

# How Russia Reacted to Orlando

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



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## The Kremlin's expressions of sympathy mask its blatantly homophobic policies at home, which are unlikely to change anytime soon given the government's need for conservative straw men.

The day after Omar Mateen massacred 49 people on June 12 at the Pulse, a gay club in Orlando, Florida -- the worst terrorist act in the U.S. since Sept. 11, 2001 -- Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a telegram with condolences to President Obama and "all Americans," much as he did after 9/11. Putin stressed, according to the Kremlin, that the Russian people "share the pain and sorrow of those who lost their loved ones as a result of this barbaric crime and hope for a speedy recovery of the wounded."

But what was the response in Russia? Alexei Pushkov, for one -- the State Duma's foreign affairs committee chairman -- decided to criticize Obama's foreign policy. Beyond the usual Kremlin anti-Americanism, however, some in Russia highlighted state-driven repressions of the LGBT community. The Orlando attacks, noted Alexander Baunov, chief editor at Carnegie.ru, "revealed the uncomfortable position in which...the Russian leadership finds itself at minimum since the beginning of [Russia's] Syria operation [in September 2015]. It is difficult to fight ISIS (banned in Russia) and share its basic tenets." Soon after Putin assumed his third presidential term in 2012 (despite the largest protests since the break-up of the Soviet Union), he began a massive and broad crackdown on Russia's civil society. Among his targets was the LGBT community, portraying homosexuality as an example of Western moral decline. According to Freedom House, "[a] 2013 law banned dissemination of information promoting 'nontraditional sexual relationships,' putting legal pressure on LGBT activists and encouraging violent attacks." Since then, abuse and harassment of the LGBT community in Russia has been well-documented...

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