

Analysis of Russia's Attitude Towards ECHR Regime Standards on LGBT Issues

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 20/11/2025

Revised 09/12/2025

Accepted 25/12/2025

Keywords:

CHR, Constructivism, LGBT,
Russia, Human Rights

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Russia's resistance to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) standards regarding the protection of LGBT rights under Vladimir Putin. Although Russia ratified the ECHR in 1998, the implementation of the European Court of Human Rights' norms and rulings has shown significant limitations, particularly on the issue of non-discrimination based on sexual orientation. This study begins by questioning the factors that contribute to the ECHR's ineffectiveness in influencing Russian domestic policy. Using qualitative methods through literature review, this study utilizes a constructivist theoretical framework to analyze the role of national identity, domestic norms, and political interests in shaping Russia's attitudes toward the European human rights regime. The analysis shows that Russia's involvement in the ECHR is formal and strategic, without deep normative internalization. The construction of an Orthodox identity, strengthening nationalism, and a centralized political structure are the main factors limiting the ECHR's effectiveness in providing substantive protection for the LGBT community in Russia.



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INTRODUCTION

The history of Russia's relationship with human rights norms cannot be separated from the structural and institutional legacies established during the Soviet era. During Joseph Stalin's reign, the state played a dominant role in controlling society's social, political, and moral life. Individual rights were subordinated to state interests, while political repression was legitimized as an instrument of maintaining ideological stability. This pattern of relations between the state and its citizens established a political tradition that emphasized sovereignty, order, and obedience, leaving an institutional legacy that persisted beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The transition to the post-Soviet era in the early 1990s opened up space for a redefinition of Russia's position in the international order. Under Boris Yeltsin's leadership, Russia sought to reorient its politics by aligning itself with European institutions and norms. The ratification of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in 1998 was a significant symbol of this effort. Windy (2025) notes that this move was not only intended as a legal commitment to European human rights standards, but also as a strategy to restore international legitimacy and affirm Russia's position as part of the post-Cold War European community. At this stage, the ECHR was viewed as an instrument of normative integration and a means to demonstrate Russia's changing political direction.

However, the adoption process took place on institutional and social foundations that were not fully aligned with liberal human rights norms. Despite formally accepting the ECHR's mechanisms and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the internalization of these norms into domestic legal and political practice was limited.

Tensions began to emerge as ECHR interpretations evolved, particularly when ECtHR rulings touched on issues considered morally and socially sensitive, such as LGBT issues. Lukina (2020) shows

that in the Russian context, the expansion of the meaning of human rights was often perceived not as a neutral normative development, but rather as pressure on the established social order.

The change in direction became increasingly apparent when Vladimir Putin began consolidating power in the early 2000s. Amid efforts to strengthen political stability and state authority, Russia's relationship with European human rights regimes underwent a recalibration. The emphasis on constitutional sovereignty, social stability, and traditional values has begun to gain greater prominence in official state discourse. Within this framework, Russia's adherence to the ECHR is no longer positioned as a primary normative priority, but rather as a commitment that can be renegotiated when deemed contrary to domestic interests. This dynamic is then reflected in the growing tension between national law and ECtHR rulings. Based on this dynamic, this study poses a key question: how and why has Russia's level of compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) regime changed over time? The analysis focuses on the factors shaping Russia's attitude toward ECHR normative obligations, particularly in the context of the interaction between international norms and the construction of values and identities at the domestic level. Therefore, this study aims to trace the process by which European human rights norms are accepted, debated, and ultimately lose legitimacy within Russia's socio-political framework. To address this question, this study uses a constructivist approach to understand how domestic meanings, identities, and norms influence Russia's relationship with the European regional human rights regime.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Essence of Norms in a Constructivist Perspective

This constructivist approach emphasizes that international norms do not become effective solely because of legal obligations or formal written rules, but rather through complex social processes in which state actors shape the meaning, legitimacy, and practice of these norms. Norms are not simply stand-alone legal texts; they become real when they are understood, interpreted, and implemented by actors with specific identities, values, and histories. Compliance with international norms does not occur automatically through treaty ratification or legal enforcement, but rather depends on how the norms are practiced and interpreted within the domestic social context (Benneker et al., 2020).

The Norm Life Cycle Concept

Within the constructivist tradition of international norms, Finnemore and Sikkink introduced the concept of the norm life cycle to explain how norms emerge, spread, and become part of institutional structures (Rosert, 2024). They divided this process into three stages: norm emergence, when norms are first introduced by norm entrepreneurs in international forums; norm cascade, when norms are widely adopted by states influenced by international pressure, the need for legitimacy, or reputation; and internalization, when norms are accepted as part of the formal and institutional structures of member states. The internalization stage indicates formal acceptance of the norm, but it does not necessarily mean that the norm is effective in domestic social practices.

Mark Raymond's Critique: Norms as Social Practices

Mark Raymond, a key figure in this analysis, critiques the assumption that formal internalization is sufficient to assess the effectiveness of international norms. Within the framework of the social practice of rule-making, Raymond distinguishes two dimensions of norms: norms as formal rules, such as legal texts, ratifications, and institutional obligations, and norms as social practices, whether they serve as moral references, are practiced by national courts, or are accepted within the social meanings of society. Raymond asserts that if the social practice dimension fails, formal norms become fragile and compliance becomes merely symbolic.

The Effectiveness Indicator Debate: Institutional Structure vs. Social Meaning

Therefore, legal ratification or obligations without deep social acceptance do not guarantee the effectiveness of norms (Raymond, 2021). The debate between Finnemore & Sikkink and Raymond lies in the indicators of norm effectiveness. Finnemore & Sikkink emphasize the formal internalization stage as a measure of norm success, focusing on how norms penetrate institutional structures and become formally accepted. Raymond critiques this, asserting that norm effectiveness can only be understood

when domestic social practices and societal meanings align with formal rules. Therefore, even legally recognized norms can fail if social practices within a country do not support them.

Theoretical Framework

This study chooses Raymond's framework as the primary reference for assessing the effectiveness of international norms, as its focus on domestic social practices is more consistent with constructivist assumptions that emphasize social meaning, practice, and legitimacy. Finnemore & Sikkink's framework remains the reference for understanding the cycle of norm diffusion at the international level.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative method with a literature review design. This method was chosen because the research focus is on a conceptual understanding of the effectiveness of the ECHR regime and the dynamics of Russia's compliance with human rights standards. Literature review allows researchers to explore and interpret ideas, theories, and empirical findings developed by previous researchers without conducting field data collection.

The research data was obtained from various written sources, such as scientific journal articles, books, reports from international institutions, and academic publications discussing the human rights regime in Europe and LGBT issues in Russia. All these sources were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the historical, political, and institutional contexts that influence the failure of the ECHR regime in the Russian case.

The analysis was conducted using a descriptive-qualitative approach, namely by organizing information from the literature, identifying patterns of thought, and developing interpretations based on relevant findings. This research design does not use a population or sample in a quantitative sense, as the goal of the research is not to measure numerical variables, but rather to understand the phenomenon in depth through a literature search.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Normative Legacy and Russian Political Structure

From the Soviet era to the present day, Russia's attitude toward its people has been influenced by a powerful, centralized political system that prioritizes social stability and equality over individual freedom. Historically and structurally, Russia inherited a pattern of relations between state and society that places the state as the primary entity and individuals as those who must adapt to collective interests. Within this framework, social stability, public morality, and value alignment are considered more important than the protection of individual rights. Non-heteronormative sexual orientation has long been viewed as a deviation from moral norms and a threat to social order, thus the state feels entitled to strictly regulate it. While the collapse of the Soviet Union brought changes to Russia's political system, it did not necessarily eliminate existing values and perspectives. The state's understanding of law, power, and human rights remains influenced by a long-standing legacy, where individual rights were often viewed as negotiable and limited.

This situation provides an important context for Russia's engagement with European human rights norms (Bayev and Others v. Russia, 2017). This mindset is not only embedded in law but also reflected in the operation of state institutions, officials, and societal attitudes. When the Soviet Union collapsed, these structures and mindsets did not simply disappear; they persisted despite institutional changes. Officially, the country adopted a series of new legal rules, including obligations to protect human rights and provide its citizens with access to bring cases before the European Court of Human Rights. In this regard, the ECHR introduced the construction a new normative framework places the individual as the primary subject of legal protection, including in the areas of non-discrimination and freedom of expression. However, this integration process is more formal than substantive.

ECHR norms are integrated into the legal and institutional framework, but have not been fully internalized in the values of the state and society. As a result, old regulations restricting LGBT groups remain. Berger & Johnson (2017) Russia's integration into the European human rights framework after the collapse of the Soviet Union cannot be separated from the state of identity confusion the country experienced. The dissolution of the Soviet Union not only abolished a political system but also removed

the fundamental values and ideology that had guided Russia for years in how it viewed itself (Kripa Mariya Manoj & S. Advaita, 2023).

In this context, Russia is in the position of a new entity still searching for a reference to understanding a form of state that is considered reasonable, legitimate, and acceptable in the international community, especially in Europe. During the 1990s, a strong understanding emerged that modern and democratic European countries are those that recognize human rights as part of the foundation of state life. Human rights are seen not only as a set of legal rules, but also as a symbol of political civilization and an indication of a country's progress. In this context, engagement with European institutions, including the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights, is considered natural and almost inseparable from the process of becoming a "European state" after the end of the Soviet era. Ratification of the Convention Boris Yeltsin's European Convention on Human Rights coincided with political instability. Russia faced economic challenges, internal power struggles, and widespread doubt about the country's future. In this situation, the human rights norms introduced by the European Convention served as an external reference for how the state should be organized and how the ideal relationship between the state and its citizens should be built. By joining the ECHR framework, Russia positioned itself within norms generally considered characteristic of a modern, democratic state, although this understanding may not have been fully internalized in domestic social and political experiences (Homosexuality and Human Rights, 2017).

However, acceptance of the ECHR has been largely formal and institutional. Human rights norms have been integrated as part of the legal system and international commitments, but have not fully reflected the changing attitudes of states and societies toward individual rights. Human rights are often viewed as externally imposed obligations, rather than as values born of domestic social agreements. This creates a gap between legal recognition and practice, which is exacerbated when these norms interact with issues considered sensitive to Russian society and national identity.

Developments and Changes in LGBT Regulations in Russia Under the European Human Rights Regime

Before Russia became a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), policies related to sexual orientation had long oppressed the LGBT community. During the Soviet era, the state openly considered homosexuality to be deviant behavior that endangered the social order. This thinking shaped society's perception of LGBT people, as if it were wrong and unacceptable.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia began to make some changes to its laws. In 1993, homosexual acts were no longer considered a crime. However, this change did not mean that the state and society's views toward LGBT people became entirely positive. Stigma and negative attitudes remained strong, and the state continued to play the role of guardian of public morals. In other words, despite the abolition of criminal laws, traditional attitudes toward LGBT people persisted in social practices and government policies.

When Russia ratified the ECHR in 1998, a number of new rules and principles focused on protecting individual rights were implemented. Within the ECHR framework, every individual has the right to a private life and to be free from discrimination, including those related to sexual orientation. As Article 8 affirms, everyone has the right to respect for their private life, including sexual identity (Bazhenov v. Russia, 2025). By law, Russia is committed to adhering to this standard and provides its citizens with the opportunity to report violations of their rights to the European Court of Human Rights.

However, the norms adopted by the ECHR do not completely eliminate traditional rules and understandings in Russia. Instead of eliminating policies that repress LGBT people, the state has added new layers of regulations on top of existing structures. This is clearly evident in the enactment of Article 6.21 of the Code of Administrative Offences in 2013 prohibits what is called "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations." (Kremlin, 2024). This provision directly restricts freedom of expression and treats certain sexual orientations unequally before the law. This regulation prohibits the dissemination of information, materials, symbols, or public expressions deemed "promotional" towards LGBT people, including in the media, public forums, or education, under the pretext of protecting children and public morals. This regulation is then used as a basis for administrative action against individuals and organizations that attempt to provide support or information about LGBT people, U.S. Department of State (2017) thus running afoul of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human

Rights. This regulation limits the activities, expression, and visibility of the LGBT community in public spaces, even though Russia officially remains bound by the ECHR principle of non-discrimination. Thus, after ratifying the ECHR, regulations that repress LGBT people in Russia were not completely abolished, but were transferred in a different format.

Although European human rights norms remain legally binding, European countries retain control over how sexual identity is expressed. As a result, protection of LGBT rights has become inconsistent, formally recognized but often limited in practice. This situation suggests that Russia's involvement in the ECHR regime has resulted in more than symbolic legal adjustments, without any profound changes in the state and society's perspective on human rights, particularly on LGBT issues.

Factors Contributing to the Ineffectiveness of ECHR Implementation in Russia

The ineffectiveness of the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in Russia cannot be understood solely as an internal failure of the state to fulfill its international legal obligations. Rather, this condition results from the interaction between the structural limitations of the ECHR regime at the external level and Russia's domestic construction of norms and identities at the internal level. This sequence of analysis is crucial for positioning the ECHR's failure not only as a matter of national resistance, but also as a reflection of the limits of the international human rights regime's own effectiveness. Externally, the ECHR regime has inherent limitations in ensuring compliance by member states.

Although the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) serves as a relatively powerful judicial oversight mechanism at the regional level, it lacks direct coercive instruments that would allow for the imposition of sanctions against states that refuse to implement court decisions. Compliance with the ECHR ultimately depends heavily on the political will and normative acceptance of member states. In the Russian context, these limitations become even more significant when states actively assert the principle of constitutional sovereignty and place national law above international obligations, as reflected in the 2015 Russian Constitutional Court ruling limiting the applicability of ECtHR decisions at the domestic level.

These external limitations then interact with internal normative and cultural factors. In contrast to approaches that place authoritarianism as the primary factor, this study emphasizes that the root of the ECHR's ineffectiveness in Russia lies in the construction of an Orthodox identity that has long shaped state and societal understandings of morality, social order, and the limits of legal appropriateness. Orthodox identity serves not only as a religious expression but also as a normative framework defining family values, sexuality, and the state's role as guardian of collective morality (Skladanowski et al., 2023).

Within this framework, ECHR principles, particularly those related to non-discrimination and the protection of LGBT rights, are perceived not simply as legal rules but as challenges to the established moral order. European human rights norms, which place individual rights at the center of legal protection, directly clash with Orthodox views that emphasize collective morality, social stability, and the integrity of traditional values. Consequently, ECHR norms have failed to gain sufficient social legitimacy to be internalized in Russian domestic practice. This weak internalization explains why Russia's ratification of the ECHR has not resulted in sustained policy change.

Commitment to the ECHR is formal and procedural, but it is not accompanied by a transformation of values at the societal or political elite levels. When international norms are inconsistent with domestic normative identities, compliance tends to be fragile and easily reversible. In this context, Orthodox identity functions as a normative filter that determines which norms are acceptable and which are rejected, thus limiting the substantive effectiveness of the ECHR. Thus, the ineffectiveness of ECHR implementation in Russia cannot be explained solely by factors of power or institutional design. This failure reflects the structural limits of the international human rights regime when confronted with a strong national identity construction incompatible with its values. Focusing on Orthodox identity allows for a deeper understanding of why the ECHR, despite its relatively advanced legal mechanisms, has been unable to generate internalized compliance in the Russian context, particularly regarding the protection of the rights of LGBT groups.

The Failure of the Social Dimension of Practice Generates Resistance to the ECHR Regime

When Russia ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) in 1998, the country formally adopted a set of legal rules that position the individual as the primary subject of rights protection. Within the framework of the convention, everyone is guaranteed the right to a private life and protection from discrimination, including that related to sexual orientation, as reflected in Article 8 of the ECHR. Normatively and institutionally, this ratification opened access for Russian citizens to seek rights protection through the European Court of Human Rights. However, as Raymond (2021) emphasizes, the existence of a norm as a formal rule cannot be equated with its effectiveness if it does not serve as a reference in domestic social practices and policies.

This gap between formal rules and social practices is evident in the development of Russian domestic regulations post-ratification. Rather than aligning national policies with the ECHR's principle of non-discrimination, the state maintained the old normative framework and reinforced it through new regulations. The 2013 implementation of Article 6.21 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which prohibits so-called "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations," demonstrates that ECHR norms are not used as a substantive reference in the national policy-making process. In Raymond's terms, the ECHR exists as a rule on the books, but fails to operate as a rule in practice.

The continuation of these restrictive policies demonstrates that ECHR norms do not replace existing moral and political logics, but rather coexist fragily within different domestic normative structures. Although Russia remains formally bound by European human rights standards, national administrative and regulatory practices actually limit the space for expression and visibility of LGBT groups. This situation reinforces Raymond's argument that when international norms are only adopted at a formal level, while social practices remain based on old norms, the resulting compliance is symbolic and easily reversible.

In the Russian context, the failure of ECHR norms to function as social practices cannot be separated from the dominant domestic normative framework, particularly Orthodox identity. Several studies have shown that Orthodoxy operates not merely as a religious belief, but as a source of moral legitimacy that shapes social boundaries regarding family, sexuality, and the role of the state as guardian of collective morality (Skladanowski, 2023). This framework provides a more powerful alternative normative reference in everyday practice than the universal human rights principles enshrined in the ECHR.

Consequently, human rights norms, particularly those related to the protection of non-heteronormative sexual orientation, are interpreted not as the fulfillment of individual rights, but rather as a threat to the established moral order. Lukina (2020) points out that in this context, human rights are not understood as principles standing outside of social values, but rather as always filtered through dominant moral boundaries. Thus, resistance to ECHR norms is not an explicit rejection of the law, but rather the failure of these norms to gain legitimacy as acceptable social practices.

Within the framework of the social practice of rule-making, the ECHR's failure to function as an internalized social practice ultimately explains Russia's decision to terminate its engagement with the ECHR regime in 2022. When European human rights norms never gained normative legitimacy in domestic practice and continued to conflict with dominant moral frameworks, particularly those rooted in Orthodox identity, continued formal commitment to the ECHR became increasingly irrelevant.

Under these conditions, ECHR ratification no longer served as a source of legitimacy, but was instead perceived as external pressure on the domestic normative order. Therefore, Russia's withdrawal from the ECHR was not a starting point for resistance, but rather a logical consequence of the norm's failure to transform from a formal legal obligation into a vibrant and accepted domestic social practice.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the overall discussion, it can be concluded that Russia's involvement in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) regime did not develop into substantive compliance from the outset, but rather stopped at the level of formal legal commitments. ECHR ratification in the post-Soviet era reflected Russia's strategy to gain international legitimacy and affirm its position as part of the European community, rather than an effort to transform human rights values into domestic social and political practices. This situation suggests that Russia's adherence to the ECHR was initially symbolic, not internalized, and merely functioned as a rule of thumb.

Over time, the reason why Russia's level of compliance with the ECHR has changed can be explained by the failure of European human rights norms to adapt to Russia's domestic normative framework. The legacy of a state structure that prioritizes stability, sovereignty, and collective morality over individual rights, reinforced by Orthodox identity and traditional values, has created resistance to the principles of non-discrimination and individual freedom, particularly regarding the protection of LGBT groups. Within the framework of the social practice of rule-making as proposed by Mark Raymond, the ECHR in Russia has failed to operate as a rule in practice, resulting in fragile compliance, easily renegotiated, and ultimately weakened as the inconsistency between international norms and domestic identities intensifies.

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