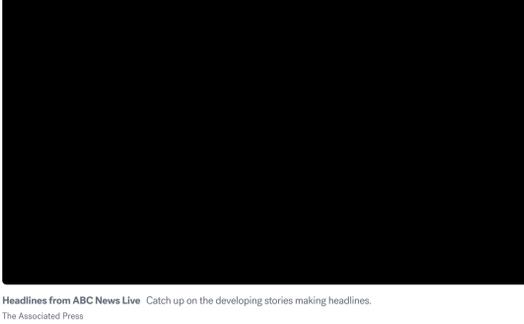


Weight loss plans starting as low as \$69 per mo.* **weight loss by hims**
 Get started today →

Gay hockey drama 'Heated Rivalry' a surprise hit in Russia despite anti-LGBTQ+ laws

The TV drama "Heated Rivalry" has become a global sensation, captivating audiences with its portrayal of a secret gay relationship between Canadian and Russian hockey players

By LOUISE DIXON Associated Press
 January 28, 2026, 9:59 AM



Headlines from ABC News Live Catch up on the developing stories making headlines.
 The Associated Press

LONDON -- If you haven't heard of gay ice hockey TV drama "Heated Rivalry" and its two lead stars Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie yet ... then get your skates on.

What started as a word-of-mouth hit in the U.S. and Canada in December 2025 has spread to become a global phenomenon. Its stars have rocketed from unknowns to cultural icons in the space of weeks, appearing on stage at the Golden Globes, sashaying down the Milan catwalks to, this week, carrying the torch for the Milan Cortina Winter Olympics.

Based on the 2019 novel by Rachel Reid, the story traces the decade-long secret relationship between Canadian Shane Hollander (Williams) and Russian Ilya Rozanov (Storrie), mixing slow-building yearning with explicit sexual scenes.

And as it launches across Europe, it's proving a surprise hit in Russia, even though homosexuality is illegal there and the show will never get an official release.

Journalist and author Mikhail Zygar was born in what was then the Soviet Union, like Rozanov, and spent his childhood as a closeted gay man in Russia. He said coming out was completely impossible and he thinks the show is inspiring, not just amongst the LGBTQ+ community, but all Russians, as "an attempt to normalize the discourse."

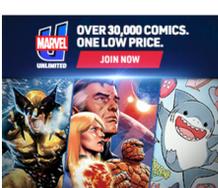
"It shows that it is OK. That people can fall in love and it's so beautiful. And the popularity of this TV show definitely may change some perception from the broader audience," he said.

Western sanctions on official streaming platforms mean it's hard for Russians to watch Western TV, but they find ways on illegal platforms and, despite the anti-gay laws that would potentially mean punishment for those who share the content, they are voting with their keyboards.

On the Russian streaming and film database platform Kinopoisk (similar to IMDb or Rotten Tomatoes in the U.S.) "Heated Rivalry" has an 8.6 rating, the highest TV show ranking of all time according to Russian viewers, overtaking shows like "Breaking Bad" and "Game of Thrones."

But official acceptance of shows like "Heated Rivalry" seems a long way off.

The LGBTQ+ community in Russia has been under legal and public pressure for over a decade, but especially since the Kremlin launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia's President Vladimir Putin has argued that the war is a proxy battle with the West, which he says aims to destroy Russia and its "traditional family values" by pushing for LGBTQ+ rights.



Any depiction of gay and transgender people that paints them in a positive or even neutral light is banned. Gender-affirming medical care and changing one's gender in official documents are prohibited. With the Supreme Court's ruling in November 2022, that outlawed what the government called "the international LGBT movement" as extremist, anyone involved with the LGBTQ+ community could be imprisoned for up to six years.

"It's really hard to believe in some kind of happy ending, as we see in the show, in Russia's reality today," Zygar says.

"Russia continues its brutal, aggressive war against Ukraine. There is no perspective of the end of this war. There is no perspective for a lot of LGBTQ+ people who live in Russia and a lot of people, a lot them have the only possibility to leave the country."

The head of the Sorok Sorokov center in Moscow, a conservative organization aligned with the Russian Orthodox Church, told The Associated Press that he was shocked by the gay sexual content of the show.

"I found out that these scenes are presented almost in every episode and I was horrified why and how this video ended up on our Russian (streaming) platforms," Georgy Soldatov said.

He said he had lodged a petition with the Prosecutor's General Office against those who posted the content, which he described as "the propaganda of untraditional sexual relationship," a classification that forces print, TV and movie censorship of LGBTQ+ storylines.

In one example, two Russian streaming services cut a transgender character from the 1990s drama series "Twin Peaks." In another, a streaming service cut several scenes from the drama series "The Sopranos" that depicted to a gay character. Instances of dialogue that has been redubbed to remove references to LGBTQ+ relations or people have been regularly reported by the Russian media.

Last year, Russian authorities launched a criminal probe against the managers of a Moscow publishing house on extremism charges over books depicting LGBTQ+ relations. They raided the homes of a number of staff and detained them. Most of detainees were released, but three people were put under house arrest in a case that reportedly sent shockwaves throughout the book industry.

In contrast, in the U.S., LGBTQ+ romance sales have surged. According to Brenna Conner, analyst for Circana (which tracks 85% of print retail sales in the US), "In the five weeks ending Jan. 10, 2026, LGBTQ+ romance sales surged more than 100% in unit sales compared to the same period the previous year, with 'Heated Rivalry' leading the growth."

Ultimately Zygar sees the popularity of "Heated Rivalry" in Russia as a sign of resistance and moral support for the LGBTQ+ community. He says its important that people watch it despite the obstacles.

"It shows us that they're trying to remain normal, they're trying to remain resistant to the attempt of Putin's regime to brainwash them. They are not brainwashed; they are not ready to agree with the propaganda and with official anti-LGBT mantras. They live their life, and they watch what they want to watch."

Associated Press writer Dasha Litvinova and producer Tanya Titova contributed to this report.

Related Topics

- LGBTQ
- Netflix
- Russia



Sponsored Content by Taboola

Sydney Sweeney faces criticism after Hollywood sign lingerie line promo [Discover](#)

Chandler: How Much Should New Windows Cost For a 2500 Sq Ft Home? [Learn More](#)

21 Dumbest Things Middle-Class Americans Waste Money On
 Sponsored / partners.wallemjump.com

Why Everyone Is Ditching TV Bills For This \$39 Gadget
 Sponsored / BetterLivingHacks

Who Charges The Least For Auto Insurance In Arizona? (Check Zip Code) [Learn More](#)

This Simple Hack That Keeps Rodents Out Of Your Engine Bay
 Sponsored / Vamoose

23 Must-Have Gadgets That Are Flying Off The Shelves This Month
 Sponsored / Tech Gadget Trend

They Seem Innocent: 3 Common Foods Neurologists Now Connect to 87% Of Dementia Cases
 Sponsored / Brain Trending Topics

Severe Ringing in Ears is Being Linked To a Common Food. Cut It Out Now
 Sponsored / Wellness Insight

Why Is This The Most Talked About Bottle Of 2026?
 Sponsored / Clygee [Learn More](#)

Popular Reads

- Minneapolis live updates: Trump says Mayor Frey is 'playing with fire'**
 1 hour ago
- Army vet detained by ICE for 8 hours says he wasn't allowed to call an attorney**
 Jan 23, 11:07 AM
- Minneapolis ICE shooting updates: Over 3,000 arrested in Minnesota, DHS says**
 Jan 18, 2:39 PM
- Winter storm updates: Dozens dead across US in wake of massive snowfall, deep freeze**
 Jan 27, 4:41 PM

ABC News Live



24/7 coverage of breaking news and live events

