great things never come from comfort zones

Last year, German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans travelled to Russia to meet members of the LGBT community in Saint Petersburg, an inspiring group of young men and women who risk their jobs and more to promote change. Here he photographs ten extraordinary individuals and interviews them on the current attitudes to LGBT people in the country, and why it is so hard to be publicly out in Russia.

“LGBT activism in Russia gives people hope for change. I’ve received a lot of letters where people write, ‘Thank you for fighting for our rights because somebody has to. You bring me hope that not everything is lost.’

DANIEL GRACHEV, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

PHOTOGRAPHY AND INTERVIEWS WOLFGANG TILLMANS
INTRODUCTION FELIX PETTY

With thanks to Frauke Nelissen, Vasilisa Grebenshchikova, Matthew Collin and Amnesty International.
Since 2006, Vladimir Putin’s Russia has been slowly cracking down on the rights of LGBT people, so when Wolfgang Tillmans found himself in Russia last year for Manifesta 10, which was being held in Saint Petersburg, Russia’s old, Baroque capital, he knew he had to make a statement. Saint Petersburg was traditionally one of Russia’s more liberal enclaves, but it’s from here that Russia’s homophobic laws have begun to spiral outwards, with the city’s mayor even saying, “They can do whatever they want in their homes, in the special ‘garbage’ places called gay night clubs. But they’re not allowed to do it in the streets.”

“I had to find a way to make a comment,” Wolfgang explains, “I included two photographs of ugly new Orthodox churches, built by the government. I also photographed television static in my Saint Petersburg hotel room as a symbol of censorship and of potential loss of connection. These became two huge pictures in the show.”

Tillmans was planning on going to the Saint Petersburg Pride festival while he was there, but this too fell victim to the Russian government. The federal law banning the “promotion of homosexuality to minors” is being used as a cloak for all kinds of homophobic behaviour, and for the police to attack protesters and to encourage vigilante style mob “justice”, as well as stopping demonstrations and Pride events. “I felt bad that I didn’t get this connection with the community there during Manifesta,” he says, “so I got in touch with Amnesty International to arrange to do these portraits, to meet and talk with people.”

“These aren’t the outstanding figureheads of the movement, just the normal people, willing to be photographed,” Tillmans is quick to stress. “None of them had a heroic street fighting rhetoric. In the West, activism of this sort always has a sense of something heroic and subversive about it. When I first got interested in different types of activism in Germany and the UK, there was always a style element to it, but it’s interesting that in a setting where there is so much real danger, activism can’t look at the aesthetics and coolness of fighting for a cause, and must instead focus on the matter at hand.”

The resulting pictures, though, don’t betray the fear of living a life in which you can’t be openly out of the closet, in which Pride marches are continually targeted by thugs, and Saint Petersburg’s activists have been shot at and even murdered. Last year there were over 100 homophobic attacks recorded by Human Rights Watch, and depressingly, only a handful of prosecutions. These are photographs that show a quiet hopefulness, a determination to make things better and a dedication to do what’s right.

“I find it so admirable that they keep doing what they’re doing, in the light of real threat, because I’ve never been in a situation like that,” says Tillmans. “All my life I’ve been involved in a political and cultural context that has become ever more free. I guess I wanted to just see for myself, and speak to people myself, to really get an idea of what it feels like to live in this situation. When you meet people everything becomes less black and white. You hear all these horror stories, but there’s always hope. There are terrible things, but wherever there’s people, there’s also hope, and that’s what I like my photography to do, to amplify and give a voice to hope and solidarity.”

“The situation is getting more depressing, but we are trying to do what we can. It gives us a lot of power and strength to move forward and to be equal. But at this time it’s quite dangerous to fight against the government.”

ELENA LEONTIEVA, SINGER, ACTRESS, LGBT VOLUNTEER
I don’t think I’ve lost any friends because of my homosexuality. I do face aggression sometimes, but so do immigrants and women in Russia; we are not the only group.

Svetlana Zakharova

RUSSIAN LGBT NETWORK

Wolfgang Tillmans: Homosexuality was decriminalised in Russia in 1993, the age of consent is 16, and gender change has been legal since 1997, yet it is not against the law to discriminate, and hate speech is widespread. It doesn’t make any sense?

Ruslan Savolainen: Propaganda in Russia claims that LGBT is something foreign to the Russian people. They believe that it came from the West and that it impinges European values. This standpoint — that it is “foreign to Russia” — is aggressively pushed by the media and the government.

Dmitry Musolin: A lot of us are trying to understand why Russia is so homophobic. Some people say it is related to globalisation, because homosexuality was illegal for 60 years during the Soviet Union — actually female homosexuality was not, but people don’t make that differentiation. In the minds of a lot of people it’s still something bad. They still see it as criminal, even though it’s not anymore. Also, the Russian Orthodox Church is very homophobic and conservative now, and in the past Soviet times, the church wanted to play a much more important role in society and it has very strong support from the state. The state needs something — like ideology — and the church has something to offer.

Ivan Suruc: These are two factors: the fact that the image of an inner enemy needed to be created to attract people from other problems and the [Soviet] homophobia of the Russian people.

Dmitry Musolin: It’s easier to manipulate people when there is an inner enemy, so new and again propaganda and government [suggest] that it is America or Europe — the EU is a big enemy of Russia. And this idea is strongly promoted by the state’s media. It’s important to have an inner enemy, inside the country, so somehow it was decided that gay people could be this kind of enemy, because for a lot of people it’s still criminal.

Pride rallies in Russia are now illegal, and attempts to hold unauthorized Pride gatherings have almost always been met with violent attacks by religious conservatives and neo-Nazis, while the police arrest LGBT demonstrators. What are your experiences of this?

Olga Panaeva: At last year’s Gay Pride in Saint Petersburg there weren’t too many activities, but there were a large group of homosexuals who came and threw eggs and stones. They were very aggressive, but the police didn’t arrest them, while all the activists were arrested. It was my first time at a police station, and while it was very interesting and funny, I was upset I just came out to say that I exist and that my friends should be killed for coming out. I was totally afraid, I was afraid of every football fan or every guy with a shaved head. You never know who the government will aim at. For example, those people who wanted to join [the pro-democracy protests in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow in 2012] were randomly chosen, just to make a point that it is a “hate” idea to participate in demonstrations.

Dmitry Musolin: There is strong pressure from conservative circles, and the state supports this. You have to be very brave to speak up for LGBT people now, especially if you are a public figure.

Russian Savolainen: I’m scared every day. Being openly “out” in Russia leaves people open to being attacked. I’m still in fear and physically attacked. How has this affected the way you speak about your sexuality?

Artjom Stadnian: With close friends, I can talk. My mum also knows and accepts it. But being openly completely is dangerous in this country.

Dmitry Musolin: I don’t have a rainbow flag in my city, but if people talk I won’t. I don’t like to work in a university and there are many older people working those who probably don’t know, but younger teachers and PhD students, if they are on Facebook or VKontakte, can easily understand who I am because they see what I post.

Svetlana Zakharova: In my environment people are nice to me. I don’t think I lost any friends because of my homosexuality. I do face aggression sometimes, but so do immigrants and women in Russia; we are not the only group.

Legal changes prohibiting “propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships” were adopted in Russia in 2013. This followed local laws on the promotion of homosexuality, lesbian, bisexual and transgender practices among minors in cities like Saint Petersburg the year before.

Dmitry Musolin: We didn’t believe that it would happen in Saint Petersburg, because it’s an important, education, modern, big city, so when they started to promote the law we had this campaign to stop it. But the people promoting these laws are not stupid, they put gay, lesbian and transgender people together with paedophiles, just separated by commas. When we tried to protest, they said, “You are protecting paedophiles.” It’s impossible to have a public discussion. They say, “This law is not against gay people, it’s against paedophiles.”

Ivan Suruc: The government practically gave the “attack” command with these local laws, so the public think it has the right to judge without trial, that killing and torturing is okay and that a murder can be justified by the fact that the victim was gay. There have been several murders in Russia already. The most famous case is that of Oleg Tenevov, who was sadly tortured and murdered [in May 2013 in Voronezh]. The mothers claimed that they killed him because he told them he was gay. They believed that if they pointed it out then they would have the same sex or gender, but there were still too few people who believed that something could change. So I actually believe that this is only going to end after some global political changes. But I don’t want to miss the revolution. What will it start after, I would be saved and because I would be like to be part of it.

It took decades of campaigns to win LGBT rights in Europe and the US, but some activists in Russia fear that they might have to struggle for much longer. How close do you feel you are to a breakthrough?

Ivan Suruc: It seems to me that nothing good will come out of this. [The popularization of homo]phobia under the current regime, there won’t be changes for the better. The inner enemy is still much needed, and the current government apparently satisfies people.

Dmitry Musolin: Civil society in Russia is really weak. There are good organisations, for keeping people away from trouble, there are still too few people who believe that something can be changed. So I actually believe that this is only going to end after some global political changes. But I don’t want to miss the revolution.

Svetlana Zakharova: I truly do believe that things can change, otherwise it’s all pointless. But I’m aware that it’s not going to happen soon. But I don’t think it will be like this forever.

Interviews edited by Matthew Collin

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