

SADO OPERA.

This queer performance band from Russia talk about the censorship they've faced in their home country, and how we can all help tackle LGBTQ discrimination across the globe.

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"Certainly many Russian artists are gay, but the majority prefer not to mention it publicly to avoid trouble," says SADO OPERA's Katya when we ask her if there is even such thing as a queer music scene in Russia.

The self-described queer performance band first came together in St. Petersburg, gaining attention for their V For Vendetta-style painted faces, and their eclectic stage shows. But being outspoken against the country's prevalent homophobia and misogyny meant they found themselves being censored by club promoters.

It wasn't long until Katya and her bandmate known as Colonel relocated to Berlin, where they continue to play their wild headline shows and raise awareness of the issues that still affect Russian LGBTQ people. During their trip to the UK this summer to take part in Expression Uncensored, a panel event hosted by Sonos, Index on Censorship and Gay Times, we caught up with the band to talk about the challenges they still face, and how we can all help Russian LGBTQ people who still face persecution in their home country.

What are the biggest challenges for a queer music act in Russia?

Being queer is quite a challenge anyways, not only for music acts. You might have heard of the Russian federal law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values. Introduced in 2013, this federal "gay propaganda" law effectively prohibits any positive information about "non-

traditional sexual relations" from public discussion and basically prohibits any public demonstration of LGBTQ in a positive context. It means that queer artists are simply not allowed to announce on the radio, TV or even on the street that they are queer and that it's normal to be queer. To make it shorter: if you raise a pride flag outside in Russia, you may get in trouble with the police.

What was the reaction like to your music when you first started performing?

Because of our music we've found a lot of like-minded people and our SADO family was instantly becoming bigger, welcoming new fans and friends. Our songs though seemed uncomfortable to some and thus it revealed another big problem of the Russian society: the self-censorship. We sometimes also had some issues with aggressive individuals who wanted and tried to fight with us during or after our shows.

What is the queer music scene like in Russia?

You might imagine that there are no gay clubs in Russia at all, but that's not true. Of course there are some, especially in the big cities like St.Petersburg and Moscow. There are some queer musicians but there is no real queer music scene in Russia. It's our dream and plan to help those talented queer artists who happened to be born as Russian citizens to build one. Certainly many Russian artists are gay, but the majority prefer not to mention it publicly to avoid trouble.

How do you manage to promote your music in Russia to fans there?

We keep in touch with our Russian fans on social media quite a lot. And we come to play sometimes as well. Not too often, maybe once or twice a year. It's way more often that our Russian friends and fans come to Berlin or other cities where we would be touring. We also believe that it's an important mission to build bridges between our Russian community and our international Berlin community, and so we are also hosting events and are inviting queer Russian acts to play at our Berlin parties.

At what lengths do the Russian authorities go to censor your art because of its queer content?

The Russian system is very different to the European one. There are a lot of unofficial sources involved and it's a scary game. The danger for the open minded Russian people can come not only from the authorities themselves, but also from so called "religious", "patriotic" or other kinds of gangs who are collaborating or just supporting the trends introduced by the government. This toxic and stressful environment understandably leads to self-censorship: people are afraid both of the police and of those "fighting-for-morals" hooligans at the same time. Sharing our personal experience we can say that our posters were sometimes censored by pretty open-minded promoters. Our interviews were censored by pretty liberal media, but the most unpleasant thing was when police attacked us on the street just because of our makeup.