

THE QUIETED QUEER:

RUSSIAN HETERONATIONALISM AND LGBTQ+ ERASURE

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ABSTRACT This paper seeks to explain the contemporary foundations for Russia's heteronational identity, as well as the prevalence of homophobia in Russian politics and society. Tracing the influence of Russian Christian Orthodoxy, the proliferation of social media and the internet, and comments by notable political and media figures. This paper posits that there is a path towards the inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities within a new Russian imagined community.

INTRODUCTION

Moscow, the Russian capital city, will not see a single gay pride demonstration until the year 2112 after the judiciary approved a 100-year ban on public LGBTQ+ events (Schaaf 2014). The Duma, or the Russian national legislative assembly, finalized the national ban on "homosexual propaganda" in June of 2013 following a string of homophobic attacks and statements by Russian political leaders (Schaaf 2014, 23). This patterned opposition to LGBTQ+ communities is deeply entrenched in the consciousness of the Russian citizenry, penetrating the social, cultural, and political identities of the nation. This paper seeks to answer questions regarding the evolution of LGBTQ+ rights and Russian nationalism, as well as track the likely trajectory for gay rights in the region.

State-sponsored Russian opposition to LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms bolsters a heteronationalist Russian identity that seeks to reproduce and condition the silencing of LGBTQ+ communities. This paper will examine the interplay between oppressive legislation, popular discourse, and nationalist reaction

within the struggle for Russian LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms. We explore the foundations for contemporary nationalist homophobia, the socio-political frameworks that reproduce a heteronationalist identity, and the lengths to which current advocates have ventured to secure increased LGBTQ+ rights in Russia. First, we explore the conditions that maintain and reproduce homophobia in Russian cultural, social, and political spheres, with emphasis on Christian Orthodoxy as a key catalyst for creating national homophobic discourse.

NATIONALIST FOUNDATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN HOMOPHOBIA

Challenges to LGBTQ+ rights are a part of the extended (and calculated) campaign by governments in both the former Soviet Union and its successor, the Russian Federation, to condition homophobia as a righteous ideal, indicative of the Russian national identity. Though 1993 saw the annulment of "article 121.1 of the criminal code, which criminalized sex between men in Soviet Russia," LGBTQ+ individuals are far from accepted as

components of the national community (Schaaf 2014, 24). Essig (2014) argues that homosexuality in Soviet Russia “was seen as a sign of foreign pollution, a temporary aberration—like a criminal or a disease,” that would disappear through the implementation of Soviet Socialism (39). By labelling LGBTQ+ individuals as subversive and deviant, the Soviet Union countered the more favourable American attitudes towards homosexuality in the mid-to-late twentieth century. This framed the ‘West’ as weak or effeminate in the eyes of many Soviet people, something that could be traced to the “late-Soviet ‘crisis of masculinity’” (Healey 2017, 138; Sleptcov 2017).

Essig (2014) devotes significant attention to the historical development of LGBTQ+ research and evolving social attitudes, to contrast the stunted perceptions of LGBTQ+ peoples possessed by much of Russia. Paraphrasing Foucault, Essig (2014) posits that “the homosexual was born in the West, but she or he was stillborn in Russia” (Essig 2014, 42). In that, the Russian understanding of LGBTQ+ peoples is not fully formed—replaced instead by a curated national message intended to portray the national community as stoic, masculine, and in support of ‘traditional family values.’ Part of the push towards upholding ‘traditional family values’ stemmed from the fact that following the war, it was argued that there were “no credible positive models of masculinity available to late Soviet man” (Healey 2017, 138). The lack of LGBTQ+ role models fostered the hyper-masculine, alpha-male leader to take control and steer Russia back towards a national masculine identity.

On June 26, 2013, Article 6.21 was signed into law by President Vladimir Putin, which prohibits distributing information to minors aimed at cultivating nontraditional sexual attitudes or

spark interest in “nontraditional sexual relations” (Essig 2014, 43). The specification of minors in said article serves to reiterate the Russian ideology that exposure to sexual development and liberation at a young age indoctrinates Russia's youth into homosexuality (Healey 2017, 136). Essig (2014) posits that the vague use of “nontraditional sexual relations” allows for continued restriction of evolving LGBTQ+ identities and their incorporated sexual components (44). Russia's policy approach principally rejects Western liberal values and sustained affronts to LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms through targeted legislation to remove LGBTQ+ voices from the Russian national identity. Any traction gained by liberals attempting to fight against Russia's heteronationalism was quickly squandered by rampant amounts of homophobia and misogyny (Healey 2017, 133). In the second half of this section, we explore some catalysts for Russia's homophobia maintenance.

CATALYSTS FOR HOMOPHOBIA MAINTENANCE IN THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL DISCOURSE

Briefly examining the post-Soviet Russian national identity, one observes a “mass public interest in [Christian] Orthodoxy,” linking it to the Russian conservative tradition (Mitrofanova, 2015, 106). This adherence to conservative, religious traditions primes Russian people to fear and admonish LGBTQ+ communities for their perceived sinful behaviour. Mitrofanova (2015) suggests that preserving Orthodoxy is a vital component of modern Russian society, with the affirmation of one's Orthodoxy countering purported homophobic propaganda (Mitrofanova, 2015, 126). In that, the Christian Orthodox ethic is a key component of the Russian national identity, serving as a vessel to target and reprimand LGBTQ+ individuals. This influences the national dialogue surrounding appropriate and

subversive sexual relations, which therein dictates the Russian identity as a unified, heterosexual state. This is an identity under interrogation by LGBTQ+ activists in the region, which will be examined in the concluding section of this paper.

Aside from Christian Orthodoxy as a catalyst for homophobia's prevalence, the internet has proved to be a double-edged sword in terms of the acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities and communities. While the internet has undoubtedly been a tool to mobilize and educate individuals to accept LGBTQ+ identities and practices, Jones (2019) argues that "propaganda memes" target people aged 18+...to continue to dominate the 'progressive' groups," to diminish calls for LGBTQ+ rights in the region (9-10). These 'memes'—which are often images with captions or text that offer humorous, sometimes incendiary, social commentary—have been spread online since the turn of the century. As a result, anti-gay chatrooms and message forums have proliferated across the region, self-described as "vigilante groups and individuals against LGBT people," leading to increased attacks on LGBTQ+ rights activists, justifying their harassment and intimidating "LGBT teachers and other school or college staff to get them fired from their jobs" (Bochenek and Knight 2018). Social media platforms in Russia, like *Vkontakte*, have amplified LGBTQ+ opposition and are often used to 'out' individuals as gay (Bochenek and Knight 2018). Increasing internet access following the dissolution of the USSR, and the introduction of social media in the past two decades, has undoubtedly set foundations for anti-LGBTQ+ national discourses. Conversely, social media plays a major role in advancing gay rights in Russia—a trajectory we explore at the end of this paper.

Condemning LGBTQ+ people and their perceived deviance within Russian society is a purely nationalist campaign, calculated to condition national conformity, and endeavours to homogenize the Russian state. This undertaking builds upon the anti-gay conditions established during the tenure of the Soviet Union, which were only bolstered following its dissolution in 1991. This is accomplished through pronounced Orthodox Christianity in the region, amplified through the proliferation of anti-gay chatrooms, and social media 'memes,' that have arisen since the turn of the century. These foundations for contemporary homophobia in Russia influence the state's national identity, cementing a unified, heteronationalist depiction on the international stage.

NATIONALIST FRAMEWORKS CONDITION HOMOPHOBIA AND HETERONATIONALIST IDENTITY

This section analyzes the political frameworks that restrict LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms and simultaneously condition national conformity in contemporary Russia. Further, a focus on the repressive-state apparatuses that mandate and enforce artificial identities within LGBTQ+ communities will be investigated. We argue that homophobia is an ingrained component of the Russian national identity, as prescribed through restrictive legislation and the judicial disinterest in charging perpetrators of LGBTQ+ hate crimes. This section relies on Anderson's (2006) notion of 'imagined communities' to illustrate how such a heteronationalist identity has been ingrained in Russian national discourse.

THE RUSSIAN HETERONATIONAL IMAGINED COMMUNITY

Anderson (2006) suggests that nations are "imagined political communit[ies]—and imagined as both inherently limited and

sovereign,” formed through communication and discourse (6). In that, citizens recognize an individual as belonging to their national community when they affirm their adoption of the national dialogue, espousing the ideology of the state. Sleptcov (2017) extends this notion, placing Anderson’s (2006) work in discussion with the contributions of Dryzek (2006), arguing that members of a nation are “mobilized into existence through symbols invoked by political leadership” (Dryzek 2006, 487). The practice of placing homosexual identities in opposition to the heteronormative, traditional ideals of the state consistently creates a national identity rooted in homophobia. The sentiments decreed through political speeches, enacted legislation, and media interpretations of LGBTQ+ struggles, are all symbols of homophobia’s agency within the formation of a Russian heteronationalist identity. Moreover, the insistence of these symbols in political, social, and cultural spheres solidifies this case as an example of Anderson’s (2006) imagined community.

LAW AND ORDER: THEREPRESSIVE POLITICAL CLIMATE THAT CONDITIONS NATIONALIST HOMOPHOBIA

Weiss and Bosia (2013) define political homophobia as “the overt deployment of homophobia in political rhetoric and policy,” through the scapegoating of LGBTQ+ communities “that drives [the] processes of state-building” (14). Political leaders and movements in Russia since 2000 have solidified an anti-gay approach to policy building, which informs contemporary Russian legislation. Expanding the Soviet rhetoric of homosexuality as ‘weak’ and ‘subversive,’ President Putin emphasized Russian masculinity and patriotic imagery in the early 2000s, deploying political homophobia as “part of a range of policies aimed at recreating a

sense of national identity that is not based on western liberal values” (Sleptcov 2017). Further, Putin’s “ideology of conservative heteronationalism” made national unification on the understanding of “nontraditional (non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative) sexual relationships [as] socially inferior” requisite for securing the Russian state and the security of its people (Sleptcov 2017, 149). This ideology informs Putin’s continued efforts to extend exclusionary policies for LGBTQ+ Russians who purportedly threaten the heteronational state identity.

Non-political figures with national prominence further sustain this heteronational identity. During a debate, Dmitri Kiselev—who was “handpicked by Vladimir Putin to run the state’s media empire”—stated that it was not enough to merely fine “gays for homosexual propaganda, [...] they should be banned from donating blood, sperm [or] their hearts, in case of automobile accident[s], and should be buried in the ground or burned as unsuitable for the continuation of life” (Essig 2014, 39-40). These sentiments, as vile and overtly discriminatory as they are, permeate Russia’s national consciousness, contributing to the state-sponsored anti-gay mission.

Specific legislation, like the 2013 “For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values (commonly called the ‘anti-gay’ law),” diminishes LGBTQ+ groups’ ability to advocate for their protection and rights (Sleptcov 2017, 151). Instead, political figures, like Putin or Kiselev, set precedent for the mistreatment of LGBTQ+ peoples across Russian society through this policy building. LGBTQ+ murder, violence, and intimidation rates have risen over the past decade, with organized anti-gay groups

attacking those they perceive to be LGBTQ+ in public spaces (Buyantueva 2018).

These frameworks evidence entrenched Russian heteronationalism in governance and legislation, however, do not comprise an exhaustive compilation of anti-gay political endeavours. Buyantueva (2018) posits that “conservative and nationalist rhetoric [has become] more and more prominent in Russian political and social life” (469-470). The social component she speaks of will be analyzed in the subsequent section.

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FORCES THAT CONDITION A HETERONATIONALIST IDENTITY

The prevalence and insistence of Orthodoxy in Russia is the foundation for “statists” and ‘patriot[ic]’ national rhetoric—encouraging and rewarding the admonishment of homosexuality in Russia—was explored earlier in this paper (Mitrofanova 2015, 107). The importance of this religious component to prescribing national identity, however, cannot be understated. Religion and faith possess great agency in dictating how society ought to be structured. A key component of that structuring is the cultivated national image. Orthodox teachings, and homophobic scripture interpretation, undoubtedly influence Russia’s national image, permeating across the social lives of its polity.

In 1994, the year immediately after the decriminalization of homosexuality, a mere 29% of the population believed that homosexual relationships should be accepted (Buyantueva 2018). Though this figure is 26 years old, Buyantueva (2018) notes that “public attitudes have remained relatively constant without becoming more accepting” (464). For example, the international media framing of Dmitry Chizhevsky, after suffering a homophobic attack at an LGBTIQ+ community

gathering where a rubber bullet took his eye, became evidence against contemporary Russian homophobia though not replicated by domestic media outlets. (Wiedlack 2017). Wiedlack (2017) states that “Chizhevsky epitomizes the vulnerability of LGBTQ+’ bodies violated by the homophobic Russian society and the Russian state,” noting that media coverage of his frail demeanour and hushed voice contributed to Chizhevsky’s perceived vulnerability (246). The mass depiction of violence towards LGBTQ+ communities does not inspire the urge to ‘come out’ for many members. Instead, the visual depictions and written articles in national media serve only as a warning to many people: this too could be you.

These social and cultural forces condition a heteronationalist identity that conforms to standards espoused by Orthodox Christianity, as well as media depictions of bleak life for LGBTQ+ individuals. In conjunction, the political, social, and cultural factors that reproduce and condition heteronationalism as the Russian identity suggest that heteronormativity has become an imagined community of its own in Russia.

TRAJECTORIES FOR LGBTQ+ RIGHTS WITHIN THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

There is evidence that conditions for LGBTQ+ individuals may improve in Russia, where a more inclusive national identity could make space for LGBTQ+ identities within the imagined community. This section will briefly track political homophobia’s trajectory in Russia, as well as explore some positive advances to overturn LGBTQ+ prejudice in the region. In an interview by Feyh (2014), Igor Iasine—an openly gay Russian activist—argues that efforts to overturn restrictive legislation and negative opinions concerning LGBTQ+ communities must be “directed at the widest

possible public, ordinary people, especially young people” to change popular discourses (107). In that, Iasine suggests that the re-education of the masses is a vital step in restructuring Russia’s national identity to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ communities. We suggest that this tool must be coupled with comprehensive legislative reform that seeks to affirm and entrench LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms, validating their existence, and encouraging the expression of their authentic identities. This is an argument shared by Human Rights Watch, as they urge the repeal of the “‘gay propaganda’ law, Federal No. 135-FZ, which bans the distribution of information about LGBT people’s lives to minors,” allowing for earlier access to LGBTQ+ educational materials to better address the gender and sexual identities of developing Russian youth (Bochenek and Knight 2018).

Social media spread and increased internet access across Russia increases the ability for LGBTQ+ people to connect with similarly oppressed individuals, seek out psychological or other community support, and access educational and informative materials to assist in their day-to-day lives. Jones (2019) posits that ‘membership calls’ rooted in social media posts and ‘memes’ serve to “emphasize LGBT community-centered visibility and rights-based equality” (11). Further, international exposure through massive events—like the 2016 Sochi Winter Olympics—is “an excellent opportunity to shine [a] light on the LGBT situation” in Russia, offering other nations and transnational activist groups the ability to penetrate the social and cultural adherence to a Russian heteronationalist identity (Schaaf 2014, 27).

We argue that these examples, coupled with the recent surge in LGBTQ+ protests across the region, suggest a trajectory towards a more inclusive Russian national identity. Protests

that target oppressive legislation, urge President Putin to “issue a public statement condemning the use of hate speech toward LGBT people,” and demand the introduction of legislation to “protect the rights of all LGBT people,” strengthen the possibility of this trajectory (Bochenek and Knight 2018). There is space to be made, within the Russian national imagined community, for LGBTQ+ voices and identities—progress is underway, though far from complete.

IN SUM

This paper has argued that state-sponsored Russian opposition to LGBTQ+ rights and freedoms has served to bolster a heteronationalist Russian identity that seeks to reproduce and condition the silencing of LGBTQ+ communities. This heteronational identity is the result of the intentional framing of Russia as antithetical to Western liberal values, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. These homophobic sentiments are often amplified through repressive political climates, the spread of social media chatrooms, and incendiary comments by notable Russian figures that contribute to the institutionalization of Russian homophobia. Orthodox influence and domestic media framing necessitate LGBTQ+ Russians’ staying ‘in the closet.’

There is hope, we argue, for LGBTQ+ rights within Russian political and social venues. The growing activist movement towards challenging homophobic legislation and popular discourses suggests a trajectory towards LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the Russian national identity. LGBTQ+ activists understand current legal and social frameworks that denigrate LGBTQ+ communities as outdated and dangerous. Massive activist movements must be undertaken to free LGBTQ+ expression, entrench legal protections, and

secure the future of the quieted queer in Russia.

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