

St. Petersburg Authorities Disrupt LGBT Film Fest Opening

November 13, 2020

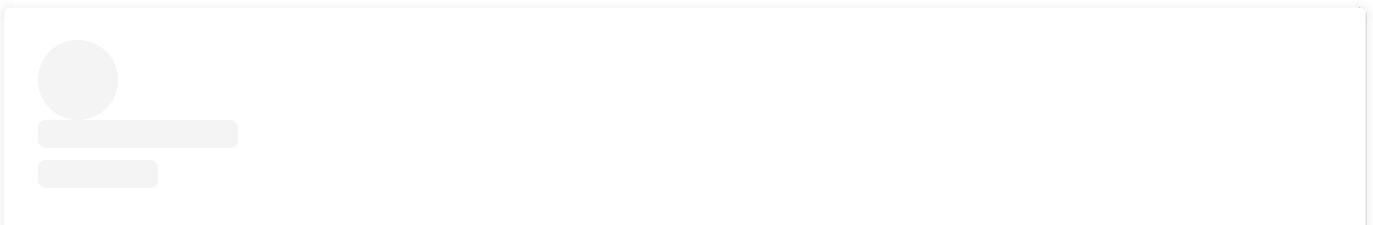


The Side By Side film festival has been subjected to numerous disruptions, bomb threats and protests in its 13-year history. **Anatoly Maltsev / EPA / TASS**

St. Petersburg police and officials from Russia's consumer safety watchdog Rospotrebnadzor disrupted the opening night of Russia's only annual LGBT film festival, its organizers said.

The Side By Side film festival has been subjected to numerous disruptions, bomb threats and protests in its 13-year history. Last year, the film festival's [opening](#) was disrupted by bomb threats, forcing organizers to call off one of the scheduled film screenings.

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Police and Rospotrebnadzor employees arrived at Side By Side's opening screening Thursday night and ordered festivalgoers to leave without giving an explanation why, festival organizers [told](#) the Mediazona news website.

"The police came without giving any reason. Rospotrebnadzor had the right to impartially check for coronavirus prevention measures," the Side by Side film festival's spokesperson Alina Pchelintseva told Mediazona.

"One police officer broke into the cinema hall and, using force and rude language, demanded that all visitors urgently leave the space," she said. "The tough police actions forced us to cancel the film screening for the safety of the audience."

As a Russian law passed in 2013 prohibits the display of LGBT "propaganda" toward minors, the Side By Side festival is one of the few spaces where Russia's LGBT community can watch movies about themselves on a big screen and participate in discussions about issues affecting them.

Days before the start of the festival, local police and prosecutors had asked organizers whether minors would be admitted to the event, the Fontanka.ru news site [reported](#) Monday.

Mediazona cited one of the festival's jury members Renat Davletgildeyev as saying that the the security forces' visit could be linked to anti-LGBT lawmaker Vitaly Milonov. One of the authors of Russia's "gay propaganda" law, Milonov has previously attempted to shut down the festival in past years.

Davletgildeyev added that about 10 masked men arrived with the police and "shouted homophobic slogans," demanding to "stop the promotion of non-traditional sexual relations among minors."

Despite the disruptions, organizers say Side By Side's schedule of online screenings will continue to run until Nov. 19.

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