

# THE GAY MAP OF THE ORTHODOX WORLD

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Most of the world's approximately 240 million Eastern Orthodox Christians reside in Eastern Europe, a region still closeted and reactionary toward gays and lesbians. All Orthodox countries (except Greece and Cyprus) were once under Communist rule, a time when national Orthodox churches cooperated with authoritarian government regimes. Many churches are at the core of antigay campaigns, and same-sex couples cannot register their partnership in any Orthodox country, nor adopt children. But things are rapidly changing as the 27-nation European Union expands eastward, carrying its more liberal attitudes and laws with it, and new tourists bring their outside influences in.

## 1. RUSSIA

**OFFICIAL LINE:** Russia refuses entry to HIV-positive people staying over three months, and many HIV-positive foreign residents have been expelled. Patriarch Alexy II of Russia has called the attempted Moscow gay pride march "propaganda for sin," and he compared homosexuality to kleptomania as "an illness and a distortion of the human personality."  
**REALITY:** In 2007 the mayor of Moscow refused for the second year in a row to authorize a peaceful LGBT demonstration, an event he called "satanic." When LGBT activists tried to lodge a related complaint with Moscow's city hall, dozens of violent opponents, including skinheads, nationalists, and self-identified Orthodox Christians, attacked the group. Police allowed the violence and then arrested around 20 LGBT activists. Nevertheless, Russia has a robust LGBT life, including long-established gay bars, nightclubs, and baths in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

## 2. BELARUS

**OFFICIAL LINE:** The limited freedom of LGBT expression, assembly, and association reflects the general human rights restrictions in this country—known as Europe's last dictatorship—which has seen its "special guest status" suspended in the Council of Europe.  
**REALITY:** An international LGBT conference was canceled in November 2006 after a police raid of the organizers' meeting in a private apartment; a second meeting was organized in February 2007. Though LGBT harassment and discrimination is common, a couple of bars and a gay club operate in Minsk; the club, unfortunately, reflects the general patriarchal culture in reportedly charging women a higher entry fee.

## 3. UKRAINE

**OFFICIAL LINE:** Ukraine's legislature is currently considering employment antidiscrimination provisions. Still, religious conservatives have a majority, and in November 2006 the head of the parliamentary committee on human rights called homosexuality an "anomaly."  
**REALITY:** Several church denominations issued a joint request to the legislature in November 2006 to restrict marriage to heterosexual couples in order to prevent the eventual "extinction of the native population." LGBT Ukrainians surveyed in 2005 overwhelmingly experienced discrimination in services, employment, education, and health care. A few gay and gay-friendly bars operate in Kiev.

## 4. ROMANIA

**OFFICIAL LINE:** Romania decriminalized same-sex relations in 2001, making it the last of the Orthodox countries to do so. Rapid progress since then includes a new antidiscrimination agency that fined the Romanian airline Tarom for not allowing same-sex couples to take advantage of a two-for-one ticket promotion on Valentine's Day in 2005. The law allows post-op transgender people new gender documents.  
**REALITY:** Police protected participants from violent opposition in a recent LGBT diversity march. (A parallel "normality march," organized by a neofascist group, was attended by Orthodox priests and members of the Conservative Party.) While Bucharest and the large cities of Cluj-Napoca and Brasov have small gay scenes, a May 2007 poll showed 52% of Romanians saying that gays should not be accepted in society.

## 5. SERBIA

**OFFICIAL LINE:** While the Serbian army has a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, the government forbids discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, higher education, public information, and the media. Local groups are currently campaigning for the inclusion of gender identity and expression in antidiscrimination legislation.  
**REALITY:** The 2001 pride march in the capital, Belgrade, encountered violent opposition led by a local Orthodox priest. While a pride march has not since been attempted and homophobic incidents remain frequent, several groups continue to pursue LGBT rights. The gay scene is small, with a few bars in Belgrade and one in Novi Sad.





## 6. MONTENEGRO

**OFFICIAL LINE:** While violence against gay Montenegrins is reportedly rare and not condoned by the government, legal protections for sexual minorities have not yet been adopted in this new country in Europe, which seceded peacefully from Serbia in May 2006.

**REALITY:** In this small, parochial society, it can be difficult for LGBT people to keep their affairs private, even in the capital, Podgorica. Gay men tend to maintain a heterosexual appearance, making same-sex connections via the Internet and unsafe city parks. The Budva resort on the Adriatic Sea serves as a point of encounter for gay people from around Serbia and Montenegro during the summer.

## 7. MACEDONIA

**OFFICIAL LINE:** The labor law was updated in 2005 to prohibit discrimination based on "gender and sex orientation," following requirements for the country's accession to the European Union, but the antidiscrimination language was deemed unsatisfactory by E.U. standards. Discriminatory provisions barring gays from military service were repealed in 2005.

**REALITY:** The local queer group Masso throws parties, debates, and art events like the nude "Dressed and Naked Conference" on discriminatory attitudes toward the naked and clothed body. Masso documents ongoing homophobic events, but a gay club opened in 2006 in the capital Skopje.

## 8. GREECE

**OFFICIAL LINE:** Gay sex was decriminalized in 1951; an age of consent of 17 is assigned to same-sex male relations if an adult partner is involved (there is no parallel law addressing straight sex). The government considers homosexuality a mental illness and thus bars gays and lesbians from military service.

**REALITY:** Ancient Greece was known for its acceptance of homosexuality (though not without limits), but modern Greek society is informed largely by conservative Orthodox Christian values. However, there's a growing visibility of LGBT people in the media, plus well-developed gay tourism infrastructures in Athens and on the well-known islands of Mykonos and Lesbos.

## 9. BULGARIA

**OFFICIAL LINE:** In 1968, Bulgaria became the first among the Orthodox Christian Communist countries to decriminalize homosexuality. The nation now extends antidiscrimination protections to gays and lesbians, and in 2007 officials added gender expression to the country's antidiscrimination plan in response to alarming statistics that 30% of Bulgarian teenagers who committed suicide identified as transsexual.

**REALITY:** A gay commercial infrastructure with several bars and dance clubs has long been established in the capital, Sofia, and in the Black Sea resort town of Varna. However, same-sex couples should think twice before walking hand in hand in the street, as homophobic incidents have been reported, including some perpetrated by police officers.

## 10. MOLDOVA

**OFFICIAL LINE:** In April 2007 the mayor of the capital, Chisinau, refused for the third consecutive year to authorize an LGBT pride march, despite a 2007 supreme court ruling that such decisions defied national and European law. A performance of *The Vagina Monologues* was also banned in Chisinau in October 2007, reportedly on instructions from the Ministry of Culture. Moldova also refuses entry to HIV-positive people (as does the United States).

**REALITY:** The local group GenderDoc-M organizes indoor pride activities and staged a march to a public monument; when a police contingent prevented them from reaching their destination, demonstrators laid flowers at the feet of the officers. Metropolitan Vladimir, the Russian Orthodox Church-appointed high cleric of Moldova, said "same-sex marriage is a danger of globalization."

## 11. CYPRUS

**OFFICIAL LINE:** With its largely Muslim population, Turkish-speaking Northern Cyprus—which in 1983 declared independence, a status recognized only by Turkey—maintains criminal penalties on same-sex male relations, but the republic recently announced plans to repeal the antigay law in late 2008. The Greek-speaking southern part of the island, recognized by the international community and represented in the European Union, decriminalized homosexuality in 1998 under pressure from European institutions. Cyprus continues to regard homosexuality as a mental illness and thus bars gays and lesbians from military service.

**REALITY:** A 2006 survey showed that 80% of Cypriots disapprove of homosexuality, and same-sex relations are accordingly kept private. Nevertheless, a few bars, B&Bs, parks, and beaches attract gay tourists in Limassol, Paphos, Larnaca, and Nicosia.

## 12. GEORGIA

**OFFICIAL LINE:** A new labor code adopted in May 2006 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

**REALITY:** In a 2006 survey 71% of respondents reported that they would not want to work with gay people, indicating wide social disapproval, though young women surveyed were statistically more tolerant than young men. An event intended to promote LGBT tolerance and cultural dialogue in Georgia was canceled in July 2007 by its organizers due to safety concerns when rumors spread that the gathering was actually a gay parade.

WE ASKED OUR READERS: WHICH OF THESE ORTHODOX COUNTRIES WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO VISIT? YOU SAID...

Greece	52%
Russia	13%
Romania	8%
Cyprus	6%
Bulgaria	5%
Ukraine	4%
Macedonia	3%
Belarus	2%
Georgia	2%
Montenegro	2%
Serbia	2%
Moldova	1%