classmates were bullied or boycotted at least once. School teachers, psychologists and administrators often fail to prevent bullying and sometimes even encourage it. The law banning the “propaganda of non-traditional values” makes some school staff wary of expressing support or helping LGBTQ students. LGBTQ+ children also regularly face discriminatory actions by psychologists and doctors, such as verbal abuse, prejudice and outing.

A survey conducted across Russia in 2021 by Sphere, the Russian LGBT network, and the LGBT Resource Centre, found that 51.7% of the teenagers they surveyed felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation during the last school year. This study shows that lower achievement among LGBTQ+ students is also associated with harassment, bullying and homophobic or transphobic school environments.

V. Conclusion

LGBTQ+ youth in Russia face severe challenges due to deeply entrenched discrimination and restrictive policies. These challenges are exacerbated by laws that criminalise LGBTQ+ visibility, prohibit gender-affirming treatment and promote the practice of conversion therapy. In addition, Russia's educational environment increasingly serves as a vehicle for state propaganda, systematically excluding discussions of diversity, tolerance and LGBTQ+ issues. This situation has serious implications for the mental health, safety and educational outcomes of LGBTQ+ youth, depriving them of a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Addressing these issues is critical to upholding the human rights of LGBTQ+ youth and ensuring that they have access to an education based on principles of peace and tolerance.

VI. Recommendations

- **Develop Inclusive Curriculum Standards:** Advocate for educational reforms that integrate topics on human rights, diversity, and tolerance into the curriculum, including positive discussions on gender identity and sexual orientation.
- **Train Educators on Diversity and Inclusion:** Provide specialised training for teachers, counsellors, and school administrators on supporting LGBTQ+ students and handling issues of discrimination. This training should focus on creating safe, welcoming environments and equipping educators with tools to address prejudice, homophobia, and transphobia within classrooms.
- **International Advocacy for LGBTQ+ Rights in Russia**: The United Nations, human rights organisations, and foreign governments should continue to apply diplomatic pressure on Russia to reform policies that criminalise LGBTQ+ identities and support international monitoring of LGBTQ+ rights abuses.
- **Opposition to Conversion Therapy**: Lobby for the global condemnation and banning of conversion therapy practices, urging the Russian government to follow international norms and guidelines against these harmful interventions.
- **Community Education Programs**: Encourage organisations to develop online educational materials and campaigns that promote understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, aiming to reach Russian youth despite the country's restrictive laws.

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