

The impact of COVID-19 on the human rights of LGBT persons, communities and/or populations

Commentary by LGBT-Initiative group “Coming Out”

For Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity

“Coming Out” (<https://comingoutspb.com/eng/>) is a regional nonprofit initiative group founded in 2008 in St. Petersburg, Russia. We work for universal recognition of human dignity and equal rights of all regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity by lobbying and advocacy, educational and cultural events, and providing psychological and legal services to LGBT* people. We base our work on the principles of openness, visibility and nonviolence.

How did the State evaluate the situation of LGBT persons vis-à-vis the pandemic and potential specific vulnerabilities?

Unfortunately, the Russian state ignores the vulnerability of LGBT persons. As known, the Russian government prefers not to identify LGBT people as a social group, thus, from the State’s point of view there cannot be any “extra” vulnerability, and the problems of LGBT people are almost invisible to the authorities.

What measures were adopted by the State to ensure that LGBT persons would not be subjected to discrimination in the implementation of COVID-19 related interventions?

No specific measures were adopted to protect LGBT people in Russia. The last few months unemployment had grown for all. Another problem is overload of medical care system. LGBT people are faced with both of these challenges even in usual time, becoming victims of discrimination in their labor rights and in access to healthcare. There is no official data or research on the situation of LGBT people in Russia in the context of the pandemic, but we can assume that LGBT people, who are discriminated and highly vulnerable in normal time, are even more unprotected in the current situation. This assumption is partly proved by the increased number of addresses to “Coming out” from LGBT people who have been fired, lost their source of income and even their home during the pandemic period.

The data collected by “Coming Out” over several years indicate that LGBT people may be subjected to pressure, constructive dismissal and violation of their labor rights due to their appearance, LGBT symbols they might wear, their participation in activist projects or as a result of outing. As a rule, employers do not voice the true reason for dismissal, choosing instead to manipulate unwanted LGBT workers into resigning by deliberately making the working conditions unbearable (e.g., by dramatically increasing the workload, using homo/transphobic slurs and other forms of pressure, making artificial layoffs, cutting down the wages while maintaining the workload, etc). Thus, the situation is outwardly legal, while in fact, the labor rights of LGBT people are being restricted. These people cannot simply go to work and perform their duties in safety like their heterosexual cisgender peers. This discrimination is caused by a high level of homophobia/transphobia in the Russian society, but technically it does not violate the labor legislation.¹

¹ [Report On The Situation of the LGBT* Community of Saint Petersburg in 2019 — St. Petersburg: Coming Out, 2020.](#)

Did LGBT civil society participate in the design of measures taken to respond to the pandemic? If no, why not?

In general, LGBT civil society did not participate in the design of measures taken to respond to the pandemic, because no effective impact tools for LGBT people to influence the government's policy exist in Russia.

Despite this, there are instances of attempts to improvement LGBT people's situation from LGBT organizations. For example, "Coming out" and "T-action" in April and May launched an advocacy campaign aimed to simplification the process of legal gender reassignment for transgender people, because nowadays to change their gender marker in their documents, they need to go their native region, which is almost impossible during the quarantine. Within this campaign people sent their appeals in support of simplification this process to the Justice Department and to the Prime Minister (wed-page of this campaign: http://law.comingoutspb.com/gosuslugi_translyudyam).

What is the information available to the State as to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the general situation of LGBT persons and their access to education, housing, health and employment and on their living conditions?

The State does not collect any information about impact the of the pandemic on LGBT people, about their needs and vulnerabilities, because the State does not perceive LGBT as a social group with specific characteristics and needs. The only source of support for LGBT people in the pandemic period are nongovernmental organizations, civil society associations and grassroots LGBT initiatives.

Can you identify good practices in the State interventions in relation to COVID-19 and LGBT persons? Can you identify good practices stemming from civil society actions? Have lessons be learned from the pandemic on how not to leave LGBT persons behind in emergency situations?

As we have already said, the State policy does not highlight LGBT people and their specific needs.

However nongovernmental organizations take actions to improve the situation of LGBT people. Here are some examples:

- [Rainbow World \(Perm\)](#) provides food for LGBT people who lost their source of income;
- Trans* Coalition On Postsoviet Space [started a special program](#) aimed to decrease vulnerability and to support transgender people. They provide psychological help and humanitarian aid;
- [T-Action initiative group](#) provides free-of-charge endocrinologists' consultations on hormonal therapy for transgender people online, after which they can get a prescription for hormonal medication by mail. This helps transgender people to connect with doctors in the pandemic period, when most of clinics are closed;
- Several other social initiatives for transgender people aimed to provide them food, medicine, health care and psychological consultations.

Conclusion

LGBT people are not being supported by Russian State at all. In the pandemic period the social vulnerability of LGBT people only increases, and their needs are ignored by the government. This situation is a consequence of long-lasting State policy of pressure and efforts to make LGBT people invisible.

While the state is inactive, the civil society, nonprofit organizations and initiative groups do as much as they can for LGBT-community in Russia, providing for LGBT people's basic needs and trying to improve their situation in general.

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