

Gay Activists Protest as Vkontakte Refuses to Offer New Relationship Status

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Gay rights activists joining thousands of others at a June anti-government protest on Moscow's Prospekt Sakharova.

A scandal is brewing after Russia's largest social network Vkontakte refused to introduce special symbols for users in same-sex relationships, a step already taken by the site's closest competitor, Facebook.

In protest at the move, activists are urging the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community to pressure the Russian site until it rethinks its decision, Izvestia reported Thursday, citing a case in which Vkontakte administrators advised one user to "have a sex change."

Andrei Obolensky, leader of the Rainbow Association, a LGBT rights group, told

the newspaper that Vkontakte's decision is indicative of wider discrimination against the LGBT community and that his organization would press the "homophobes" that run the site.

"Now they're even banning us from speaking openly about our relationships on social-networking sites. We are against the silencing of such issues and are making a stand for maximum openness," he said.

Vkontakte's move to deny LGBT users tailored relationship statuses follows legislation passed in St. Petersburg, where Vkontakte is based, and several other large cities banning so-called "homosexual propaganda" to minors.

The legislation, which stipulates fines ranging from 5,000 to 500,000 rubles (\$154 to \$15,300) for violators, has sparked outrage from rights organizations and Western governments.

Rainbow Association leader Obolensky said that many Russian gays had deleted their Vkontakte accounts and moved to Facebook after the U.S. site enabled users to indicate nontraditional sexual orientations on their homepages. According to Izvestia, LGBT users make up between 4 and 5 percent of Vkontakte's total user base.

In response to questions from journalists, a Vkontakte spokesman said the site had no intention of changing its policy.

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