

# Gay Rights Festival to Start in St. Pete

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ST. PETERSBURG — The consulates of Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden are supporting a major gay rights cultural event that opens in St. Petersburg this week, as national statistics show that homophobic attitudes are on the rise in Russia.

Called Queerfest, the 10-day festival featuring music, dance, art, lectures and debates was launched in 2009 by Vykhod, or Coming Out, a local LGBT rights group.

“I am looking forward to visiting this year’s St. Petersburg Queerfest because I believe that gay people should be able to live without fear of discrimination or criminalization,” British Consul-General Gareth Ward said in an e-mail.

“Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people make a big contribution to British cultural life,” Ward said. “St. Petersburg’s sister city, Manchester, has a famous gay pride event. This can be an important and fun way of celebrating diversity and tolerance in Russia as well.”

Homophobia is a problem in many countries, he continued. “The U.K. is a world leader in

supporting LGBT equality, but we are not complacent.”

“Last year the U.K. government passed an ambitious program to tackle prejudices. In Russia, homosexuality was decriminalized in the 1990s, but there is a long way to go to remove social stigmatization and hate crime. Civil society groups such as Vykhod are leading the way.”

Ward will speak at the opening of Queerfest on Thursday along with Dutch Consul-General Yennes de Mol.

The Swedish Consulate has also backed the event with a letter of support that can be read on Queerfest’s web site.

The motto of this year’s festival is the “Art of Being Yourself.”

“It’s dedicated to the subject of self-expression through art by different people, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity,” Vykhod director Igor Kochetkov said.

The festival’s diverse program includes photo exhibitions by World Press Photo award-winning Italian photographer Mattia Insolera and the Moscow-based contemporary artist Serge Golovach.

Queerfest will end with a rock concert called Stop Homophobia! at the Avrora Concert Hall on Sept. 25. Headlined by Moldovan folk-punk band Zdob Si Zdub, it will feature Cuibul — also from Moldova, the Moscow band FiLLiN and St. Petersburg’s own Iva Nova, Monoliza and Snega.

Last year, the festival came under pressure from the authorities when the state-owned House of Artists canceled a photography exhibition — and the festival’s planned opening — at the last minute, allegedly after getting a telephone call from the city’s culture committee.

All Queerfest events are open to the public, except for the opening, which is by invitation only. For a full program, see [www.queerfest.ru](http://www.queerfest.ru).

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