

With the end of Soviet persecutions in 1991, LGBTQ+ communities have experienced a period of development even though post-Soviet societies have only partially shown greater tolerance toward sexual and gender minorities. The transnational interaction between Western activism and post-Soviet communities has led to the emergence of new feelings of gender, sexual, and national belonging. This volume presents research by experts in queer studies who study how the struggle for sexual and gender minority rights has intersected with the construction of political, social, and cultural belongings over the past three decades.

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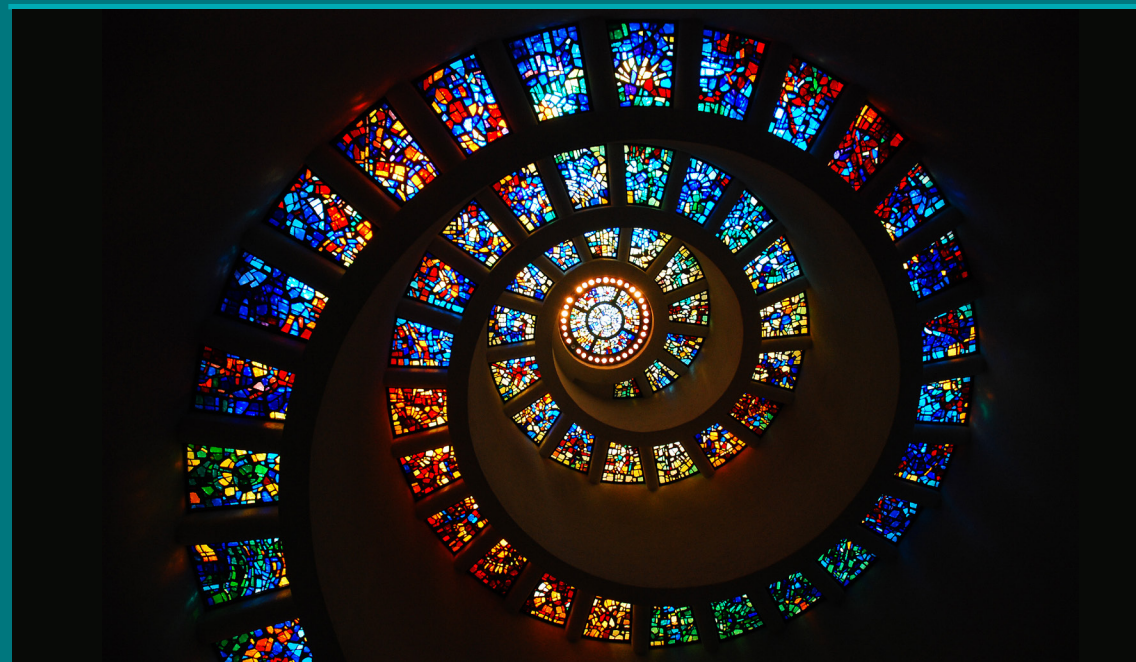
Queer Transnationalities · a cura di S.A. Bellezza e E. Dundovich

GENERE, SOGGETTIVITÀ, DIRITTI · 9

# QUEER TRANSNATIONALITIES

*Towards a History of LGBTQ+  
Rights in the Post-Soviet Space*

a cura di Simone A. Bellezza e Elena Dundovich



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**QUEER TRANSNATIONALITIES:  
TOWARDS A HISTORY OF LGBTQ+  
RIGHTS IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE**





# Preface: on the Political Significance of Queer Studies

ELENA DUNDOVICH, SIMONE A. BELLEZZA

On 24 February 2022 the troops of the Russian Federation started the invasion of Ukraine following an order of the Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the following days, as well as before the war broke out, Putin's historical thinking has been thoroughly analyzed by historians, political scientists, and other experts. Just a couple of weeks later, on 9 March 2022, Moscow patriarch Kirill blamed the war on Ukraine and spotted in the Western "gay lobbies" with their pride parades one of the reasons for Ukrainian degeneration that the war was meant to fight against. There were no more doubts that the conflict against the new political course in Kyiv was part of a greater attack on human rights.

During 2021 Memorial Italia, the Italian "section" of famous Russian and International Memorial, organized a series of roundtables focused on critical issues of the contemporary post-Soviet environment: one was dedicated to the Russo-Ukrainian war and one to LGBTQ+ activism in the area. After the second one, in June 2021, we felt that the significance of the queer question in the post-Soviet space needed further investigation and decided to put together a volume dedicated to a topic that the Western/Italian public opinion rarely addressed. One of the characteristics that impressed us the most was the transnational component of LGBTQ+

activism in every almost initiative we discussed, from the cultural ones to those dedicated to the defense of specific individuals. We had no hesitation in choosing this perspective to read such a multi-faceted phenomenon.

After having launched a call for papers, we were positively surprised by the quantity and quality of the proposals we received, but soon discovered that working on this book would cost more efforts and concern than we anticipated. Our Russian colleagues working in queer studies often had to emigrate from Russia in search of more welcoming countries and research institutions. Those who did not flee were forced to work in secrecy and to publish their work with pseudonyms. The war caught us in the middle of the writing process and could only add more reasons to worry: as some of the contributions to this volume described the strategies and the transnational networks that allowed LGBTQ+ activism to survive despite the persecution by the Russian government, we decided – in agreement with the authors – not to publish those papers that could endanger the few remaining channels of communication and support from outside the Russian Federation.

Despite these difficulties this volume aims to be a contribution to the understanding of queer identities and to the study of the struggle for their rights in the post-Soviet area. To each of these two goals is dedicated one section of the book: in the first part, entitled *Making Sense of Queerness in a Transnational Context*, we start off with Luc Beaudoin illustrating the origins and development of the persecution of homosexuality in Russia. The very original contribution by Mariya Levitanus analyzes the situation of queer people in Kazakhstan before and after the fall of the Soviet Union, while Martina Napolitano and Sandra Joy Russell describe the discourses on homosexuality in the construction of national identities respectively in Russian and Ukrainian literatures. Jill Martiniuk illus-

trates a singular cultural initiative in the Russian environment, that of Victoria Lomasko's comics as queer art.

The second section addresses queer activism as a field of interaction between "East" and "West": Laura Luciani gives a general assessment of this confrontation following the specific case of Georgia. Eugenia Benigni describes the international cooperation in the field of women's and LGBTQ+ rights in Ukraine. Yana Kirey-Sitnikova's essay gives a fundamental contribution to the history of trans activism in Russia and Masha Beketova takes the issue of national, sexual, and gender identity in post-Soviet diasporas in Germany. Finally, Simone Bellezza provides an introduction to the volume through a still provisional historiographic account of post-Soviet queer studies.

As emerges from the many elements of continuity with already established strands of research, as well as from the many new features compared to past scholarship, this book is not conceived as an end point of research but as a further impetus for discussion in a field that has seen a tremendous growth in new publications and readership over the past five years. In 2001 Dan Healey pointed out in his famous *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* that queer studies are not only the specific research dedicated to what clearly remains a minority of the population, but they also allow us to uncover the general articulation of the construction of gender and sexuality and elucidate how these two interact with political power by influencing the sense of belonging and other types of cultural, social, and political loyalties. We therefore hope that this volume will contribute to the genuine understanding of the dynamics that have led to the current ongoing conflict despite the many attempts of the propaganda to present a one-sided unproblematic fresco.



# A Transnational Community? Queer Studies in the Post-Soviet Space

SIMONE A. BELLEZZA

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, scholars in the field of Soviet studies finally became able to conduct their research freely and with an abundance of sources. For historians, the end of the Communist regime meant the opening of archives that had been off-limits for decades: the number of new documents available for analysis was so high that this turning point has been called an «archival revolution»<sup>1</sup>. The *perestroika* and early post-Soviet years also marked the opening of research topics that had been kept under strict control or even prohibited, such as gender and sexuality studies. Recent years have seen a proliferation of publications devoted to these issues, especially in queer studies and associated with a general reflection on the role played by this region in relation to the rest of the world. It will therefore be worthwhile to briefly review the birth and evolution of queer studies in the Soviet and post-Soviet space, also to place the present volume within a constantly and impetuously growing literature.

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical assessment of the aptness of this expression, see the special session edited by Kragh M., Hedlund S. in *The Russian Review*, July 2015, 74, in particular Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History*, 377-400.

## Gender and sexuality between East and West (1980-2001)

The Soviet regime had rejected the idea of a division between the public and private spheres and had therefore also subjected the sphere of affections, family and sexuality, to the dictates of socialist ideology. Men and women were assigned specific roles in the reproduction and upbringing of children, while homosexual relationships, after a brief decriminalization in the 1920s, were condemned as a legacy of the depravity of bourgeois rule or as a remnant of still non-fully developed civilizations, as in Central Asia<sup>2</sup>. Soviet scholars devoted none or little attention to the questions of sexuality, sexual differentiation or gender. The ever-widening liberalization that began in the second half of the 1980s was thus a watershed for both local and Western scholars, who were finally able to investigate previously forbidden topics<sup>3</sup>.

In the West, the precursor of this type of study was the literary scholar Simon Karlinsky, who first addressed the theme of homoeroticism and homosexuality in Russian literature (for example in Gogol) and who published some essays that for a long time remained the only writings available on this topic<sup>4</sup>. These first attempts in the field of literary criticism were followed by Vladimir Kozlovsky's analysis of Russian gay slang, which, although published in the USA, was only published in Russian<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Figs O., *The Whisperers. Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, London, Allen Lane, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See the account given in Attwood L., *The New Soviet Man and Woman. Sex Role Socialization in the USSR*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Karlinsky S., *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard UP, 1976; *Id.*, *Death and Resurrection of Mikhail Kuzmin*, in *Slavic Review*, January 1979, 38, 1, 92-96.

<sup>5</sup> Kozlovsky V., *Argo russkoi gomoseksual'noi subkul'tury*, Benson, Chalidze Publications, 1986.

In the Soviet scholarly context, a genuine exception was the work of the Soviet sexologist Igor Kon: historian by training, Kon has subsequently distinguished himself for his interdisciplinarity with a research practice that united history, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology without setting disciplinary limits. In addition to a myriad of other interests such as the history of sociology, Kon began to take an interest in the sphere of sexuality since the 1960s, so much so that he was considered the founder of Soviet sexology even in the medical field. He then became increasingly interested in the issue of homosexuality, to which he devoted some of his most interesting works, that already came out in English and in collaboration with Western scholars<sup>6</sup>. Although not immune to errors and generalizations, Kon's studies on sexuality and homosexuality laid the groundwork for future developments in the discipline: from the history of the three sexual revolutions (1905, 1920s, 1990s) to the focus on the repression of sodomy in the Orthodox Church (in his opinion persecuted but not well-defined) and the harsh critique of Soviet sexophobia, that allegedly imposed a «sexless sexism» that Russia seemed unable to rid itself of even after the end of the Soviet dictatorship<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> On Kon's, see his autobiography *80 let odinochestva*, Moskva, Vremia, 2008; Attwood L., *The New Soviet Man and Woman*, 86-99; Baer B.J., *Igor Kon: The Making of a Russian Sexologist*, in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2005, 49, 2, 157-163.

<sup>7</sup> Kon I.S., *Polovaia moral' v svete sotsiologii*, in *Sovetskaia sotsiologiia*, 1966, 12, 64-77; *Sex and Russian Society*, eds. Kon I. and Riordan J., Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 1993; Kon I., *The Sexual Revolution in Russia. From the Age of the Czars to Today*, New York, The Free Press, 1995; Kon's first work completely dedicated to homosexuality was however in Russian: *Lunnyi svet na zare. Liki i maski odnopoloi liubvi*, Moskva, AST, 1998. It is worth remembering that Kon's first books in English were the result of the collaboration with (and translated by) the British historian James Riordan, who in the 1960s was a vowed Communist and later a historian of Soviet sport and education.



The excellent reception given to Kon in the West also depended on the fact that two major books on the history of sexuality, partially undertaken with materials outside Soviet political control, had just recently come out. The first was Eve Levin's research on sexuality among the Orthodox Slavs in the early modern period: in her seminal study, Levin studied the construction of sexual morality as the interplay between the Orthodox Church and society (mainly the *élite*), showing the origins of sexophobia, which included a harsh repression of homosexuality, and the differences with the West, including the absence of romantic love, even within marriage<sup>8</sup>. The second research was Laura Engelstein's book devoted to sexual morals and behaviors in late tsarist Russia, which also defined 1905-1906 as a sexual revolution: indeed, Engelstein showed how the Russian intelligentsia's growing sense of anxiety about the nation's sexual morality was inextricably linked as much to the particular evolution of Russian liberalism as to the essentially unsuccessful course of its political instances. Engelstein showed how also in Russia the medical and legal experts managed to establish themselves as the more authoritative voices in this process over the religious authorities: differently from the West, the Russian elites looked benevolently upon the rural people, who were considered naturally virtuous, and interpreted the city environment with its modernity as the origin of sexual degeneration, which included prostitution and homosexuality<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Levin E., *Sex and Society in the world of Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Engelstein L., *The Keys to Happiness. Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1993; Engelstein thoroughly analyzed the work of homosexual authors such as Mikhail Kuzmin, Lidiia Zinov'eva-Annibal, and Evdokiia Nagrodskaia.

These works laid the foundations for future research on Soviet and post-Soviet sexuality in the following years, outside of which it would have been impossible to conceive of the birth of homosexual or queer studies. In this field, the most important contribution was perhaps that of Eric Naiman, who in 1997 dedicated an entire monograph to the sexual revolution of the 1920s and to the creation of a communist sexual morality in the USSR: the political anxiety created by the NEP, which was interpreted as a retreat from socialist principles, joined the rhetoric of revolutionary purity, creating a public discourse on sexual morality essentially dominated by the concern to safeguard the “collective body”. In this sexophobic rhetoric, traditional Russian misogyny made a comeback and interpreted the movement for women’s emancipation as a threat of “androgyny”: sexism and homophobia thus became one of the pillars of Soviet morality<sup>10</sup>. Naiman’s interpretation was criticized for its tendency to read the discourse on sexuality from a top-down perspective and without underlining that the new Soviet norms were instead the result of a negotiation between political power and the populace, represented by the rank-and-file of the Communist Party, who were very interested in redefining sexual behavior and not just passive subjects<sup>11</sup>. This debate eventually helped set the stage for two studies that can be considered the acme but also the end of the formative period of queer studies in the Soviet and post-Soviet space.

The first real example of academic queer studies was written by an American sociologist, Laurie Essig, and not surprisingly was entitled *Queer in Russia*: the use of the term “queer”, which had been

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<sup>10</sup> Naiman E., *Sex in Public. The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1997, in particular 33-45.

<sup>11</sup> Carleton G., *Writing-Reading the Sexual Revolution in the Early Soviet Union*, in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, October 1997, 8, 2, 229-255.

institutionalized less than a decade earlier by the famous conference organized by Teresa De Laurentis<sup>12</sup>, corresponded precisely to the need not to impose on Russian sexual minorities a “homosexual identity” as was being developed in the West and especially in the USA. This sociological and ethnological research was based on an important field-work carried out in Moscow and St. Petersburg and began with the description of the repression of homosexuality in the Soviet Union, establishing a characteristic still considered valid today: while male homosexuality was punished with internment in forced labor camps, women found guilty of lesbian relationships were usually subjected to a no lesser grueling cycle of psychological and psychiatric therapies. Beginning with the second section of the book, Essig intentionally focuses not on the private lives of queer subjects, but on public manifestations of queerness, on the connection of the question of visibility and on their political significance: she thus describes the reality of the queer minority in Russia in the 1990s, in which personages who became famous like the activist and writer Masha Gessen were formed. The third part of the book exploits the heuristic potential of another sociological concept of a fairly new formulation at the time, namely that of intersectionality<sup>13</sup>: it is by combining the analysis of gender belonging with the national one that Essig hypothesizes the existence of a detached queer culture, different from the Western one, with original modes of expression and political objectives. She acknowledged, howev-

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<sup>12</sup> The minutes of the conference were published the following year, see *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, ed. De Laurentis T., special issue of *Differences*, Summer 1991, 3, 2.

<sup>13</sup> For an assessment of the potentiality of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s systemization of intersectionality see Harnois C.E., *Jeopardy, Consciousness, and Multiple Discrimination: Intersecting Inequalities in Contemporary Western Europe*, in *Sociological Forum*, December 2015, 30, 4, 971-994.

er, that there was a part of the community that already referred to models apparently imported from the West, such as the gay pride parade or the concept of the “closet”<sup>14</sup>.

This largely theoretical and sociological study was joined in less than two years by the first major historical research devoted to homosexuality (and its repression) in the Soviet Union by Oxford University historian Dan Healey. This book can by all reason be considered a milestone in this field: Healey started from the refutation of Simon Karlinsky’s thesis that the re-penalization of homosexuality in the USSR depended on the essentially totalitarian nature of the Bolshevik regime. Indeed, this research reconstructed not only the debate on homosexuality within Soviet communism itself, but also the subculture of sexual minorities in late tsarist Russia and the USSR, showing how complex and multifaceted the debate on sexuality actually was. Healey emphasized how the debate on homosexuality regarded the overall construction of masculinity and gender roles in the Soviet Union and thus defined as his object of study what he calls «sexual and gender dissent», in an attempt not to define queer subjects aprioristically and to highlight how the exception from norms could relate to both sexual practices and gender identification. Healey showed that the condemnation of same-sex relations was determined within the frame of a «tripartite geography»: a pure and chaste Russian people ended up surrounded by a neurasthenic and degenerate West and a backward and traditionally pederast East. Communism considered homosexuality as an evil of the past (like in the campaign against pederasty in the Orthodox Church), but it repressed minorities who had grown up

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<sup>14</sup> Essig L., *Queer in Russia. A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other*, Durham-London, Duke UP, 1999.

in the modernity of Soviet city culture and which Stalinism was not willing to tolerate<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, at the beginning of the new millennium, queer studies in the Soviet and post-Soviet space area seemed to have laid a solid foundation for future development: the topic of sexual and gender minorities in this region had been approached without superimposing a Westernizing reading and had enjoyed a great availability of materials that had helped to highlight its heuristic potential for all the humanities and social sciences.

### **A growth crisis? (2001-2011)**

Instead, the following decade saw a slowdown in the development of queer studies, probably due to a summation of factors partly internal to the academic environment and partly originating from the specific social and political development of the post-Soviet space. At the beginning of this period, some important volumes presenting research carried out in the past were still published, such as a collective volume on masculinity in Russia or an important sociological investigation by Daniel Schulster, which gave an overview of homosexual minorities shortly before the collapse of the USSR<sup>16</sup>. However, this period should have seen the development of the discipline in the post-Soviet countries themselves, but they still did not provide the necessary political and social conditions for the development of certain fields of study: as noted by many an

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<sup>15</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia. The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, eds. Evans Clemens B., Friedman R., and Healey D., Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002; Schulster D.P., *Gay Life in the Former USSR. Fraternity without Community*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

observer, fields of inquiry that were more innovative with respect to the Soviet tradition rarely found a way to take root in post-Soviet academies and universities and were funded from abroad through international support programs. Queer studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies more generally, have thus only been partially integrated within the context of scholarly research, and a few independent centers, such as the Moscow Center for Gender Studies or the Centre for Independent Social Research of St. Petersburg, have taken on the task of providing all-round training for researchers (including special summer schools) and organizing organic research groups<sup>17</sup>.

One of the most successful initiatives seems to be the Kharkov Center for Gender Studies at the V.N. Karzin Kharkiv National University, founded in 1994: in addition to having organized a good summer school for a decade, the Center has conducted and supervised research in gender and feminist studies, including the queer and especially the transgender issue. Since 1998, the Center has also published an online journal in Russian, *Gendernye Issledovaniia* (Gender Studies), with somewhat irregular cadence, but which has become an important reference point for the discipline in the post-Soviet area<sup>18</sup>.

At a glance, gender studies and especially queer studies therefore seemed able to take root and expand and gave rise to several scientific meetings and publications. However, by analyzing in detail what was produced it might be noted that this kind of research was almost completely isolated both from the rest of the scientific community and from the social and political debates of post-Sovi-

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<sup>17</sup> Garstenaue T., *Gendernye i kvir-issledovaniia v Rossii*, in *Sotsiologiya vlasti*, 2018, 30, 1, 161-174.

<sup>18</sup> <http://kegs.net.ua/journal-gs.html> (accessed: 24.06.2022).

et societies. The published studies often had a very local character, dedicated to different themes and with very different or weak theoretical approaches<sup>19</sup>. The growing difficulties in the development of research were due to a persistent and increasingly explicit hostility of Russian society against not only queer subjects but the concept of gender itself, even within the research community<sup>20</sup>.

In this same decade, Western research also seemed to face a moment of pause or even crisis: after past successes there was a need to reorganize ideas around new questions. Western scholars also needed to devote themselves to training a new generation of researchers who would be able to continue their work so far. It thus seemed that, unlike Healey's assertions, queer issues played a less important role in defining the politics of gender and sexuality, as for example in Gregory Carleton's study, that devoted only brief mentions to homosexuality and its condemnation in the Soviet era<sup>21</sup>. The uncertain situation not only of queer studies but also of feminist demands, or even of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community in the post-Soviet space, however, did not take long to come to the forefront of scholarly attention: Brian James Baer, in his research on post-Soviet homosexuality, explicitly posed the problem of the visibility of sexual and gender minorities and its cultural and political significance<sup>22</sup>. Inspired also by this first book, a specific

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<sup>19</sup> Nartova N., 'Russian Love,' or What of Lesbian Studies in Russia?, in *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 2007, 11, 3-4, 313-320.

<sup>20</sup> Temkina A., Zdravomyslova E., *Gender Studies in Post-Soviet Society: Western Frames and Cultural Differences*, in *Studies in East European Thought*, March 2003, 55, 1, 51-61.

<sup>21</sup> Carleton G., *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Baer B.J., *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, New York, Palgrave, 2009.

strand of research developed, which a few years later was addressed in a comparative perspective in all of Central and Eastern Europe<sup>23</sup>.

### **Repression, Resistance, and Counter-Attack (2012-2022)**

The return of Vladimir Putin to the post of President of the Russian Federation can be considered a turning point for several reasons: the new political course was increasingly based on the construction of an opposition between Russia and the West which also included the question of gender and sexuality. Putin's Russia aspired to stand up as a defender of traditional values against a West perceived as degenerate: public space was forcibly «re-masculinized» in what has rightly been called a «biopolitical turn»<sup>24</sup>. The cornerstones of this new policy were the Russian “foreign agent” (2012, reinforced in 2014) and “gay propaganda” (2013) laws: these measures on one hand forbade mention of homosexuality or the like in public and condemned any institution or association receiving funding from abroad as a *de facto* traitor. This legislation has caused the death of independent research centers and the redescend of gender and queer studies into a limbo of illegality. Moreover, a part of the Russian academy has not been slow to come up with a

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<sup>23</sup> *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*, eds. Fejes N. and Balogh A.P., Bristol-Chicago, Intellect, 2013; Kondrakov A., *Resisting the Silence: The Use of Tolerance and Equality Arguments by Gay and Lesbian Activist Group in Russia*, in *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*, December 2013, 28, 3, 403-424.

<sup>24</sup> Riabov O., Riabova T., *The Remasculinization of Russia? Gender, Nationalism, and the Legitimation of Power under Vladimir Putin*, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, March-April 2014, 61, 2, 23-35; Id., *The Decline of Gayropa? How Russia Intends to Save the World*, in *Eurozine*, 5 February 2014, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-decline-of-gayropa/> (accessed: 24.06.2022); Stella F., Nartova N., *Sexual Citizenship, Nationalism and Biopolitics in Putin's Russia*, in *Sexuality, Citizenship and Belonging. Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives*, eds. Stella F., Taylor Y., Reynolds T., Rogers A., New York, Routledge, 2016, 17-36.



very primitive refutation of the validity of the concepts of gender and queer, showing that it cannot or even will not counter the Russian government's interference in scholarly research<sup>25</sup>.

The repressive turn against queer studies and LGBTQ+ communities in Russia was not a surprise to those studying the contemporary media discourse, who also had the merit of introducing one of the greatest conceptual innovations of post-Soviet queer studies, as evidenced by the scholarship on the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), which from 2010 went through a period of tremendous expansion. As early as 2007, Dana Heller warned against those who saw the participation of t.A.T.u, a singing duo only apparently lesbian, as bringing Russia closer to a complex of values more tolerant of differences in gender and sexual orientation<sup>26</sup>. Also a careful analysis of Dima Bilan's participation in the competition in 2008, which earned Russia the victory and therefore the organization of the show in Moscow the following year, showed that the main Russian state television channel, that was in charge of every aspect of the participation in the ESC, conceived this participation to give only the impression of greater liberality, but its aim was instead to reinforce the construction of a traditional masculinity, in consonance with the perhaps less refined propaganda centered on the body of the Russian president<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> For an example of this pseudo-scholarship, see Popova L.V., *Končita Vurst, ili zakat Evropy*, in *Nauka televideniia*, 2016, 12, 4, 19-32; for a critical assessment of this stream of publications, see Moss K., *Russia's Queer Science, or How anti-LGBT Scholarship is Made*, in *The Russian Review*, January 2021, 80, 1, 17-36.

<sup>26</sup> Heller D., *t.A.T.u. You! Russia, the Global Politics of Eurovision, and Lesbian Pop*, in *Popular Music*, May 2007, 22, 2, 195-210.

<sup>27</sup> Cassidy J.E., *Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia's Trajectory to Eurovision Victory*, in *The Russian Review*, January 2014, 73, 1, 1-23; on the limits of Putin's hypermasculinity propaganda see Novitskaia A., *Patriotism, Sentiment, and Male*

Scholarship on the Eurovision Song quickly included a discussion over the new concept of homonationalism. Created by Jasbir Puar, homonationalism means that certain forms of homosexuality and queerness have been normalized and integrated into nationalistic discourses which postulate the superiority of some nations based on granting rights to the LGBTQ+ community. Puar identified the United States of America and Israel, particularly in relation to the Palestinian minority, as classic examples of this phenomenon<sup>28</sup>. In the attempt to build a horizon of common European values, the ESC operated a cultural pressure for the extension of the rights of LGBTQ+ communities first among the countries of so-called Western Europe and then in Eastern Europe, articulating a strategy that was described as a form of homonationalism<sup>29</sup>: an obvious example was the victory of Conchita Wurst, an Austrian cross-dressing camp performer, in the year of the approval of the gay propaganda law in Russia. Although this influence was viewed positively, there was political concern that the performativity of the homonationalist discourse could limit the specificities of LGBTQ+ communities in Eastern Europe and be used to conceal forms of cultural, economic, or political imperialism.

Of course, since the collapse of the USSR, not all national contexts have evolved in the same way. Although it is not possible to

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*Hysteria: Putin's Masculinity Politics and the Persecution of Non-Heterosexual Russians*, in *International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, 2017, 12, 3-4, 1-17.

<sup>28</sup> Puar J.K., *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, Duke UP, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> See Gluhovic M., *Sing for Democracy: Human rights and Sexuality Discourse in the Eurovision Song Contest*, in *Performing the 'New' Europe. Identity, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, eds. Gluhovic M. and Fricker K., Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, 194-217; Baker C., *The 'Gay Olympics'? The Eurovision Song Contest and the Politics of LGBT/European Belonging*, in *European Journal of International Relations*, 2017, 23, 1, 97-121.

follow in detail here the developments in all the fifteen former Soviet republics, it is worth noting that in Ukraine gender and queer studies have slowly spread and consolidated. Evidence of this was a volume published in 2012 by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies that collected contributions from many Ukrainian women scholars: among them were some of the most prestigious names in gender studies in Ukraine, such as Tetiana Zhurzhenko and Oksana Kis', and one of the first true Ukrainian scholars of queer studies, Tamara Martsenyuk<sup>30</sup>.

The second half of the 2010s, perhaps also as a reaction to the closure of this field in Russia, saw a boom in the field of queer studies, both in the form of in-depth researches published as monographs, and in the form of numerous conferences and meetings, which have represented a common occasion for meeting and discussion among those cultivating this topic, often followed by the publication of important collective volumes. The first group includes the truly seminal work of Francesca Stella, dedicated to Russian lesbians that, among other themes, underscored the role of motherhood in defining femininity in Russia: lesbian women in both Soviet and post-Soviet times are often perceived (even by themselves) as incomplete women and many decide to marry in order to generate: these women often resist the practice of defining themselves as lesbians or more generally according to their sexual

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<sup>30</sup> *Gender Politics, and Society in Ukraine*, eds. Hankivsky O. and Salnykova A., Toronto-Edmonton, CIUS Press, 2012, in particular Kis' O., *(Re)Constructing Ukrainian Women's History: Actors, Agents, and Narratives*, 152-179; Kis' would also publish the first study of women's conditions in the Gulag, first in Ukrainian and later in English: *Survival as Victory. Ukrainian Women in the Gulag*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard UP, 2020 [Ukr. or. 2017]. Sociologist Tamara Martsenyuk has published extensively, especially on the topic of LGBTQ+ families in Ukraine and has achieved considerable public acclaim with the book *Chomu ne varto boiatysia feminizmu* [Why feminism is not worth being afraid of], Kyiv, Komora, 2018.

practices (homosexual or bisexual). This resistance is interpreted by Stella as a consequence of the «widespread isolation and lack of contact with others involved in same-sex relationships, and the very informal and hidden character of queer subcultures in Soviet Russia, [which] resulted in the lack of shared social experience and narratives of identity. Thus, sexual subjectivities were more fluid than in ‘the west’ because ‘homonorm’ failed to crystallise in Soviet Russia»<sup>31</sup>.

Another important book was the history of Russian homophobia written by Dan Healey. In addition to the history of the medico-legal repression of homosexuality and the horror of the Gulags, however, this research poses the question of the “invisibility” of queer individuals in the Soviet Union and Russia as a major differentiating factor in the development of LGBTQ+ identities in this region: this invisibility of homosexuality, sanctioned by the state and preserved by individuals who sought in this way to carve out spaces for survival and action, is the reason for the lack of a discourse on the shame (public as well as internalized) of homosexuality and thus also the impossibility of reversing this feeling into pride. Healey thus helps to clarify one of the points of greatest interest for a history of homosexuality in Russia, avoiding a Western or homonationalist perspective<sup>32</sup>. Recently, Rustam Alexander focused on the regulation of homosexuality in the post-Stalin period, for the first time compiling a history of Soviet sexology, in which physicians, jurists, prison directors and other scholars participated

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<sup>31</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexuality*, Basingstoke, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018; see also the illuminating review by Clech A. in *Cahiers du monde russe*, 2018, 59, 4, 687-693.

in an international context since it included influences from other Socialist countries.<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned above, in recent years queer studies developed not only thanks to the theoretical contributions of individuals<sup>34</sup>, but also thanks to the formation of a real community of scholars in which research carried out by scholars from both Western and Eastern Europe could be discussed. From these meetings important volumes have emerged that at times address a specific theme, at others a particular interpretative question: the comparison between Western and Eastern Europe, the continuities and discontinuities between Soviet and post-Soviet sexualities, LGBTQ+ themes in various national literatures, political activism for the defense and obtaining of rights, the analysis of the performativity of queer identities in the post-Soviet sovereign states, and a reassessment of sexual and gender dissent in the Soviet Union<sup>35</sup>. In this enormous production, two approaches deserve to be mentioned: first of all the full development of the intersectionality between queer theory

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander R., *Regulating Homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-1991. A Different History*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> See the attempt to bring together queer theory and communist ideology by Popa B., *De-Centering Queer Theory. Communist Sexuality in the Flow during and after the Cold War*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> *Queer Stories of Europe*, eds. Vėrdiņš K. and Ozoliņš J., Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2016; *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Mole R.C.M., New York-London, Routledge, 2019; *Go East! LGBTQ+ Literature in Eastern Europe*, eds. Zavrl A. and Zupan Sosič A., Ljubljana, University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts, 2020; *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe. Resistance, Representation and Identity*, eds. Buyantuva R. and Shevtsova M., New York-London, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2020; *Decolonizing Queer Experience. LGBTQ+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. Channell-Justice E., Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020; *Dissidences sexuelles et de genre en URSS et dans l'espace postsoviétique*, eds. Clech A., Healey D., and Stella F., special issue of *Cahiers du monde russe*, April-September 2021, 62, 2-3.

and national identification, which was carried out by Arthur Clech in the Georgian case and by Richard Mole for the subjects of the diaspora<sup>36</sup>. Secondly, the expansion of the temporal perspective of analysis carried out by the English researcher Nick Mayhew, who goes back to study the sexuality of and in the Orthodox Church in the Middle Ages, seems to be the bearer of interesting reflections, but also traces its continuities until now to analyze another specific concept of the persecution of homosexuality in contemporary Russia, such as that of *muzhelozhstvo* (literally man-lying)<sup>37</sup>.

As evidence of the consolidation of this type of studies, in 2016 the Q\*ASEEES was formed within the Association for Slavic of East European Eurasian Studies to connect and coordinate scholarly initiatives in queer studies. Since 2021, as a positive consequence of Covid, a Queer and Gender Studies in the Slavic Context group has been formed (under the coordination of Alex Averbuch), which reunited online each month to present and discuss the members' research papers. These two latest initiatives also confirm the essentially transnational nature of queer studies in which there is a marked sensitivity to cultural specificities and a rightful concern not to impose Western interpretive paradigms on multiple and diverse realities, but without weakening the political significance

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<sup>36</sup> Clech A., *Des subjectivités homosexuelles dans une URSS multinationale*, in *Le Mouvement social*, March 2017, 260, 91-110; Mole R.C.M., *Identity, Belonging and Solidarity among Russian-Speaking Queer Migrants in Berlin*, in *Id.*, *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, cit., pp. 129-149.

<sup>37</sup> Mayhew N., *Banning 'Spiritual Brotherhoods' and Establishing Marital Chastity in Sixteen- and Seventeen-Century Muscovy and Ruthenia*, in *Paleoslavica*, 2017, 25, 2, 80-108; *Id.*, *Eunuchs and Ascetic Masculinity in Kievan Rus*, in *The Medieval History Journal*, 2018, 21, 1, 100-116; *Id.*, *Queering Sodomy: A Challenge to 'Traditional' Sexual Relations in Russia*, in *Queer Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*, eds. Wiedlack K., Shoshanova S., and Godovannaya M., Oxford, Peter Lang, 2019, 77-96.

of these studies and in general of the LGBTQ+ rights movement with the accusation of homonationalism. One can certainly acknowledge that queer studies have had the opportunity to develop mostly in the “West”, while in post-Soviet countries they are still on the fringes of the scientific community with a range of national situations ranging from formal prohibition (and therefore substantial clandestinity) in Russia to countries where they are fully accepted, such as Ukraine or Estonia.

**MAKING SENSE OF QUEERNESS IN A  
TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT**





# The End of Homosexuality

LUC BEAUDOIN

In 1994, the English-language *Saint Petersburg Press* (a new publication at the time; it later changed its name to the *Saint Petersburg Times*) interviewed citizens to gauge the level of civic support for that summer's Goodwill Games, a US-Russian athletic meet intended to counteract the boycotts of the Olympics in the 1980s. One middle-aged woman, Valentina Vorobiova, raised her voice against them: «I don't expect good coming out of the Games. I'm worried about our children, with hordes of foreigners bringing along all sorts of venereal diseases»<sup>1</sup>. Most telling is her logic: foreigners are sexually infected, implicitly because they cannot help their sexual compulsions: the same argument that Maksim Gorkii made in 1934<sup>2</sup>. It also stems from the nagging legacy of Soviet rule and Article 121.1 (the notorious anti-sodomy law quietly abolished in 1993). Sexuality as pleasure was indeed suspect in the former Soviet Union; it was as antithetical to the nature of the collective nurtured by prurient Soviet family discourse and the country's ideological and totalitarian take-over of sexual individuality

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<sup>1</sup> *Saint Petersburg Press*, July 26-August 1, 1994, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Gor'kii M., *Proletarskii gumanizm*, in *Pravda*, 23 May 1934.

as Igor' Kon has pointed out<sup>3</sup>. Certainly, same-sex relations could not contribute to the building of society. The question of masculine demography in particular was to be, in fact, a primary basis for spirited discussions in the State Duma regarding the creation of new laws targeting homosexuality in the early 2000s<sup>4</sup>. The restoration of the Stalinist ban on homosexuality (including lesbianism this time around) was supported by State Duma representative Gennadii Raikov, for example, who justified his logic by making the usual link that homosexuality could not be Russian, not even linguistically: «If someone wants to do this [homosexuality], let them move to France, let them move to Holland. But here just go to the countryside, they don't even know the words for those things there»<sup>5</sup>. While progress was made towards the slow acceptance of queer identities in Russia through 2010, it has since vanished<sup>6</sup>. In this sense, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was correct when he told CNN's Larry King that Russia is «tolerant toward sexual minorities but supports 'processes that lead to childbearing' because of the demographical situation»<sup>7</sup>. It is a mark of a certain sensitivity to

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<sup>3</sup> Kon I.S., *Seksologiya*, Moskva, Academia, 2004, 115-8. See also chapter 10 in *Id.*, *Seksual'naiia kul'tura v Rossii. Klubnichka na berezke*, Moskva, Vremia, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See Healey D., *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 130-47.

<sup>5</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, cit., 136. Healey is quoting from a website interview that is no longer available.

<sup>6</sup> Buyantueva R., *LGBT Rights Activism and Homophobia in Russia*, in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2018, 65, 4, 465. The source is a widely-cited set of opinion polls by the Levada Center from 1989 through 2015, presented here in English with informative context.

<sup>7</sup> Abdullaev N., *Putin Opens Up for Larry King*, in *Moscow Times*, 2 December 2010. The question was geared to gays in the military, against which Putin said there is no prohibition in Russia, as sodomy was decriminalized after the USSR. See as well *Transcript of Vladimir Putin's interview with CNN's Larry King, 2 February 2010*: <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20101202/161586625.html>.

the perceived selfishness of homosexuality, as Putin also points out: «There is a rather acute demographic problem in Russia, as in the rest of Europe. We are making serious efforts to improve the situation, and we are having success. I think we have the best indicators in Europe in terms of the rate of improvement. For the first time in the last 10 to 15 years, we are seeing a sustainable trend of rising births, and the country's population has even increased somewhat this year»<sup>8</sup>.

In 1990, the defunct gay magazines *Gai Pied Hebdo* (France) and *De Gay Krant* (Netherlands) published the first issue of *Gay Pravda*, specifically «addressed to gay men and women living in the USSR [...] to inform and help them in a country that still has not legalized homosexual conduct between consenting adults»<sup>9</sup>. The issue, which readers were encouraged to distribute by hand in the country, served mostly as a showcase for French and Dutch gay liberation while also portraying what the future could hold: included is a photomontage by Berlin photographer Michael Traubenheim depicting two Soviet male soldiers kissing and undressing each other. The journal's self-confident exuberance belies the tension between homosexuality as an identity and the reality of the late USSR. But despite the bravado of *Gay Pravda* that same tension has persisted in France, one of the countries to which queers were to flee according to Raikov. Had he maybe read the issue?

As in Russia, tensions arise in France between an Americanized view of sexual identity and a broader national view of family and citizenship, and the connections between French universalism and

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<sup>8</sup> See *Transcript of Vladimir Putin's interview with CNN's Larry King*, 2 February 2010: <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20101202/161586625.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *Gei Pravda*, 1990, 3.

Russian conservatism under Vladimir Putin have deep roots. Most strikingly, at roughly the same moment when Russian cities and finally the federal state itself passed laws limiting queer speech, France was roiled by demonstrations against same-sex marriage organized under the umbrella of *La Manif pour tous*. *La Manif* brought millions of concerned French citizens to the streets in late 2012-early 2013. Later, representatives of *La Manif* visited Moscow, met with the Russian Orthodox patriarch, and members felt that Putin was the ideal champion for conservative values<sup>10</sup>. By 2015 organizations in the two countries had employed similar banners against queer identities: the stylized portrayal of a traditional family holding hands<sup>11</sup>.

Despite everything, *La Manif* was at pains to not be anti-gay, but rather pro-family, yet its discourse was and is based on the perceived threat of queer identities made visible, their couplings and families rendered equal to heterosexual ones. Broadly anthropological, invoking the naturalness of a man and woman reproducing in a union sanctified by the state (and church), *La Manif* argued that same-sex marriage would undermine the core of French culture,

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<sup>10</sup> See Poujol R., *Reçue à Moscou, la Manif pour tous en voie de poutinisation*, 23 January 2017: <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/20140329.RUE3654/recue-a-moscou-la-manif-pour-tous-en-voie-de-poutinisation.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Not without controversy: see *Le parti de Poutine fâche La Manif pour tous*, in *Le Point*, 10 July 2015. Arguably, the connections between Western and Russian sexual conservatism have their roots in the United States, but are part of a worldwide exchange of measures intended to promote heterosexuality, starting as early as 1995. See Essig L., Kondakov A., *A Cold War for the Twenty-First Century. Homosexuality Vs. Heterosexuality*, in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Mole R.C.M., New York, Routledge, 2019, 92-3. Also see Stroop C., *A Right-Wing International? Russian Social Conservatism, the U.S.-based WCF, & the Global Culture Wars in Historical Context*, 16 February 2016: <https://politicalresearch.org/2016/02/16/russian-social-conservatism-the-u-s-based-wcf-the-global-culture-wars-in-historical-context>.

causing a «transfiguration of the difference between the sexes and the creation of an immunologically based definition of the nation» – that homosexuality is, in fact, contagious<sup>12</sup>. How? By being a minoritized identity that has gained perceived special rights. In that sense, they argue, homosexuality and gender theory (the disparaging term used across Europe, usually in reference to Judith Butler) are an attempt by Americans to colonize the French, to make immediate (selfish) pleasure the primary reason for living in the abandonment of any national project. To make men into women, a project intended to change the rules of life as attempted Communism and Nazism<sup>13</sup>. As an ideology, “gender theory” undermines the role of the state in protecting its culture and way of life, and, literally, its offspring. Sexuality could not be a legitimate basis for an identity. Or, perhaps, that the growing visibility of queer identities presaged instability<sup>14</sup>. In any case, American terms of sexual identification were transplants, usually seen as less pertinent than the French (often offensive) terms<sup>15</sup>. Just as significantly, not all gay men in France jumped on the gender project. A notable example of resistance is Frédéric Martel, author of a number of books detailing the history of gay identity in France and worldwide: in a 1997 article published in *Le Monde* he decried the ghettoization of gay and

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<sup>12</sup> Perreau B., *Queer Theory. The French Response*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016, 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ivi*, 23. See also Bourdin A., «*La théorie du genre et l'origine de l'homosexualité*», par Mgr Anatrella, 3 June 2012: <https://fiancailles.org/aimer/theorie-du-genre-homosexualite.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Similarly to the advent of visible homosexuality in Russia after the abolishment of Article 121.1, there is a public connection made between queer visibility and its socio-legal manifestation. See Baer B.J., *Other Russias. Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Perreau B., *Queer Theory*, cit., 82. Perreau is referring particularly to “queer”, but also to the other terms imported from English.

lesbian identities once American-style identity politics took hold in French culture and French universities, creating a class that is separate from the larger concerns of humanity<sup>16</sup>.

The arguments put forward by *La Manif* originally proliferated in interwar France and subsequently never quite vanished from public discourse: the association between homosexuality and an antisocietal violation of the «social order and the gender norms that inhered in it»<sup>17</sup>. In the interwar period, a sense of France's emasculation of France – the result a war that did not end with an incontestable victory – led to suspicions that male homosexuality was everywhere. «The war's violence was located metaphorically in so-called deviant bodies and particularly in homosexual ones», as Dean suggests<sup>18</sup>. Parallels to Russia's perceived humiliation after the inconclusive end of the Cold War are clear, even including demographic fears about the future of French (or Russian) culture.

But homosexuality in Russia had its moment, even if briefly. The July 2006 issue of *Sobaka* magazine, a glossy monthly specifically

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<sup>16</sup> Martel F., *Dans la solitude des bibliothèques gay*, in *Le Monde*, 27 June 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Dean C.J., *The Frail Social Body. Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, 134.

<sup>18</sup> Amid the national shame and subjugation following World War I in France, cultural critics there – journalists, novelists, doctors, and legislators, among others – worked to rehabilitate what was perceived as an unhealthy social body. Carolyn J. Dean shows how these critics attempted to reconstruct the “bodily integrity” of the nation by pointing to the dangers of homosexuality and pornography. Dean's provocative work demonstrates the importance of this concept of bodily integrity in France and shows how it was ultimately used to define first-class citizenship. Dean presents fresh historical material – including novels and medical treatises – to show how fantasies about the body-violating qualities of homosexuality and pornography informed social perceptions and political action. Although she focuses on the period from 1890 to 1945, Dean also establishes the relevance of these ideas to current preoccupations with pornography and sexuality in the United States. See Dean C.J., *The Frail Social Body*, cit., 144.

for the Saint Petersburg market, is a case in point. On its cover is a bald, shaved man with earrings, chest hair trimmed, its title emblazoned across the top: *Konets gomoseksualizma 1986-2006* [The End of Homosexuality 1986-2006]. The issue was quickly unavailable, presumably sold-out (although later available online). The choice of end date is indeed not a coincidence, but rather tied with the first gay pride parade in Moscow, on May 27, 2006<sup>19</sup>. The start date? Nikolai Burasov, the USSR's Surgeon General's statement in 1986 that homosexuality was a «serious sexual perversion»<sup>20</sup>.

In Russia the period between 1986 and 2006 also encompasses times of comparative openness (and ability to speak) as well as times of erasure and silence, of state-sponsored queer isolation and openness to the West, pivoting on May 27 1993, when Article 121.1 was abolished. That law, as Laurie Essig observed, had a lasting effect: «There was no public presence of queer desires – not in the mass media, nor in the art or literary worlds, not even in

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<sup>19</sup> The first successful Moscow Gay Pride parade was held in 2010, after the removal of former mayor Yury Luzhkov, who denounced such parades as “satanic” on a regular basis. The 2006 parade garnered international news reports, in part because of the participation of a number of West European politicians, some of whom, such as Volker Beck, were beaten themselves. The mayor's chief of security in Moscow at the time, Nikolai Kulikov, was quoted on a popular radio station as saying, «all public expressions [by gays and lesbians] must be banned. [...] They violate our rights. We have our traditions, lots of religious groups told us that they were against this gay pride». See Tatchell P., *Marching in Moscow*, in *The Guardian*, 24 May 2006. See also Buyantueva R., *LGBT Rights Activism and Homophobia in Russia*, cit., 469.

<sup>20</sup> *Orientatsiia na mestnosti. Kratkaia gei-istoriia Rossii za poslednie 20 let*, in *Sobaka*, 2006, 7, 66, 64. This is a direct echo of the only information available in much of the Soviet period, in an entry on homosexuality in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. See *Gomoseksualizm*, in *Bol'shoi Sovetskoi Entsiklopedii*: <http://bse.sci-lib.com/article011556.html>. Something to keep in mind, the issue only considers male homosexuality: this has as much to do with Russian as a language, where *gomoseksualist* or *gomoseksual* refers to men, and *lesbiianka* to women, but it is nonetheless strange.



the medical or psychiatric professions. And most of all, those who were the objects of the law never spoke aloud about their lives. [...] Queers were completely erased, except as objects of a law that demanded they disappear»<sup>21</sup>.

Claiming those identities is at the heart of the struggle because of what those identities entail. Are they Russian enough? Do they make sense? Even in France, Martel implied that they do not. The same is in Russia. Essig's groundbreaking *Queer in Russia* examines in depth the conflict between Western queer organizations arriving in the newly independent Russia to instruct the natives on sexual orientation: the Russians she joins in various workshops and seminars are both exasperated at being patronized and frustrated that the assumed codes of sexual identity – gay, lesbian, bisexual – were not applicable to their lived moment. The terms were American, imported, without any tradition in Russia, seen, ultimately, as limiting in that they forced people to choose sides<sup>22</sup>.

As Essig is implying in her book, queerness can both be Western and Russian, but when it is Russian it is not categorized as narrowly as in the West, perhaps because of the Soviet habit of dismissing sexuality as a basis for an identity in the first place, so that other more relatable identities stand in to serve its purpose. For some, as Essig quotes, that stand-in is fascism, tied to Zhirinovskiy and skinheads. To violent sexual desires. «My brother is part of a neo-fascist punk band, and of course they're all gay and they're all for Zhirinovskii. I thought that homosexuals were always connected

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<sup>21</sup> Essig L., *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1999, 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, 123-57. Essig even points out, as if to hammer her point home, that the American organizers of the 1994 seminar she attended did not even speak Russian.

with fascism»<sup>23</sup>. Or with a masculinism resulting from personal distortions of women<sup>24</sup>.

Twenty years and one month of homosexuality after the abolition of Article 121.1 President Putin signed Russia's infamous "anti-gay propaganda" law «for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values», on 30 June 2013. The law was the culmination of efforts across the country to silence queer identities in the service of the state, reproduction, and traditional values, an explicit denunciation of what was claimed to be a central defining element of the Western ideology of individualism:

Today, many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognise everyone's right to the freedom of consciousness, political views and privacy, but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil, strange as it seems, concepts that are opposite in meaning<sup>25</sup>.

Putin clearly differentiates between good and an implicitly queer evil that comes from pathology: «In Russian, the term 'homosexualism' implies a set of Western perversions that can be imposed on anyone and thus a threat to supposedly traditional sexual and gender values»<sup>26</sup>. That those threats come from the West makes it easy to dismiss the fusion of queer and Russian before 2013, and

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<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, quoting a young woman in Moscow in conversation with Essig.

<sup>24</sup> See the first chapter of Tuller D., *Cracks in the Iron Closet. Travels in Gay & Lesbian Russia*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, for a humorous description of Russian attitudes towards gay men in 1991.

<sup>25</sup> *President of Russia, Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly*, 2013: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>. The address also mentions that 2014 is the Year of Culture, which, tellingly, Putin explains as «a year of enlightenment, emphasis on our cultural roots, patriotism, values and ethics».

<sup>26</sup> Essig L., Kondakov A., *A Cold War for the Twenty-First Century*, cit., 79.

their expression, as both transplanted concepts that are, nonetheless also made into part of the new Russia. It makes *Sobaka's* special issue a snapshot of a moment in time when the Saint Petersburg gay men it featured were at the height of their self-confidence. The issue includes an introductory essay by Andrei Savel'ev, *Sobaka's* creative director, followed by significant interviews with a diverse set of six men, a selection of well-known cultural figures, celebrities within the gay community and successful businessmen. An eight-page timeline then covers, naturally, 1986-2006. A supplementary interview, with Igor' Puga, a drag show artist, is not within the gay main section but rather in an initial section that runs in every issue, "portrety" (portraits). With these interviews, *Sobaka* put (male) homosexuality in a specific (successful) context that provided for a thorough overview of what it meant to be gay in Russia for a narrowly-chosen group of men at a specific moment in time. What it does not include is a sense of male homosexuality in Russia historically, with the exception of an interview with Gennadii Trifonov, arrested in the USSR under Article 121.1 and who spoke candidly about his arrest and incarceration in Siberia (Trifonov later died in 2011).

What the interviews emphasize is that homosexuality is not an identity that has its definitive markers, except in the most foreign sense. The magazine's editor, Iana Miloradovskaia, points out as much in some startling opening editorial comments: «Homosexuality has died. And specifically in Russia. For the past twenty years, it was able to spiritedly surface from nowhere, romp around for a while in freedom, and then suddenly submerge lower than the waterline. It has either lain down in the depths, or it has decisively vanished»<sup>27</sup>. The arrival of homosexuality was indeed a shock to

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<sup>27</sup> Miloradovskaia I., *Slovo redaktora*, in *Sobaka*, 2006, 7, 66, 8.

most Russians. And, probably, to gay Russians as well. This legacy is visible in the interviews here: most of those interviewed carefully chart a difference between being gay and claiming gayness as an identity. Most interviewees emphasize the fact that they are the same as everyone else, and that they should be judged by their work and their actions, as opposed to their sexual orientation. All good and well, of course – although it seems that most of these Russian gay men, who talk about their revulsion at the idea of a gay pride parade in Moscow, are also limited in their actions *as gay men*. The editor continues, «In the entire supposedly civilized world homosexuality has been victorious, proven its right to a comfortable existence, in Russia it has not stood its ground. Here gays don't have anything to be proud of. Behind them nothing's there, except for a couple clubs and magazines. In the best case people ask, 'You're gay? OK, so what else do you do? We're in the land of Dostoevskii and Mikhalkov, and not Wilde and Almodóvar. So why don't you show us what kind of identity you have»<sup>28</sup>. The pastiche of Wilde and Almodóvar symbolizes the West of gay identities; what does it matter if it doesn't exist?

“What kind of identity” is also what drives Savel'ev to write, in reference to the fact that politicians are playing the “gay card” to score political and anti-Western points: «But here's something striking: Moscow and Saint Petersburg's society didn't react at all like they were supposed to. 'Leave them in peace. Let them live quietly by themselves, just don't demonstrate again'. And this position is utterly new for our homophobic country. [...] Because here, someone who says, 'I'm gay,' is looked at like at someone who's complaining that at rush hour someone stepped on his foot. It's reality. And precisely here is the collapse of homosexuality. In the 1980s

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<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, 8.

a confession of one's homosexuality was a protest, in the 1990s a fashion, and in the 2000s it's simply part of daily life»<sup>29</sup>. The gay organizations fighting to have a gay pride parade want «to seem oppressed in the eyes of the representatives of foreign foundations that eagerly finance the victims of discrimination»<sup>30</sup>. Those are the cynical words of a self-confidence that has come too soon, revealing an eagerness to effectively nationalize a gay identity that was originally premised on a foreign (American) perception in the first place.

The interviews in *Sobaka* are painful reading given events only a few years later. Iurii Vinogradov, a producer of photo shoots for major European magazines, states quite clearly, «In any case, nobody's interested anymore in whether you're gay or not. Today you're judged not by with whom you live, but by how you live. [...] If you work well, then your boss won't worry about what you do after work. But if you come to work and yell that you're gay more than you work, then don't be surprised that you've been fired»<sup>31</sup>.

One of Vinogradov's more interesting points is about the aborted gay pride parade of 2006 in Moscow. The demonstrators, who attempted to place flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by the Kremlin, were unsuccessful, with Orthodox believers and skinheads coordinating to beat them up. Vinogradov, however, believes that both sides organized simply in order to promote their own individual causes, and that the act of trying to place flowers at the tomb was a deliberate provocation of older Russians who do not understand, and are not expected to. Yet, simultaneously, he is not worried about believers and skinheads uniting, stating bluntly

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<sup>29</sup> Saval'iev A., *Konets gomoseksualizma*, in *Sobaka*, 2006, 7, 66, 51.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Vinogradov I., *Iurii Vinogradov*, in *Sobaka*, 2006, 7, 66, 53.

that «among the ones and the others there are so many homosexuals»<sup>32</sup>. Another interviewee, Igor' Pravdin, the founder of what is now xs.gayru.info and the Saint Petersburg representative of the former magazine *Kvir* magazine, says even more bluntly that the gay parade is a «provocation, not supported by 90% of gay organizations»<sup>33</sup>.

So what does a gay identity mean? The cover boy, Vladimir Kalinchev, a stylist, is asked whether he feels pride that many important people have been gay, people like Oscar Wilde and Piotr Tchaikovsky. He answers, keeping in the tone of the article overall, that he is proud that there have been brilliant people in the world, but that he is not concerned about their orientation<sup>34</sup>.

This is not to say that all the men interviewed hide the difficulties of the past, but, rather, that they are focusing on the ability to have a career, and the presence of gay clubs, which, as Iakov Pak points out, are openly advertised and signed, as opposed to in the West (and, to boot, are visited by both Russian and Western celebrities)<sup>35</sup>. The interview with Trifonov lays most of these conceits to rest and yet seems oddly anachronistic. When asked about Article 121.1, he answers, «We were all victims. Because of the existence of Article 121.1, we, homosexuals, *a priori* felt ourselves to be criminals. In the Soviet Union everyone was very closed, there was no freedom»<sup>36</sup>. His arrest he details in disturbing, pithy detail – he was accused by a young man he did not know, and after a 15-min-

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Pravdin I., *Igor' Pravdin*, in *Sobaka*, 2006, 7, 66, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Kalinchev V., *Vladimir Kalinchev*, in *Sobaka*, 2006, 7, 66, 57.

<sup>35</sup> Pak I., *Iakov Pak*, in *Sobaka*, 2006, 7, 66, 59.

<sup>36</sup> Trifonov G., *Gennadii Trifonov*, in *Sobaka*, 2006, 7, 66, 61.

ute trial, was shipped off to Magadan, Siberia<sup>37</sup>. Yet homosexual life existed in Saint Petersburg, and at times openly: he relates a charming anecdote about seeing Rudolf Nureyev, the famous ballet dancer, madly kissing a male friend in the Summer Gardens. Despite this brush with gay fame does not change the fundamental fact that Trifonov's perception of Russia is negative, which is why he ultimately chose to leave. He states that Russia is only changing its surface, not its essence<sup>38</sup>. The others who are interviewed apparently do not have the same sense of futility, perhaps because they do not answer the same question and do not locate their homosexuality in the same way. They are uncomfortable with what they see as the Western conceits of identity politics, yet those same politics, had they been supported, may well have prevented the new wave of legislation against those same identities. They argue that there is information everywhere about what it means to be gay – in the media, online, in print.

The 2009 film *Vesel'chaki* (officially translated as *Jolly Fellows*, Feliks Mikhailov director) serves as an example of what they meant<sup>39</sup>. The film's title is a coy wink to queerness, a calque of gay/happy/queer between English and Russian. As an initial representation of a certain type Russian gay culture, it focuses, à la *Cage aux folles*, on men who impersonate women, on men who, in the contemporary Russian context, can do better as women, on stage at least. As such,

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<sup>37</sup> *Ivi*, 61. In an interesting expansion of his years in the camp, he says that those were the best years of his life, because of the black-and-white nature of his life then.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> The film premiered in cinemas across Russia on 13 October 2009 with its cast of comparatively well-known actors. See Buyantueva R., *LGBT Rights Activism and Homophobia in Russia*, cit., 466. See also Kondakov A.A., *Poriadok diskursov i formirovanii deviantnykh chert gomoseksual'noi sub'ektivnosti*, in *Paradigma. Filosofsko-kul'turologicheskii al'manakh*, 2011, 16, 65-74.

it explores the background of the men – their former wives, their childhoods, and current situation. It was intended to be friendly in its presentation of homosexuality, even as it promulgated the idea that all gay men are transvestites and all transvestites are gay men<sup>40</sup>.

In an interview with Dmitrii Savel'ev for a glossy magazine special edition accompanying *Jolly Fellows'* release, Andriy Mykhailovich Danylko (1973-), who composed the film's soundtrack (and is better known as Verka Serdiuchka, the second-place winner in Eurovision 2007), says that he agreed to work with the film only because he was promised that it would be a «nontraditional comedy»<sup>41</sup>. But Danylko also explains that he does not mean nontraditional sex, but rather a type of comedy that cannot be defined by normal words. His explanation seems to avoid an uncomfortable truth. The issue of drag always brings up gayness, and always brings up the extent to which nontraditional sexuality can be hidden. Verka Serdiuchka is an avatar of Soviet camp: a middle-aged woman who is a train conductor and who blends together Soviet bureaucratic types, garish New Russians, and pop divas such as Alla Pugacheva. Danylko himself lived with a woman for a number of years. Yet, still, the conjunction of men performing women and homosexuality is an uncomfortable one, visible to those who have a sense of that sensibility, invisible to those who are unaware of its existence.

*Vesel'chaki* is considered Russia's first home-grown gay film. Its storyline revolves around five men/drag queens of different ages and difficult, even pathological pasts – Gertuda, Roza, Fira, Liucia, Lara – who enjoy cross-dressing and performing in a transvestite

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<sup>40</sup> Kondakov A.A., *Poriadok diskursov*, cit., 67-8.

<sup>41</sup> Danilko A., *Moia verka zdes' ne pri chem!*, in *Vesel'chaki*, 2009, 38.



cabaret in Moscow, having found their family in drag<sup>42</sup>. While it is not always explicitly stated that the men are gay, it is implied in the reactions of others, in the cabaret shows themselves (when the camera focuses quickly on the bulging crotches of the male dancers), on the attitude of the queens themselves. But being gay does not mean always gay all the time: for example, one of the men is married and has a daughter even as another is in a long-term relationship with a man (only to discover his HIV-positive status towards the end of the film).

The film draws connections between drag and divas, particularly French divas at the outset (the film's opening number with *Ti-co-Tico* by Dalida); Edith Piaf makes an appearance (in a flashback during the Soviet period) as does Alla Pugacheva from Russia. In the first half the film's catch is an interview between the queens and a journalist. The questions trigger memories, of which the final one, involving "Liusia" (Dima, played by Daniil Kozlovskii, a well-known Russian actor), sets the tone for the film. Dima does drag because he needs money, but he is also afraid of having sex with women. He decides to return to his home village; after a send-off at the train station worthy of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Liusia discards her drag persona in the train's toilet as it leaves Moscow, disposing of his glittered heels in the trash for effect. But an attempted seduction by a childhood woman friend in the village, combined with his mother's alcoholism, pushes Dima to emerge in full drag once more as Liusia the next morning, dancing to a Nataliia Pugacheva cover of the gay anthem *I Will Survive*. Gay identities stem from broken pasts.

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<sup>42</sup> Kondakov A.A., *Poriadok diskursov*, cit., 72. Kondakov lists the Krafft-Ebing-style pathologies of each queen in his article.

The film is about transformations: from man to woman, from straight to gay, from the provinces to the city. It is a film about the possibility of creating one's own life: the majority of the film takes place on stage and in the dressing room, or at a train station and in cars. The destination in *Jolly Fellows* is self-acceptance, but one that cannot be Russian: it is heavily premised on a Western conception of music and self, something that does not withstand the trips to the countryside.

The interview ended, an HIV diagnosis found out, four of the men decide to go to the dacha. Lost in their red VW New Beetle, they ask for directions. The men they ask see them urinating outside. «Faggots!», followed by a car chase. The queens give up, tired of having to fight for who they are. The thugs have pipes at the ready. While the viewer never sees the murders, the figure of Roza run to join the queens. Roza wasn't with them; having met a stranger earlier, she goes home with him, not suspecting that he was sexually abused in early childhood by a man and has been waiting for revenge. He tosses her body onto the street below to make it seem like a suicide. When Roza and the queens meet up, they embrace and run away from the viewer across a field in a typical Russian countryside, existing in the "real" Russia only through death, escaping the world and its cruelty. They have been marked for death because of publicly living their queerness. Killed by real *muzhiks*. Echoes of AIDS.

## Coda

On Sunday, 6 March 2022, Kirill, the Most Holy Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, gave a sermon in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, in which he explained the reason why Russia had to intervene in the Donbas. The "free" world, he stated, has a test to demonstrate loyalty to its principles, a «very simple and at the same time

terrible» test: gay-parades<sup>43</sup>. These «so-called marches of dignity» are a sin that leads directly to the collapse of civilization, celebrating an act against God<sup>44</sup>. The war in Ukraine has become (meta) physical fight to save the world from homosexuality.

If only we had known in the early 1990s, or in the late 2000s. Kirill's statements are just among the most recent that use queer identities to exemplify the battles of civilizations, but the rhetoric – waging war to stop gay pride parades coming to a city near you – is a breathtaking escalation. Those same identities that were so difficult, so foreign, so *American*, have come back to roost, now in state-sponsored violence.

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<sup>43</sup> *Patriarshaia propoved' v Nedeliu cyropustnuiu posle Liturgii v Khrame Khrista Spasitel'a*, 6 March 2022: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

# Soviet Legacy in the Narratives of Queer People Living in Kazakhstan

MARIYA LEVITANUS

Based on in-depth interviews of eleven people who identify as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender and live in Kazakhstan, this chapter seeks to shed light upon the effect of Soviet gender and sexuality discourses on the everyday narratives of queer people in Kazakhstan. The findings show the pervasive impact of the general silence around gender diversity and sexuality, which intersects with the culture of shame or *uyat* prevalent in the Central Asian region, which is often used for maintaining “traditional” gender order that tends to represent heteronormative ideals. Another facet of the Soviet legacy that emerged in the narrative of older participants in this study is the impact of the association of queerness with marginality and criminality in the Soviet Union, as well as the echo of the impact of Gulags (*Glavnoye Upravleniye Lagerey* [Main Camps Administration]) and prison culture in participants’ stories. This research also highlights the presence of Soviet discourses in medical healthcare, which is especially evident in the healthcare of transgender people in Kazakhstan. This chapter contributes to the growing body of scholarship on post-Soviet gender and sexualities by developing a deeper understanding of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender subjectivities in the context of Kazakhstan.

## Introduction

While queer history in post-Soviet countries is largely under-explored<sup>1</sup>, queer history in Central Asia is uncharted territory. Anything that deviated from “traditional” gender and sexual practices was met with hostility by both Soviet society and especially the Soviet state<sup>2</sup>. Topics concerning sexuality were deemed to belong to the private domain and any sexual or gender deviance was regulated through medicalisation and (or) criminalisation<sup>3</sup>. It is worth pointing out that with a few exceptions<sup>4</sup>, the literature on the history of sexuality is predominantly focused on Russia.

When speaking about the history of Central Asia, it is essential to acknowledge the shift in the view of Soviet modernity and its re-evaluation as an imperial formation and an optic of postcolo-

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<sup>1</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual desire in revolutionary Russia: The regulation of sexual and gender dissent*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001; Kon I., *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*, New York, The Free Press, 1995; Kon I., *Russia*, in *Sociolegal Control of Homosexuality. A Multi-National Comparison*, eds. West D. and Green R., New York, Plenum Press, 1997, 221-242; Kon I., *Lunnyy svet na zare. Liki i maski odnopoloy lyubvi* [Moonlight at dawn. Faced and masks of same-sex love], Moskva, Olimp/AST, 1998; Essig L., *Queer in Russia. A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1999; Alexander R., *Regulating homosexuality in Soviet Russia, 1956-91*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2021; Clech A., *Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic : Tema or the Shared Forms of Late Soviet Homosexual Subjectivities*, in *Slavic Review*, 2018, 77, 1, 6-29; Stella F., *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander R., *Regulating homosexuality in Soviet Russia*, cit.; Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.; Kon I., *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, cit.

<sup>3</sup> Kon I., *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, cit.; Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.; Clech A., *Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic*, cit.; Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.; Alexander R., *Homosexuality in the USSR (1956-82)*, The University of Melbourne, 2018; *Id.*, *Regulating homosexuality in Soviet Russia*, cit.

niality that has been adopted both within and outside the region since the dissolution of state socialism<sup>5</sup>. While this is a highly contested field, scholars argue that postcolonial critique is relevant to Central Asia and other former Soviet territories<sup>6</sup>. «A postcolonial approach has altered the understanding of power in the region, including the state socialist project of equality and friendship – two ideas fundamental to how states related to and constructed sexual, racial, and ethnic differences»<sup>7</sup>. Adaptation of postcolonial optics reframes some of the state socialist policies and practices, for example, how women’s rights policies became tools of regulation of “backward” ethnic religious and culturally others<sup>8</sup> who became targets of the Soviet “civilising mission”<sup>9</sup>. In Central Asia, the eradication of local customs such as child marriage, bride abduction and veiling, along with the campaigns against patriarchal institution, became pre-requisite for social progress<sup>10</sup>. Traditional Central Asian kinship ideology was gradually weakened and replaced with the endorsement of the nuclear heterosexual family as a “founding unit of Soviet society” serving the needs of the socialist state<sup>11</sup>. Het-

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<sup>5</sup> Shchurko T., Suchland J., *Postcoloniality in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, eds. Fabian K., Johnson J.E., and Lazda M., London, Routledge, 2021, 71-79.

<sup>6</sup> Tlostanova M., *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Shchurko T., Suchland J., *Postcoloniality in Central-Eastern Europe*, cit., 71-72.

<sup>8</sup> Kamp M., *The New Woman in Uzbekistan. Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Shchurko T., Suchland J., *Postcoloniality in Central-Eastern Europe*, cit., 72.

<sup>10</sup> Kamp M., *The New Woman in Uzbekistan*, cit.; Northtop D., *Veiled Empire. Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2004; Tlostanova M., *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, cit..

<sup>11</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit., 28-29; Ashwin S., *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, London, Routledge, 2000; Zdravolmyslova E. and

erosexuality, therefore, became “compulsory”<sup>12</sup>. Francesca Stella argues that compulsory heterosexuality «hegemonic discursive practices endorsing heterosexual romance, marriage and the nuclear family as a “natural” norm» was one of the key underlying mechanisms of making non-heterosexual practices invisible and deviant<sup>13</sup>.

In this chapter, I aim to shed light upon the effect of Soviet gender and sexuality discourses on the everyday narratives of queer people in Kazakhstan. This chapter is based on the in-depth interviews of eleven people who identify as queer and live in Kazakhstan that were conducted in November 2017 as a part of a Doctorate in Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh. Interviews took place in Almaty, Astana and Karaganda. I follow the lead of oral history traditions identified as one of the key methods used by gay, lesbian, and queer historians, who often lack printed sources and thus turn to live historical actors for information about the recent past<sup>14</sup>. Drawing from Maria Tamboukou<sup>15</sup>, I use Foucauldian perspective on narratives, viewing individual narratives as discursively

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Temkina A., *Sovetskii Etakraticeskii Gendernyi Kontrakt*, in *Rossiiskii Gendernyi Poriadok. Sotsiologicheskii Podkhod*, eds. Zdravomyslova E., Rotkirch A., and Tartakovskaia I., Saint Petersburg, Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2007, 96-137.

<sup>12</sup> Rich A., *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1980, 5, 4, 631-660.

<sup>13</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit., 52.

<sup>14</sup> Boyd N.A., *Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History*, in *Journal of History of Sexuality*, 2008, 17, 2, 177-189; Johnson E.P., *Sweet Tea. Black Gay Men of the South – An Oral History*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Tamboukou M., *Narrative Phenomena. Entanglements and Intra-actions in Narrative Research*, in *Discourse and Narrative Methods: Theoretical Departures, Analytical Strategies and Situated Writings*, eds. Livholts M. and Tamboukou M., London, Sage, 2015, 37-46; Tamboukou M., *Narrative Modalities of Power*, *ivi*, 63-78.

constructed or «narrative as/in discourse»<sup>16</sup>. Tamboukou<sup>17</sup> argues that apart from being effects of power/knowledge structures mediating and reflecting reality, narratives can also challenge and produce reality. From this perspective, Kazakhstani queer narratives are both vehicles through which power and discourses are circulated and “spaces” and tools that create the possibility for those discourses to be creatively negotiated and resisted.

It is worth noting that here, I do not endeavour to reconstruct a queer history of Kazakhstan. Neither will the political developments concerning non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people in Kazakhstan be addressed. Instead, the focus is on the everyday life narratives of queer-identifying people. Their narratives are not to be seen as representative of all queer people in Kazakhstan, let alone queer people in Central Asia. Narratives of participants will be used to understand if and how Soviet discourses circulate and regulate the lives of modern-day Kazakhstani queer people.

I begin by discussing the regulation of “dissident” gender and sexuality in Soviet Central Asia, focusing on the case example of Bacha Bazi. Second, I will consider practices of silencing, medicalisation and criminalisation commonly attributed as dominant regulatory mechanisms of those who transgressed Soviet gender and sexual order. I will then trace discursive self-formation that emerged from the narratives of the participants in my study.

## **Regulation of “dissident” gender and sexuality in Soviet Central Asia**

One of the case examples illustrating the previously mentioned eradication of local “backward” customs concerning gender and

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<sup>16</sup> Tamboukou M., *Narrative Phenomena*, cit., 42.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



sexuality was an attempt to eliminate the practice of “Bacha Bazi” in the region. In his travel memoirs, Eugene Schuyler writes that, «In Central Asia, Mohammedan prudery prohibits the public dancing of women; but as the desire of being amused and of witnessing a graceful spectacle is the same the world over, here boys and youths specially trained take the place of dancing girls of other countries»<sup>18</sup>. Those dancing boys were referred to as Bacha Bazi. Similarly, in his travel memoirs in Turkestan<sup>19</sup>, Count Pahlen recounts watching boys who were «barefoot, and dressed like women in long, brightly coloured silk smocks reaching below their knees and narrow trousers fastened tightly around their ankles, their arms and hands sparkle with rings and bracelets»<sup>20</sup>.

Bacha Bazi boys were involved in cross-generational same-sex practices and were regarded by Soviet officials as «survivors of primitive customs»<sup>21</sup>. They were first prohibited in Turkmen and Uzbek SSR in 1927, viewed by the Soviets as «the places where homosexuality was traditionally most prevalent»<sup>22</sup> together with Azerbaijan and Georgia. While in Kazakhstan there was no legislation explicitly prohibiting Bacha Bazi, there is evidence that this practice also existed there. Such evidence comes from the writing of

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<sup>18</sup> Schuyler E., *Turkistan. Notes of a Journey in Russian Turkistan, Kokand, Bukhara and Kuldja*, New York, F.A. Praeger, 1966, 132.

<sup>19</sup> Turkestan covered territories of present-day Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and the Southern parts of Kazakhstan as well as the territory of Uighur Autonomous Region of Sinkiang, and China (referred to as Eastern Turkistan or Chinese Turkestan). Western Turkistan or Russian Turkestan (administratively excluding Southern Kazakhstan) was also used a synonym for Soviet Central Asia. Duarte P., *Central Asia. The Bends of History and Geography*, in *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad*, 2014, 9, 1, 21-35.

<sup>20</sup> Pahlen K., *Mission to Turkestan. Being the Memoirs of Count K.K. Pahlen, 1908-1909*, London, Oxford University Press, 1964, 170.

<sup>21</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual Desire*, cit., 160.

<sup>22</sup> Kon I., *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, cit., 70.

the biologist Kol'stov, who in his 1929 correspondence with German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld noted the economic exploitation of Bacha Bazi «in such Republics as Kazakhstan»<sup>23</sup>. In 1934, anti-*muzhelozhstvo* legislation (prohibiting same-sex male activity) was adopted throughout the Soviet Union, encompassing practices of Bacha Bazi<sup>24</sup>.

### **Silencing, medicalisation, and criminalisation**

Silencing, medicalisation, and criminalisation have been highlighted as some of the key strategies in the regulation of gender and sexuality in the Soviet Union. One of the earliest Russian works on Soviet sex was published by Igor Kon in 1995 where he contends that since the 1930s, «a complete and utter silence on the subject [homosexuality] has descended», that «homosexuality was simply never mentioned» and that it has become an «unimaginable vice in the full sense of the term» during the Soviet period<sup>25</sup>. As noted by Rustam Alexander, Kon contradicts himself as he notes that the first sexopathology books labelling homosexuality a «sexual perversion» started to appear in the USSR in the 1970s<sup>26</sup>. According to Stella, queerness was regulated differently depending on gender<sup>27</sup>. The introduction of the 1934 anti-sodomy law only criminalised male same-sex sexuality, with up to five years of imprisonment<sup>28</sup>, however, both male and female same-sex sexual-

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<sup>23</sup> Cited in Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit., 167.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Kon I., *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, cit., 242.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit.

<sup>28</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.

ity were seen as deviant and perverted<sup>29</sup>. Both Healey and Stella emphasise that while male homosexuality was criminalised in the Soviet Union, it was less intertwined with reproductive and family roles than female same sex practices<sup>30</sup>. Until the 1950s, female homosexuality was thought to be a curable deviance correctable through motherhood<sup>31</sup>. From the 1950s, Soviet sexology renewed its interest in lesbianism, where lesbianism was thought to be curable though forced hospitalisation, the use of psychiatric drugs and psychological therapy<sup>32</sup>, and the more alternative medical approach «heterosexual re-education» as suggested by Stella<sup>33</sup>. It is worth pointing out that most of the data on existing accounts of medical treatment of female sexuality relies on interview data with little support from archival evidence, often subject to confidentiality rules<sup>34</sup>. Medical treatment of male homosexuality remains underexplored<sup>35</sup>. Nevertheless, medical treatment did occur, despite existing criminalisation and penalties<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, an interview study conducted by Sonja Franeta in the 1990s with men and women expressing same-sex desire, highlights an example where medical di-

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<sup>29</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit.; Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.; Clech A., *Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic*, cit.

<sup>30</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit.; Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.

<sup>31</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.

<sup>32</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.; Gessen M., *The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in the Russian Federation*, San Francisco, The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), 1994; Essig L., *Queer in Russia*, cit.

<sup>33</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit., 47.

<sup>34</sup> Kelly C., *White Coats and Tea with Raspberry Jam, Caring for Sick Children in Late Soviet Russia*, in *Soviet Medicine. Culture, Practice and Science*, eds. Bernstein F.L., Burton C., and Healey D., DeKalb, University of Illinois Press, 2010, 258.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander R., *Homosexuality in the USSR*, cit.; Volodin V., *Kvir-istoriia Belarusi vtoroi poloviny XX veka: popytka priblizheniia*, Minsk, s.e., 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Alexander R., *Homosexuality in the USSR*, cit.

agnosis of homosexuality saved the diagnosed from incarceration<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, Arthur Clech, who conducted interviews with thirty-six men and women who lived and expressed their same-sex sexuality during the late Soviet period, warns against the danger of oversimplification of the view that male homosexuality was penalised while women's deviant sexuality was medicalised<sup>38</sup>. Clech writes «[m]y interviewees attest to a more fluid reality: men were also subject to the psycho-pathologisation of their homosexuality, just as women feared the article penalising male homosexuality»<sup>39</sup>.

Currently, limited scholarly attention has focused on the lives and medical care of gender non-conforming people during the Soviet period and more generally, within the post-Soviet space<sup>40</sup>. Medical treatment of homosexuality often included sex-change operations. For example, Essig wrote, «in the past and the present many young females have sex change operations, not because the doctors diagnosed them as “transsexuals” but because they labelled them “lesbians”»<sup>41</sup>. Conflation of sexuality and gender makes it difficult to understand transgender experiences during the Soviet period. Indeed, as emphasised by Catherine Baker, «where there is evidence of incongruence, variance or dissent, how do we know the gender of our historical subjects?»<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Franeta S., *Rozovye Flamingo: 10 Sibirskikh interv'iu*, Tver', Kolonna Publications, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Clech A., *Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic*, cit.

<sup>39</sup> *Ivi*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Husakouskaya N., *Transgender, Transition, and Dilemma of Choice in Contemporary Ukraine*, in *Gender and Choice after Socialism*, eds. Attwood L., Schimpfossel E., and Yusupova M., Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 23-46.

<sup>41</sup> Essig L., *Queer in Russia*, cit., 36.

<sup>42</sup> Baker C., *Transnational “LGBT Politics after the Cold War and Implications for Gender History*, in *Gender in twentieth-century Eastern Europe and the USSR*,

## Results

### *Silence and signification of queer identity in Soviet Kazakhstan*

The legacy of Soviet perceptions of queerness is evident in the narrative of a participant named Gulzada<sup>43</sup>, a forty-four-year-old, who stresses her difficulty in making sense of her experience as a lesbian while growing up in an “*aul*” [village] in the South of Kazakh SSR.

I couldn't recognise my sexual orientation. Before, because there was no information since everyone lived behind the [Iron] Curtain, I think because there was no information, I couldn't identify myself. [...] I would just hide those thoughts deep inside so that they did not come up. Because I had to live somehow. [...] I had no model of what I should look for. [...] Those I could see around me were heterosexuals, and I had a feeling that I absolutely did not fit in.

Here, Gulzada explores the difficulty in understanding herself within an environment where gender and sexuality diversity was absent. As Baer puts it, «Soviet culture offered little ontological basis for the representation of homosexuality as an identity, as a stable subject position through which one might assume a voice in the [...] public sphere»<sup>44</sup>. Gulzada struggled to find language to describe her experiences, feeling alienated. Stella describes a similar struggle to self-identify for women who grew up and had same-sex relationships in Soviet Russia. According to Stella, «[w]hile punitive and stigmatising discourses circulated, the categories “homosexual” and “lesbian” remained unavailable as affirmative narratives

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eds. Baker London C., Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 241.

<sup>43</sup> Participants' names and other identifiable information were changed, apart from one; Gulzada chose to opt out of anonymisation.

<sup>44</sup> Baer B.J., *Now You See It. Gay (In)Visibility and the Performance of Post-Soviet Identity*, in *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*, eds. Fejes N. and Balough A.P., Bristol, University of Chicago Press, 2013, 35-55, 37.

of social identity for most of the Soviet period»<sup>45</sup>. Women in Stella's study reported that censorship and invisibility of gender and sexuality diversity in the public sphere resulted in their feeling isolated and struggling to find a collective language to describe their experiences. Gulzada continued:

I was searching in books for what I was missing. But they only covered heterosexual relationships. This was not me. Well, I understood the feelings described but they were described from a male perspective and I didn't understand the women's side. I read a lot of Russian classics because there were no other books available.

In her attempt to make sense of her experiences, Gulzada turned to literature where she found little comfort and mostly identified with the male perspective. As pointed out previously, same-sex desire was heavily censored. Baer points out that references to any form of non-heterosexual desire were removed from Soviet publications and foreign literature translations<sup>46</sup>. While the literary works of Sappho, Proust and Colette were not banned in the Soviet Union and there was uncensored circulation of gay literature by writers such as Gennady Trifonov and Yevgeny Kharitonov<sup>47</sup>, these works were not easily available and were likely inaccessible in the small *aul* where Gulzada grew up.

One of the themes that emerged from my study was the general silence around sexuality and relationships outside of matrimony within the families of the participants. One of the potential explanations of the silence may be the culture of *uyat* or shame, which is argued to be one of the central regulating forces of gender order

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<sup>45</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit., 134.

<sup>46</sup> Baer B.J., *Now You See It*, cit.

<sup>47</sup> Moss K., *Out of the Blue. Russia's Hidden Gay Literature. An Anthology*, San Francisco, Gay Sunshine Press, 1997.

and transgressions of norms in Kazakh culture<sup>48</sup>. The subject of sex and sexuality, especially non-heteronormative practices along with any relationships before and outside of marriage, is a subject of *uyat*<sup>49</sup>. Amir, who identifies as a cisgender gay man in his mid-thirties, explains his parent's attitude towards sexuality:

No one from my surroundings spoke to their family members about their relationships or sexuality. It was normal not to.

*Why do you think that was?*

I don't know... well, our parents are of the Soviet generation where it wasn't supported, I mean talking about sex and private relationships.

Amir attributes his parents not mentioning sex to Soviet values, which is consistent with the argument that silence and privacy around the matter of sex and sexuality is one of the features of Soviet gender order<sup>50</sup>. However, it is unclear whether it is indeed Soviet taboo or Kazakh *uyat* around the topic of sex and sexuality outside of matrimony that plays a role in the silence Amir and other participants describe. Indeed, later in the interview Amir specifies, «in a Kazakh family, there is no sex»<sup>51</sup>. It is, therefore, possible that the two silences overlap and amplify each other.

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<sup>48</sup> Kudaibergenova D.T., *The body global and the body traditional: a digital ethnography of Instagram and nationalism in Kazakhstan and Russia*, in *Central Asian Survey*, 2019, 38, 3, 363-380.

<sup>49</sup> Levitanus M., *The role of uyat or the culture of shame in the regulation of queer subjectivities in Kazakhstan, and forms of resistance against it*, in *Uyat and the Culture of Shame in Central Asia*, eds. Thibault H. and Caron J.F., New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 117-149.

<sup>50</sup> Kon I., *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, cit.; Zdravomyslova E., *Hypocritical Sexuality of the Late Soviet Period: Sexual Knowledge d Sexual Ignorance*, in *Education and Civic Culture in Post-Communist Countries*, eds. Webber S. and Liikanen I., London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2001, 151-167; Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit.

<sup>51</sup> Levitanus M., *The role of uyat or the culture of shame*, cit.

*Effects of Gulags and prison culture*

Another aspect of the Soviet legacy within the narratives of participants in this study is the echo of the impact of Gulags and prison culture on those narratives. Gulzada recalls her first encounter with the word “lesbian” after the Soviet Union collapsed:

The Soviet Union collapsed and “the gate” opened, but the first information about lesbians that I encountered was horrible. I was at university and someone brought a newspaper into our student accommodation. It said on the cover that when women in prisons want sexual relations, some of them pretend to be “men” and others “women” and they have intercourse. And it’s called, well, those pretending to be men are called lesbians [“*lesbianka*”]. That is how the word was defined. This was how it reached me [...] it simply confused me. [...] well, why would I identify myself with women who are in prison? And secondly, why would I identify myself with those who want to pretend to be men?

Gulzada found it difficult to identify with the word “lesbian”. She did not want to pretend to be a man and she certainly did not want to be associated with prisons. Gulzada’s experience echoes the findings of Franeta, who demonstrates how the penal system is deeply interconnected with the Soviet representation of female homosexuality<sup>52</sup>. For example, Franeta writes about the experience of Sasha, who said, «I didn’t consider myself a lesbian because I thought that all lesbians were in prison»<sup>53</sup>. Healey also emphasises that within the Soviet Union, depictions of lesbians in the press were strongly associated with women in Gulags<sup>54</sup>. Moreover, “lesbians” in Gulags were presented as “true” criminals charged for murder or theft rather than falsely charged for «anti-Soviet agita-

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<sup>52</sup> Franeta S., *My Pink Road to Russia, Tales of Amazons, Peasants, and Queers*, Oakland, Dacha Books, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, 140.

<sup>54</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.



tion» or «counter-revolutionary» actions<sup>55</sup>. Gulzada's description of the newspaper article where lesbians are defined as criminals also mirrors Clech's conclusion that disrupts the simplified binary of women's same-sex desire being associated with pathologisation and male's desire with criminalisation.

According to Adi Kuntsman, the association of queerness, marginality and criminality was actively cultivated during the Soviet era<sup>56</sup>. The association can be traced to Gulags and "dissident literature" – a body of memoirs written by former political prisoners of Stalinist and post-Stalinist labour camps<sup>57</sup>. Stella and Clech point out that it is within Gulags that non-heterosexual practices were visible<sup>58</sup>, resulting in same-sex desire being «symbolically confined to the prison camp, an environment where they could find expression and be tolerated as a surrogate of heterosexual relations and justified by the need to satisfy one's sexual urges in an "unnaturally" same-sex environment»<sup>59</sup>.

Another participant, Ivan, who identifies as a pansexual in his mid-forties, also speaks about Soviet prisons and Gulags as having a lasting impact on queer experiences in today's Kazakhstan.

[...] we are very much affected by prison subculture. [...] For example, they ask, "Who are you in life?" ["*Kto ty po zhizni?*"] "Are you a real man?" ["*muzhik*"] And based on that they put you into castes. In prison subculture, there is a category called "*opushennyj*", considered to mean beyond reach ["*schitajutsia priamo za gran'ju*"], I mean they are like untouchables, no one talks to them... no one sits near them or uses their dishes. They are discriminated against. This started, I

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<sup>55</sup> *Ivi*, 236.

<sup>56</sup> Kuntsman A., *With a Shade of Disgust. Affective Politics of Sexuality and Class in Memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag*, in *Slavic Review*, 2009, 68, 2, 308-328.

<sup>57</sup> Toker L., *Return from Archipelago. Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000.

<sup>58</sup> Clech A., *Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic*, cit.

<sup>59</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian Lives*, cit., 34.

don't know, maybe in the Soviet period from Gulags, when half or at least a third of people were either in prisons or affected by prison culture, right? This Soviet culture... it has dissolved, and it affects [us]. And here and in Russia, you feel it very acutely. So, if you are gay, it means that you are *opushennyj*.

What is striking in this extract is Ivan's awareness of the role of *opushennyj*[e] and links to the perversive effects of Soviet Gulags and late prison culture on the views about queer people in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Healey, along with Ol'ga Zhuk and Vladimir Kozkovskii, highlight the hostile depiction of queer people in dissident literature<sup>60</sup>. Consistent with Ivan's description, men who were perceived as feminine within prisons and labour camps were viewed as occupying the lowest ranks (*opushennyj*) and were routinely degraded, abused and exploited by other prisoners<sup>61</sup>.

### *Soviet medical discourses in the narratives of transgender people in Kazakhstan*

Soviet discourses were also present within the narratives of participants who identified as transgender. This was particularly evident when participants spoke about their engagement with medical professionals who were still influenced by Soviet values. Participants referred to them as doctors of «*Sovetskoj zakalki*». The term *Sovetskoj zakalki* kept figuring within the narratives of participants

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<sup>60</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.; Zhuk O., *Russkie Amazonki. Istoriiia Lesbiiskoi Subkul'tury v Rossii XX-go Veka*, Moskva, Izdatel'stvo Glagol, 1998; Kozkovskii V., *Argo Russkoi gomoseksual'noi subkul'tury: materialy k uzyceniju*, in *Zapiski golubogo*, ed. Bulkin A., Moskva, Kamennyj pojas, 1997, 326.

<sup>61</sup> Healey D., *Homosexual desire*, cit.; Horne S.G. et al., *Leaving the Herd. The Lingering Threat of Difference for Same-Sex Desires in Postcommunist Russia*, in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 2009, 6, 2, 88-102; Kuntsman A., *With a Shade of Disgust: Affective Politics of Sexuality and Class in Memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag*, in *Slavic Review*, 2009, 68, 2, 308-328.

in this study. For example, Anna, a participant in her mid-thirties from Karaganda, mentioned that her mother is «*Sovetskoj zakalki*». The Russian dictionary defines it as old-school<sup>62</sup>. However, the word *zakalki* can be translated as “training, tempering, hardening, or forging”<sup>63</sup>. In this chapter, I translate “*Sovetskoj zakalki*” as “Soviet forged”.

For example, Ekaterina, a transgender woman in her mid-twenties, talked about undergoing medical commission in order to access medication and hormones<sup>64</sup>. In the following extract, she describes the experience:

I came to see the head of the commission, and she is a woman “on fire” [*“baba-ogon’”*]. She is also really transphobic; she is Soviet forged. I came wearing a dress, and it was summer and boiling hot so I was not wearing any makeup. And she said to me, “what, you think if you put on a dress you are a woman?” I was angry. She continued, “what, you couldn’t put on normal makeup, at least some eyeshadow?” I responded that it was hot outside and she said, “do you think it is easy to be a woman?”

Here, Ekaterina speaks about the older medical professional, who was likely trained in the Soviet medical education system. The head of the commission dictates the expectations with regard to ex-

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<sup>62</sup> Reverso Context, *Reverso Context* (2019): <https://context.reverso.net/nepesod/русский-английский/старая+закалка> (accessed: 8.03.2022).

<sup>63</sup> *Linguee, No Title* (2019): <https://www.linguee.ru/русский-английский/перевод/закалка.html> (accessed: 8.03.2019).

<sup>64</sup> The current gender recognition procedure in Kazakhstan requires individuals to undergo hormone therapy and surgical genital correction to obtain a legally recognised gender identity, which is possible only if the diagnosis of “transsexualism” is made as a result of passing several commissions and inpatient observation in a psychiatric hospital. The Minister of Health and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *Ob Utverzhenii Pravil Medicinskogo Osvidetel'stvovanija i providenija smeny pola lic s nasstrojstvom polovoj identifikacii* (2015): <http://egov.kz/cms/ru/law/list/V1500010843> (accessed: 23.03.2022).

pressions of a particular kind of femininity, such as wearing makeup that transgender women are supposed to adhere to. Similarly, Oleg – a transgender man in his early thirties – talks about the process of going through a psychiatric commission. Oleg highlights that a transgender person needs to adhere to a specific heteronormative storyline.

For the commission, if you say that you are homosexual, if you don't want to have a family, or if you don't want kids, or just don't want a traditional family [...] for them, it casts as a contraindication [...] So more often, folk go there and say that they just want a stable job, they want to plant a tree and build a home, and then everything is fine. Even better, take a friend and say she is your girlfriend.

Both Oleg and Ekaterina's narratives demonstrate that Soviet forged medical professionals serve to classify and normalise regulatory function, determining what it means to be a "man" and a "woman"<sup>65</sup>. Oleg also talks about the creative ways in which transgender people try to predict and meet the heteronormative and cis-normative expectations of medical professionals by following "traditional" expectations. Oleg continues:

Why are people afraid to go to a psychiatrist? Because people still have this Soviet understanding of psychiatry. Now I will be given a diagnosis and tomorrow I won't be able to get a job because of it. Or I won't be able to get a driving licence. They treat a doctor like a god... what if he says that you are not transgender, what will you do then? That is why when people are about to undergo a commission, they ask ten times about what to expect. How do they know? I don't myself understand how they diagnose? What are they trying to find out? Okay, they are trying to exclude some intersex variations, right? They do some tests and try to understand potential risks and so on. But what is the rest for? Take any man and ask him to go through this commission... let him prove how he is a man...

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<sup>65</sup> Foucault M., *The History of Sexuality. The Will to Knowledge*, vol. I, London, Penguin, 1978.

Oleg's narrative highlights the fear associated with psychiatry by transgender people. Within their article on the state of Russian psychiatry, Caesar Korolenko and Dennis Kensin write that, «to a certain extent the Soviet psychiatric mentality has been preserved among psychiatrists working in administrative and leading official positions»<sup>66</sup>. During the Soviet period, psychiatry was strongly influenced by the Soviet ideology<sup>67</sup> and later criticised for its political abuses<sup>68</sup>. Patient rights were severely restricted<sup>69</sup> and psychiatry was viewed negatively, with mental health issues being heavily stigmatised and people who were deemed “mentally ill” being actively excluded from society<sup>70</sup>. This is consistent with Oleg's description of psychiatrists being viewed as powerful “gods” since medical professionals in today's Kazakhstan act as gatekeepers for transgender people to access the necessary healthcare, which in turn links to their ability to change their documents<sup>71</sup>. Transgender participants within this study explain the attitudes of the medical profession

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<sup>66</sup> Korolenko C.P., Kensin D.V., *Reflections on the past and present state of Russian psychiatry*, in *Anthropology & Medicine*, 2002, 9, 1, 51-64, 61.

<sup>67</sup> Van Voren R., *Political Abuse of Psychiatry – An Historical Overview*, in *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 2010, 36, 1, 33-35; Zajicek B. et al., *Soviet Madness: Nervousness, Mild Schizophrenia, and the Professional Jurisdiction of Psychiatry in the USSR, 1918-1936*, in *Ab Imperio*, 2014, 4, 167-194.

<sup>68</sup> Laveretsky M.D., *The Russian Concept of Schizophrenia. A Review of the Literature*, in *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 1998, 24, 537-557; Spencer I., *Lessons from History. The Politics of Psychiatry in the USSR*, in *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 2000, 7, 355-361.

<sup>69</sup> McDaid D. et al., *Health System Factors Impacting on Delivery of Mental Health Services in Russia. Multi-Methods Study*, in *Health Policy*, 2006, 79, 144-152.

<sup>70</sup> Korolenko C.P., Kensin D.V., *Reflections on the past*, cit.

<sup>71</sup> Alma-TQ, *Violations by Kazakhstan of the Right of Transgender Persons to Legal Recognition of Gender Identity* (2016): [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared\\_Documents/KAZ/INT\\_CCPR\\_CSS\\_KAZ\\_24305\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared_Documents/KAZ/INT_CCPR_CSS_KAZ_24305_E.pdf) (accessed: 2.02.2022).

as being due to their Soviet training, which was primarily directed to «symptoms, syndromes and nosologies», with the emphasis on «how to single out the signs of psychopathology»<sup>72</sup>. Oleg's description of transgender people not knowing what to expect from the psychiatric commission signals the ambiguity of the process and the residual fear of being singled out as “mentally ill” by the medical professional. Noteworthy are the ways in which transgender people try to resist the power of medical professionals [within Oleg's narrative] by predicting expectations, self-fashioning and playing into cis- and hetero-normative assumptions of medical professionals. Questions, however, remain about what happens to those who are unable to “fit” into the matrix of expectations of the medical professionals? What it is like to undergo a medical commission for those who do not fit the binary system of gender, such as non-binary and gender-queer individuals?

## Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate the pervasive impact of Soviet discourses and collective memory where, «for Soviet generations, images of queerness, marginality and criminality have become metonymically entwined through repeated association»<sup>73</sup>. Gulzada emphasises this association retrospectively as she recalls her first encounter with the word lesbian, while Ivan emphasises how the association persists in today's queer culture in Kazakhstan. It is crucial to note that such association is chiefly highlighted within the narratives of older participants, pointing towards the intersec-

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<sup>72</sup> Korolenko C.P., Kensin D.V., *Reflections on the past*, cit., 56.

<sup>73</sup> Stella F., *Lesbian lives and real existing socialism in late Soviet Russia*, in *Queer presences and absences*, eds. Taylor Y. and Addison M., Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 6.

tional nature of queer identities in Kazakhstan where the fact that whether a participant was born, grew up and received an education in the Soviet Union seems to play a significant role in shaping their narratives<sup>74</sup>. The research also shows the link to the Soviet legacy within transgender narratives of medical care and transitioning in Kazakhstan. The narratives of participants in this study indicate effects of stigma and the normalising function of medical professionals in today's Kazakhstan. Furthermore, this study highlights the way people express their agentic power by creatively navigating and negotiating hetero- and cis-normative expectations whilst playing into the assumptions of medical professionals. This chapter contributes towards the growing field of scholarship on post-Soviet gender and sexuality by developing a deeper understanding of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender subjectivities in the context of Kazakhstan.

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<sup>74</sup> Taylor Y., Hines S., Caset M.E., *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

# Is a Homosexual (Poet) a Good Citizen? Queer Discourses in Russian Literature and New “Civic Poetry”<sup>1</sup>

MARTINA NAPOLITANO

We are children of the epoch,  
The epoch is political.  
*Wisława Szymborska*

In 1934, a British Communist party member, Harry Whyte, wrote a letter to Iosif Stalin confronting the Soviet leader with a bold question: «Can an open homosexual be considered a person fit to become a member of the Communist Party?»<sup>2</sup>. Stalin’s answer – a short note on Whyte’s filed letter – was, so to speak, equally frank: «An idiot and a degenerate». If a Communist party member was assumably the ideal Soviet citizen<sup>3</sup>, Stalin’s brief comment suggests

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<sup>1</sup> I am writing this while Russia is conducting a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the consequences of which are already under everyone’s eyes and will be greater and partially unpredictable in the near and far future. It goes without saying that any speculation on the current situation regarding human rights in Russia is subject to changes in the current and future state of affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2018, 165. Stalin’s answer is quoted here too.

<sup>3</sup> To quote a piece of literature of the time: «I’m setting up a commission on everything to do with electricity in the province, and you’re the chairman! Are you a Party member?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, not to worry. You’ll be something of an exception...Why



in very few words what kind of treatment homosexual citizens of the USSR (be they Party members or not) could expect to face in their everyday life – something Dan Healey in particular (among others)<sup>4</sup> has studied in detail.

If we now were to move forward in time and interrogate the contemporary epoch, what answer would we receive to a similar question, or – «can an open homosexual be considered a person fit to become a citizen of the Russian Federation?» Surprisingly enough, the answer is officially provided by the Russian Consti-

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aren't you a member?' 'I don't know myself,' uttered Dushin. 'Does you no good, that doesn't! Get you nowhere, that won't!' said Chunyaev. 'What's wrong with you, don't you fancy joining us building life's meaning in the midst of all matter? One of them, are you then?' 'No, I'm on the right side,' said Dushin, and felt surprised that the mass of the people and the entire Party were building universal truth, whereas he had thought that only he wanted it». Platonov A., *Bread and Reading*, tr. Geoffrey Smith, in *Index on Censorship*, 1991, 20, 8, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Apart from Healey (author of the seminal volume *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001), see also the following works, for example: Engelstein L., *Soviet Policy toward Male Homosexuality*, in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1995, 29, 155-178; Klesh A., *Istoriya russkoi gomoseksual'nosti do i posle oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii: razlichnye podkhody i perspektivy*, in *Kak my pishem istoriyu*, eds. Garreta G., Dufaud G., Pimenova L., Moscow, ROSSPEN, 2013, 335-375. Kozlovsky V., *Argo russkoi gomoseksual'noi subkul'tury. Materialy k izucheniyu*, Benson, Chalidze, 1996; Kuntsman A., *With a Shade of Disgust: Affective Politics of Sexuality and Class in Memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag*, in *Slavic Review*, 2009, 68, 308-328; Roldugina I., *Rannesovetskaya gomoseksual'naya subkul'tura: istoriya odnoi fotografii*, in *Teatr*, 2004, 16, 188-191; *Id.*, "Pochemu my takie lyudi?" *Rannesovetskie gomoseksualy ot pervogo litsa. Novye istochniki po istorii gomoseksual'nikh identichnostei v Rossii*, in *Ab Imperio*, 2016, 2, 183-216; Rudusa R., *Forced Underground: Homosexuals in Soviet Latvia*, Riga, Mansards, 2014; Stella F., *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. Post-Socialism and Gendered Sexualities*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Bell W.T., *Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag*, in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2015, 24, 198-224; Zhuk O., *Russkie amazonki. Istoriya lesbiiskoi subkul'tury v Rossii XX veka*, Moscow, Glagol, 1998.

tution, by way of the 2020 amendments, which not only revised almost one third of the 137 articles and notoriously “reset” Vladimir Putin’s mandates to zero, but introduced unambiguous and prescriptive references regarding the Russian national social and cultural identity (language, culture, religion, historical role of the country, family, childcare)<sup>5</sup>. In particular, article 72 clearly states that *marriage* unequivocally defines «a union of a male and a female»<sup>6</sup>.

If any (good) citizen of a State is to comply with the principles enshrined in the Constitution, it goes without saying that any Russian holding a divergent opinion about what family and marriage are is to be regarded, at least, as a *bad* citizen. However, is there any chance for a homosexual or queer person to be a good citizen of Russia? In a sense, there is.

### Who is the *good citizen*?

To quote a poet, a (good) citizen is «a son worthy of his Fatherland» [*otechestva dostoinyi syn*]. In mid-19th century, Nikolai Nekrasov, recuperating the famous words of Decembrist Kondraty Ryleev «I am not a poet, I am a citizen» and developing specific traits of Pushkin’s oeuvre<sup>7</sup>, initiated a fertile line of «civic poetry» [*grazhdanskaya poeziya*] in Russian literature that still proves pro-

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<sup>5</sup> See also Di Gregorio A., *Dinamiche di contesto e caratteristiche generali della Legge di Emendamento della Costituzione della Russia del 14 marzo 2020. La riforma costituzionale russa del 2020*, in *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie: Diritti, Istituzioni e Società*, 2020, 1, 140-176.

<sup>6</sup> The Russian Constitution is available for consultation online: <https://rm.coe.int/constitution-of-the-russian-federation-en/1680a1a237> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>7</sup> Gippius V., *Nekrasov v istorii russkoi poezii XIX veka*, Moscow, Nauka, 1966, 233-234.

ductive, if simply as an evocative and powerful reference: one of the most successful satirical tv shows in the first 2010s was Dmitry Bykov and Mikhail Efremov's *Citizen Poet* [*Grazhdanin Poet*], whose title is directly indebted to Nekrasov's poem devoted to the *Poet and the Citizen* [*Poet i grazhdanin*, 1855]<sup>8</sup>.

Nekrasov's immortalizing coining of such association between poetry and its civic role reflects and evocatively summarizes an idea that other poets and scholars have suggested as a peculiar trait of Russian culture before and after he did. Yuri Lotman in particular observed that what differentiates the Russian and Western European cultures is, among other things, the societal attitude towards the work of the poet and towards that of other artists: while in Western Europe the poet is equal to the other artists, since the eighteenth century Russian culture perceives the painter, the architect, the musician and the actor as "low" professions suitable for serfs, freedmen, or foreigners; poetry is separated from the other arts, being a noble and "divine" occupation (and therefore, also unpaid). The poet, in this context, is the bearer of a higher truth [*vysshaya istina*], and his Word comes from above. However, in order to fulfill his high civic mission, the poet must also possess some special authority: if in the first half of the eighteenth century (for Mikhail Lomonosov, for instance) the inspiration for the poet's Word came from the State, in the other half of the century «the public authority of the State declines. At the same time, poetry separates from the State and transforms itself first into an active power, and then into an opposing force to the State. Poetry comes to occupy the vacant place of spiritual authority», an authority that was "humiliated" by

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<sup>8</sup> See also Turoma S., *When satire does not subvert. Citizen Poet as nostalgia for Soviet dissidence*, in *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia*, eds. Beumers B., Etkind A., Gurova O., Turoma S., London-New York, Routledge, 2018, 221-242.

Peter the Great, and whose conceptual structures were somehow indirectly transferred to poetry – hence its quasi-divine nature<sup>9</sup>.

This shift in the origin of the poet's authority creates, however, a conceptual problem with no easy solution: if poets are invested with the greatest, quasi-divine consideration in society, yet their Word is but an opposing force to the State, their work discredits and questions the official discourse and its assumptions, their voices invite the audience to critically reconsider, confute, and possibly rebel against the very State they thrive in, should they be considered *good* citizens of their country? Of course, it depends – good for whom, from what perspective, in the context of what type of country, and under the power of what ruling elite.

The renowned writer Vladimir Sorokin recently published a personal comment on the *Guardian*, in which he draws clear-cut parallels between the type of power inaugurated by Ivan the Terrible and the ones that followed it in time – something he defines as Russia's «main tragedy»:

In Russia, power is a pyramid. This pyramid was built by Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century – an ambitious, brutal tsar overrun by paranoia and a great many other vices. With the help of his personal army – the *oprichnina* – he cruelly and bloodily divided the Russian state into power and people, friend and foe, and the gap between them became the deepest of moats. [...] The occupying power had to be strong, cruel, unpredictable and incomprehensible to the people. The people should have no choice but to obey and worship it. [...] Paradoxically, the principle of Russian power hasn't even remotely changed in the last five centuries<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Lotman Yu., *Russkaya literatura poslepetrovskoi epokhi i khristianskaya traditsiya*, in *Id., O poetakh i poezii*, Sankt Peterburg, Iskustvo-SPb, 1996, 255-256.

<sup>10</sup> Sorokin V., *Vladimir Putin sits atop a crumbling pyramid of power*, in *The Guardian*, 27 February 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/27/vladimir-putin-russia-ukraine-power> (last accessed: 29.03.2022). Sorokin is famous for his dystopian novels which describe a near future full of medieval traits (in particular his dilogy, *Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006, and *Sugar Kremlin*, 2008).

Such «occupying power» not only cannot but dislike and disapprove of any opposing force (whether represented by a quasi-divine sect of poets or not), but is also keen on producing sets of prescriptive *texts* (semiotically intended) that clearly delineate the ideal good citizenship. The 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution are but the latest example of this dogmatic process.

### **What is *tradition*?**

In the last few years, the Russian legislation and the official political discourse have incorporated a growing number of expressions linked with the idea of “tradition”, yet failing to clearly define what tradition is in its essence, but rather presenting it under an unequivocally positive light. Such conceptual ambiguity has generated and fed an adaptable doctrine open to contradictions that Marlène Laruelle defines as an «explicit but blurry narrative of conservatism»<sup>11</sup>, which is based on «a few common basic ideological tenets such as anti-Westernism, antiliberalism, and ‘traditional values’»<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Laruelle M., *Putin’s Regime and the Ideological Market. A Difficult Balancing Game*, in *Carnegie*, 16 March 2017: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/16/putin-s-regime-and-ideological-market-difficult-balancing-game-pub-68250> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>12</sup> *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin’s Russia*, eds. Bernsand N. and Törnquist-Plewa B., Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2019, 4. Indeed, while in the early 1990s Russia seemed interested in approaching the “common European home” envisioned (yet in a different context) by Mikhail Gorbachev, over time the Russian power has grown more and more skeptical towards its Western neighbor (mostly due to diplomatic failures at the international level), projecting on society a distorted idea of an alleged European decadence and immorality. According to this view, Russia sets itself apart as a champion of morality and “traditional values” (presented at times as rooted in the Christian-European tradition). This national project, which clearly and consciously distanced the Russian path from the «common European home», has however strengthened in the 2010s, while, «by the time the 2008 international

It is in this context that in 2013 the so called “gay propaganda” law was introduced: namely, it is a federal law for the purpose of protecting children from information advocating for a denial of *traditional* family values, and it prohibits the spreading of «propaganda of *non-traditional* sexual relationships» among minors. I am reluctant to explain such legislative prescriptive tendency with a supposed intrinsic normativity towards which «Russian society tends» as Brian James Baer suggests<sup>13</sup>. I rather consider the Soviet normative experience a more suitable key to understanding, as

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financial crisis hit Russia, the Russian government had no clear strategic direction» (Jonson L., *Russia: Culture, Cultural Policy, and the Swinging Pendulum of Politics*, in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries*, cit., 22). No matter how strongly the Putin and Medvedev presidencies stressed the regained unity and stability of the country, by the end of the first decade of the new millennium support for both was falling under the pressure of problems that seized a society that was still coming to terms with the disappearance of welfarism and the emergence of new and predatory power relations. From this angle, the 2000s will not go down in history as the decade that marked the end of the post-Soviet epoch: it was a transitory decade still indebted with the legacy of the collapse of the previous system, yet looking forward to making Russia «[reemerge] as an economic and military hegemon» and Russians «[be] reborn as the self-confident representatives of an established social and political order» (Platt K., *The Post-Soviet Is Over: On Reading the Ruins*, in *Republic of Letters*, 2009, 1, 2). The political response put in practice by Presidents Medvedev and Putin aimed at finding a «more ‘dynamic’ conservative approach», a «militant authoritarian conservatism» (Jonson L., *Russia*, cit., 25) that could embody the much sought for “national idea” to make Russia great again (and wipe away its post-Soviet dust once and for all). At the Valdai Discussion Club annual meeting held in 2013, Vladimir Putin underlined that it was high time that Russia found an answer to the questions «*Kto my?*» [Who are we?], «*Kem my khotim byt’?*» [Who do we want to be?]. To accomplish the task, like anywhere where a nation had to be formed from scratch, culture and, in particular, the elaboration of a single historical narrative were the best candidates in formulating a new state ideology (on this topic, see in particular Jonson L., *Russia*, cit.).

<sup>13</sup> Baer B.J., *Other Russias. Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 9.

Dan Healey maintains: «modern Russian homophobia [...] originated in the 1930s in the law and policing practices set in train by the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin»<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, it also makes sense observing that “gender politics” is directly linked to the idea of the nation-state, to its creation and modelling<sup>15</sup> (homosexuality and queerness in this context are catch-all topics subject to great and volatile metonymy, as Baer correctly points out<sup>16</sup>). As the Russian ruling elite aimed to make the country reemerge from the savage, “wild” 1990s, and from the socio-economic *cul-de-sac* it went through in its first two post-Soviet decades, the Kremlin inaugurated the crafting of a new national idea, a new suitable idea of the Russian nation. Within this semiotic policy, gender politics played

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<sup>14</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., xi.

<sup>15</sup> See Timm A.R. and Sanborn J.A., *Gender, sex and the shaping of modern Europe: a history from the French Revolution to the present day*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> «One is immediately struck by the signifying power of homosexuality in contemporary Russia, where it has been deployed in literature, cinema, and the press to discuss not only the “usual” issues such as sexual pleasure and decadence, normalcy and vice, and masculinity and femininity, but also such issues as individuality, aesthetics, spirituality, victimhood, and, yes, even Russianness. [...] homosexuality in Russia today belongs in large part to a broader, much contested discourse on democracy, liberalism, personal freedom, and modernity. [...] In Russia homosexuality almost never simply denotes same-sex desire or specific sex acts». Baer B.J., *Other Russias*, cit., 3. Moreover, the stress on the topic of homosexuality in the Russian official discourse is also used as a way to distract the electorates from socio-economic problems, to superficially justify demographic issues (low birth rates and health issues, for example), to “protect” young people while “defending morality” (in 2002 the Duma discussed a bill entitled «On the defense of morality»), and to avoid examining crucial issues related to “masculinity” and male behavior in the late Soviet and post-Soviet context (see Zdravomyslova E., Temkina A., *Krizis maskulinosti v pozdnesovetskom diskurse*, in *O muzhe(n)stvennosti*, ed. Ushakin S., Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002, 432-51; Yusupova M., *Masculinity, Criminality, and Russian Men*, in *Sextures*, 2015, 3, 46-61).

a role, and the fact that in the first post-Soviet years «the “first generation” of Russia’s divided gay and lesbian movement largely failed to ignite a national discussion about queer citizenship»<sup>17</sup> did not promote the emergence of a more inclusive idea of nation and citizenship.

When crafting the present idea (or ideology) of a nation, history came at hand, however misused and distorted for the intended purposes<sup>18</sup>. As a result, the very narrative of history underwent a shift – a shift developed in order to trace an inclusive yet unquestionable thousand-year Russian history that had to comprise the Soviet era, and that could work as a justification for the present time and for the government’s authoritarian policies, re-interpreted as necessary milestones on a millenary line of political “Russian-ness”<sup>19</sup>. Tradition, in this context, served as a fundamental ideological basis, fulfilling two purposes at a time: on the one hand, it justifies present tendencies in diachronic terms, while on the other, it responds to the ideological need for the spreading of a generic anti-Western sentiment (so as to say, “our tradition makes us different, and we must be proud of this difference”). However, tradition – maybe even more than history – is subject to free and controversial rewritings as well.

A seminal work in the field of queer (gay) Russian literature is the anthology *Out of the blue* edited by Kevin Moss in 1997, which shed brand new light on the homosexual theme that can be found both in the classics (from Aleksandr Pushkin to Lev Tolstoy, from Nikolai Gogol to Mikhail Kuzmin) and in contemporary works of Russian authors. Even though the editor underlines that «several

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<sup>17</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 112.

<sup>18</sup> See the already quoted work by Jonson L., *Russia*, cit.

<sup>19</sup> *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia. Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, eds. Suslov M. and Bodin P.A., London-New York, Tauris, 2020, 321.



of these selections also marginalize homosexuality by setting it in another culture (Pushkin's *Imitation of the Arabic*, Leontiev's story set in Crete) or restricting it to a childhood phase (Lermontov's cadet school, Tolstoy's *Childhood*)»<sup>20</sup>, the anthology comes with an enlightening introduction by Simon Karlinsky, which clearly refutes any assumption of a traditional (or even orthodox) homophobic sentiment in Russian society:

The Muscovite period may have been the era of the greatest visibility and tolerance for male homosexuality that the world had seen since the days of ancient Greece and Rome. During the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, foreign travelers and ambassadors, coming from countries where "sodomites" were subjected to torture, burning at the stake, and life-long incarcerations, repeatedly registered their amazement and shock at the unconcealed manifestations of homosexual behavior by Russian men of every social class. [...] Turberville visited Moscow with a diplomatic mission in 1568, the time of one of Ivan the Terrible's worst political purges. The poet was struck not by the carnage, however, but by the open homosexuality of the Russian peasants. [...]

Eastern Orthodox Christianity considered various forms of sexual deviance not as crimes, but as sins, subject to religious jurisdiction. What Eve Levin established was that in this area the main concern was not so much the sex of the participants or the organs involved, but the relative position of the partners during the sex act. The woman below and the man above was permitted as the "natural" way; reversal of this position was "unnatural" and a sin. Homosexual and lesbian contacts were thus sinful, the sin being of the same magnitude as the reversal of positions in heterosexual intercourse. It was of no concern to civil authorities and it could be expiated by going to confession, doing an assigned number of prostrations, and abstaining from meat and milk products for several months. Summing up the testimony of foreign and native observers of Muscovite Russia, the authoritative nineteenth-century historian Sergei Soloviov wrote: «Nowhere, either in the Orient or in the West, was [homosexuality] taken as lightly as in Russia»<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Moss K., *Out of the Blue. Russia's Hidden Gay Literature. An Anthology*, San Francisco, Gay Sunshine Press, 1997, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Karlinsky S., *Russia's Gay Literature and History*, in *Out of the Blue*, cit., 16, 18.

Recuperating Vasily Rozanov's theory of homosexuality as «central to Christian asceticism»<sup>22</sup>, this anthology also suggests a topic noted by Dan Healey too: the paradoxical “traditionality” of the image of the homosexual or queer person as the «suffering martyr, or as tortured soul with spiritual gifts or refinement»<sup>23</sup>.

In light of the above, the use of the epithet “traditional” (or its opposite “non-traditional”) in the current Russian political and legislative discourse not only erases an important side of its real socio-cultural tradition, but it is used to «assert that the range of sexual activity under consideration is novel, alien, and by implication not indigenously Russian»<sup>24</sup>. Being “non-traditional” or living “non-traditionally” equals being something other to (and possibly, intrinsically dangerous for) the contemporary Russian nation.

### Great artists, bad citizens?

«There is no proof of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality» [*net nikakikh dokazatel'stv gomoseksual'nosti Chaikovskogo*]: these words were pronounced by the former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky in an interview to Interfax in September 2013<sup>25</sup> (the year in which the “gay propaganda law” was introduced). Medinsky was referring to a well-known significant trait in the composer's biography<sup>26</sup>, adopting a common strategy for the Russian power that ne-

<sup>22</sup> Moss K., *Out of the Blue*, cit., 11.

<sup>23</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 113.

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Barabash E., *Net nikakikh dokazatel'stv gomoseksual'nosti Chaikovskogo*, in *Interfax*, 17 September 2013: <https://www.interfax.ru/interview/329409> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>26</sup> The world of classical music is full of such cases, however, as a recent volume has demonstrated: Ciammarughi L., *Non tocchiamo questo tasto. Musica classica e mondo queer*, Milano, Edizioni Curci, 2021.

gates the obvious and pragmatically abuses of certain specific words (Ukraine's full-scale invasion in February 2022 was accompanied by plenty of such arguments).

Tchaikovsky's case is a typical example of queer artistry in the Russian culture, and it was a «widely circulating argument»<sup>27</sup> even among homosexuals before 1917. In his volume Healey devotes an entire chapter to another renowned homosexual who – as his diary confirms – «identified with the great Russian composer [Tchaikovsky], suggesting that his own talent was inextricably linked to his sexual deviance»<sup>28</sup>: Vadim Kozin, a successful singer who was first sentenced in 1945 over a combination of charges (propaganda against Soviet power in wartime, sex offenses with minors, and sodomy), then in 1959 was arrested again for homosexuality offenses, and lived in Magadan until his death in 1994. «So what if Tchaikovsky violated hypocritical morality, but he was a good, kind-hearted, sympathetic man. The people loved him» – he wrote in his diary<sup>29</sup> – «You can't fool the people, the wise Russian people!».

Even though in Soviet times the “crime” of homosexuality (or sodomy) was used against artists mainly for politically charged cases (in order to destroy their reputation)<sup>30</sup>, authorities used many other ways to persecute queer intellectuals – writer Evgeny Kharitonov's biography (1941-1981) is telling in this sense<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 85.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Quoted *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Other famous cases are that of director Sergei Paradzhanov or poet Gennady Trifonov.

<sup>31</sup> «As an underground writer and a gay man, Kharitonov was under double pressure from the KGB and the police. In 1979 he was suspected in the murder of a gay friend and interrogated. It may have been this added pressure that led to his premature death». Moss K., *Out of the Blue*, cit., 196.

Questioning the homophobic attitude widespread in the Soviet and Russian dominant discourse, Kharitonov for his part – as Kozin did in his diary – polemically underlined the link between beauty (or art in general) and the queer person: «What you find beautiful is in part established by us, but you don't always guess this»<sup>32</sup>. His *Leaflet* (*Listovka*) ends in apocalyptic – menacing, or simply prophetic? – tones: «the more visible we are, the closer the End of the World»<sup>33</sup>. The world Kharitonov hinted at here was, presumably, that of the «stagnant morality of our Russian Soviet Fatherland»<sup>34</sup>, as he describes it in his «gay manifesto»<sup>35</sup>. However, despite his words, this world still exists today, and similarly to the Soviet system it has gradually adjusted its apparatus of laws in order to move this menacing “end” further ahead in time. Or, as Masha Gessen suggested, to see «the spectacle of history shifting abruptly into reverse»<sup>36</sup>.

Yet, today something has changed: the “second generation”<sup>37</sup> of Russian queer activists and artists has embraced a clearer stance and showed a stronger resistance to the system<sup>38</sup>, however growingly aggressive and suffocating. This generation comprises young people born mainly (but not only) between 1985 and 1995, of-

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<sup>32</sup> Kharitonov E., *Leaflet*, in *Out of the Blue*, cit., 225.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> So Dan Healey defines Kharitonov's *Leaflet*. Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 101.

<sup>36</sup> Gessen M., *My life as an out gay person in Russia*, in *The Guardian*, 15 November 2013: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/15/life-as-out-gay-russia> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>37</sup> With “first generation” I'd refer instead to queer people active in the late Soviet and post-Soviet context of the 1990s.

<sup>38</sup> From Healey analysis, it emerges that instead no clear gay or queer activism was present in the diverse panorama of dissent inside the Soviet Union. Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 94.

ten far from Moscow and Petersburg (a biographical trait that is not irrelevant)<sup>39</sup>. Some of them are still in the process of personal formation and find on the Internet the primary outlet for their expression. These young people are often well educated and trained not only in literary but also in philosophical matters, regardless of their family social background. They have assimilated the set of notions propounded by post-structuralism and deconstructive criticism in their most diverse forms (including feminism, gender and queer studies), and even if not all of them have a direct experience of life in Europe or North America, they are well acquainted with the characteristics and issues typical of the so-called Western society. This generation has witnessed and actively participated in the increasing socio-political upheavals that culminated in particular in 2011-2012 (Bolotnaya square protests being a turning point in this), which determined «a deep crisis of [the] symbolical orders» in Russian society<sup>40</sup>. From that moment onwards, the claim of one's own “politicality” in the creative act has taken on new legitimacy and value in Russian culture, marking a profound break with the declarations of apparent apoliticality expressed by the members of the avant-garde of the late Soviet era<sup>41</sup>. Such “political” claim stands

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<sup>39</sup> «Most of them were born in little towns in Siberia, the Urals, or Russia's Far East, and moved to Moscow or St. Petersburg as teenagers. They witnessed the disintegration of the Soviet social order. They watched as the ruins of Soviet-enforced modernization became intertwined with post-Soviet scenes of alienation and economic decay in provincial cities and towns built around Soviet military plants and factories, that remained unwanted and unclaimed till the new revival of the arms race». Kukulin I., *Cultural Shifts in Russia since 2010: Messianic Cynicism and Paradigms of Artistic Resistance*, in *Russian Literature*, 2018, 96-98, 244.

<sup>40</sup> *Ivi*, 222.

<sup>41</sup> «[B]ack in the 1980s, as well as during Perestroika and in the 1990s, writers who were close to non-conformist circles or influenced by them preached the superiority of literature that was independent from any kind of political or ideological position». Lipovetsky M., *The Formal is Political*, in *SEEJ*, 2016, 60, 2, 185.

in open contrast with the “cynicism” prevalent in today’s Russia, or at least to a certain “law of the strongest” propagated by official rhetoric<sup>42</sup>. The diffusion of artistic forms of resistance responds today to the need to counter an imposed normativity, the denial of multiplicity and pluralism, the denigration of marginality and weakness, while emphasizing the natural plurality of human experience and creativity.

Beyond the natural divergences among the different personalities and artistic projects, what emerges from an initial analysis is the common theme of personal or (more often) collective experience of trauma or violence that makes its way in more and less explicit forms into these works<sup>43</sup>. The current artistic and poetic interest in such a topic can be identified in several converging lines of reasoning (not necessarily in the following order): 1. the assimilation of post-structuralist and deconstructive perspectives (including notions from gender and queer studies); 2. the natural evolution of the Russian literary tradition, which has always been open to defamiliarizing points of view and to the pursuit of a higher level of *istina*, truth; 3. the reflection of crucial political and social issues; 4. the personal quest for a poetic language able to express «the ineffable level of perception»<sup>44</sup>. The main artistic ground today is poetry (that “Nekrasovian” *civic poetry* that finds now new fertile ground) – which replaced prose in the analysis of historical trauma, once its

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<sup>42</sup> See also Lipovetsky M., *Intelligentsia and cynicism: political metamorphoses of postmodernism*, in *Russian Journal of Communication*, 2018, 1, 1-18.

<sup>43</sup> See also Lvovsky S., *Distinguishing Trauma*, in *Russian Studies in Literature*, 2018, 54, 1-3, 192-220.

<sup>44</sup> Kukulin I., *Interv'yu s Il'ei Kukulinym (Besedovala Evgeniya Suslova)*, in *Palimpsest*, 2019, 3, 105.

traditional prerogative<sup>45</sup> – but also the innovative forms of dramatic art (*New Drama*)<sup>46</sup>. Finally, as Healey underlines, «this second generation [is] more committed to low-key community support and carefully targeted public interventions»<sup>47</sup>, also in regard to LGBT issues.

In this novel socio-cultural context, the introduction of the law against the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships” in 2013 had – paradoxically – a powerful reverse effect: by officially suffocating debates and limiting the production and diffusion of queer material in Russia, this legislative document turned LGBT issues into a central topic and a key axis for socio-cultural resistance, however risky and exposed to criminal charges. It is in this context that once again queerness underwent a profound metamorphical process, embracing the most diverse instances of democracy and liberalism.

### Reasserting citizenship

In a recent study, Roman has suggested that what this new generation of poets is enacting is the reversal of the apparent status of vulnerability in the current socio-political context of Russia, as they consciously transform it into a special kind of “agency”: following Judith Butler’s reconceptualization of vulnerability, Utkin states that such a «deliberate exposure to potential hate and violence –

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<sup>45</sup> Kukulin I., *Sozdat’ cheloveka, poka ty ne chelovek...*, in *Novyi mir*, 2010, 1, [http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi\\_mi/2010/1/ku11.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2010/1/ku11.html) (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>46</sup> See the already quoted Lipovetsky M., *The Formal is Political*, cit. In regard to queer theater, see also the anthology *Contemporary Queer Plays by Russian Playwrights*, ed. Klepikova T., London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 8.

the act of being different – connotes agency»<sup>48</sup>. I would go further and suggest that this specific agency works in a twofold manner: on the one hand, it form- and content-wise disrupts normativity (both at the level of language and themes, e.g. questioning the use of the term “tradition” and the notion of masculinity), while on the other it redefines a cultural space that is more inclusive and diverse than the one that is top-down designed and propagandized. This agency is at once a destructive and constructive force that reasserts the “citizenship” of so far excluded socio-cultural strata and discourses within Russian life. In semiotic terms, if the Constitution is a prescriptive text that activates a hierarchical, immanent, and didactic mechanism and thus responds – in Yuri Lotman’s words – to the «Self-Other model»<sup>49</sup>, the queer addressee, although being supposedly deprived of any agency in this regard, consciously and creatively rejects this model and carves out agency for the rewriting of this and other socio-cultural prescriptive texts.

The ways queer artists enact this process vary a lot. Dmitry Kuzmin is, for example, openly assertive in his critique of the purported “traditional values” in his 2013 poem *On the day of the Russian literary congress* [*V den’ rossiiskogo literaturnogo sobraniya*]:

ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши духовные скрепы,  
 ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши традиционные ценности,  
 ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши крокодиловы слёзы  
 о самой читающей (и самой расстреливающей писателей) стране,  
 ебал я в рот и в жопу вашу «глубокую тревогу»  
 об «оскудении мысли и, как следствие, одичании душ»

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<sup>48</sup> Utkin R., *Queer Vulnerability and Russian Poetry after the ‘Gay Propaganda’ Law*, in *The Russian Review*, 2021, 80, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Lotman Yu., *Avtokommunikatsiya: “Ya” i “Drugoi” kak adresaty (O dvukh modelyakh kommunikatsii v sisteme kul’tury)*, in *Id.*, *Semiosfera*, Saint Petersburg, Iskusstvo, 2000, 164-165.



у народа, ежедневно растлеваемого официальными media,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши секции и пленарные заседания,  
ваши комитеты и комиссии, банкеты и фуршеты,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу вашу фамильную гордость,  
крыловские гуси, годные лишь на жаркое<sup>50</sup>

I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your spiritual bounds,  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your traditional values,  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your crocodile tears  
about the country that reads the most (and kills its writers the most),  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your “deep concern”  
about the “impoverishment of thought and, consequently, the degradation of the  
souls”  
of people who are molested on a daily basis by the official media,  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your sections and plenary sessions,  
your committees and commissions, banquets and receptions,  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your family pride,  
Krylov’s geese, fit only to be roasted

Transgender poet Friedrich Chernyshov more personally describes the attitude of people he faces in his everyday life in a poem written to publicly support artist Yulia Tsvetkova, charged in November 2019 with producing “pornography” for sharing her drawings of the female body online:

молодая женщина в метро  
заслоняет от меня своего ребенка  
не смотри говорит не смотри  
приставляет ладонь словно шору  
не смотри на него мой козленочек  
вдруг ты сам таким станешь  
все люди с цветными волосами пидоры<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted from Kuzmin’s blog: <https://dkuzmin.livejournal.com/531973.html> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>51</sup> The poem is available online: <https://feminisms.co/tsvetkova/5#3> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

a young woman in the metro  
 shields her baby from me  
 don't look she says don't look  
 she holds up her palm like a shield  
 don't look at him my little baby goat  
 you'd suddenly become like that yourself  
 all people with colored hair are faggots

Feminist poet Galina Rymbu chooses to describe a gay friend, Zhenya (whose name gives this poem its title), presenting this figure as a positive hero disrupting general assumptions (cooking borscht, for example, a “traditional” female activity) and asserting novel, more equal, and inclusive models:

И тут пришёл Женья вместе с мужем Сашей.  
 Он принёс с собой большую кастрюлю с борщом –  
 сам приготовил и захотел поделиться.

[...]

А Женья рассказывал про свой борщ,  
 как он его делал, и вообще, как он любит готовить и приглашать домой  
 гостей-активистов: выпить немного, поесть, передохнуть, очнуться.

[...]

Женья Павловский:  
 гей с левыми убеждениями,  
 бывший профсоюзный активист,  
 разнорабочий,  
 повар, строитель,  
 человек из  
 Дагестана,  
 где...

Он, сам того не зная, многим со мной поделился.  
 На самом деле,  
 всё важное в нём сошлось.  
 Открытый, витальный, красноречивый,  
 для меня именно он стал примером будущего,  
 надеждой настоящего,  
 я так и думала про него:

ВОТ НАСТОЯЩИЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИОНЕР

не с книжным засушенным знанием  
(хотя и не без знания теории в тех местах,  
где она может быть реально полезна)  
но с силой опыта, силой самой жизни,  
которая может перевернуть любой мир,  
смахнуть любой авторитарный режим,

как пёрышко с лица,  
как ниточку с плеча друга<sup>52</sup>.

And then Zhenya came in with his husband, Sasha.  
He brought a big pot of borscht with him:  
he had cooked it himself and wanted to share it.

[...]

And Zhenya was telling about his borscht,  
how he prepared it, and in general, how he loves cooking and inviting home  
guests-activists: have a little drink, eat, take a break, wake up.

[...]

Zhenya Pavlovsky:  
a gay with leftist convictions,  
a former trade union activist,  
a handyman,  
a cook, a construction worker,  
a man from  
Dagestan,  
where...

He, without knowing it himself, shared a lot with me.  
Indeed,  
everything important came together in his figure.  
Open, vital, eloquent,  
he was, for me, an example of the future,  
the hope of the present,  
that's what I thought of him:

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<sup>52</sup> The poem is available online: <https://feminisms.co/tsvetkova/5#3> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

THIS IS A REAL REVOLUTIONARY...

not with a bookish, dried-up knowledge  
(although not lacking theoretical knowledge in areas  
where it can be really useful)  
but with the power of experience, the power of life itself,  
which can turn any world upside down,  
sweep away any authoritarian regime,

like a feather from one's face,  
like a string from a friend's shoulder.

In her *Songs about love and motherland* [*Pesni o liubvi i rodine*, 2018], Rimma Agliullina clearly states that poets have the right to «sing» their own country in something other than an imposed celebrative «anthem»:

если каждый первый мужчина этой страны  
желает мне зла

есть  
у меня  
дом?  
не каждая песня о Родине – это гимн<sup>53</sup>.

if every single man in this country  
wishes me bad

do I  
have  
a home?

not every song about the Motherland is an anthem.

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<sup>53</sup> The poem is available online: [https://45parallel.net/rimma\\_agliullina/pis-mo\\_pered\\_ischeznoveniem/](https://45parallel.net/rimma_agliullina/pis-mo_pered_ischeznoveniem/) (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

The reassertion of a legitimate citizenship for queer discourses in Russian society riskily proposed by these socio-cultural *artists*<sup>54</sup> (apart from the quoted poets, we can also recall – at least – Oksana Vasyakina, Yulia Podlubnova, Lolita Agamalova, Lida Yusupova, Elena Kostyleva, Dariya Serenko, Aleksandr Ilyanen, Ilya Danishevsky, Aleksandr Averbukh), though denied and persecuted by the official discourse, embodies a different modality of being a Russian citizen today: these artists are actively working to craft a better nation for all, in which they will simply cease to be *bad* citizens.

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<sup>54</sup> The word “artivism” was coined by artist Anton Nikolaev: Nikolaev A., *Ob artivizme, provintsii i politike*, in *Dialog iskusstv*, 2011, 5: <https://di.mmoma.ru/news?mid=2608&id=1070> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

# «Are These Guys Gay or Merely from Moscow?»: Homonationalism and Martyrology in Ukrainian Literature, 1991-Present

SANDRA JOY RUSSELL

«no stinking fsb trash/fuckers with rotten teeth and tridents in camouflage/no bad Russian air/nor nationalist Ukrainian dream»  
– Friedrich Chernyshov, from *Are These Guys Gay or Merely*

## Introduction: Ukraine's Illiberal Specters

Even prior to Ukraine's transition to independence in 1991, there emerged perceptible shifts in Ukrainian writers' representation of their own embodied subjectivities throughout perestroika. This included a turn to more open and subversive representations of the erotic that continued to develop rapidly in the early post-Soviet years, wherein authors engaged with more explicit sexual themes – including queer sex. Yuri Andrukhovych's (1960-) 1992 novel, *Recreations* (*Recreatsii*), for instance, includes a queer character, Khomsky (sometimes referred to in the novel as «Khomo-homo»), and Oksana Zabuzhko's (1960-) 1998 short story, *Girls* (*Divchat-*

ka), which focuses on a sapphic relationship between two young women, as well as her 1996 *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* [*Polovi doslidzhennia z ukrainskoho seksu*]. Both authors narrativize, and even mythologize, the nation as itself a sexual project – deployed through its subjects’ bodies, negotiating, at once, the co-mingling of power, pleasure, and even violence. The shift toward more visible representations of homosexuality and queer desire in the Ukrainian context is, importantly, not the product of a post-communist sexual progress narrative. Dan Healy notes in *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*<sup>1</sup>, in the Russian context, homosexuality and homoeroticism had thriving subcultures during its imperial status, decriminalized in 1922 and recriminalized by the Soviet Union in 1934. Similarly, Robert Kulpa’s work on nationalisms and sexuality in Central and East European contexts explores the extent to which Western hegemonies inform assumptions around sexualities and nationalisms in «non-Western realities»<sup>2</sup>. The Ukrainian context reflects such historical complexities and aberrations with respect to the social and political imaginaries around sexuality, and likewise, their re-imaginings have been entangled in the ongoing processes of Ukraine’s liberalization.

Ukrainian literature of the 1990s is often discussed in relation to the emergence of an independent Ukraine. It is positioned and critiqued in relation to a national or collective sense of “newness” or as Tamara Hundorova writes in *The Post-Chornobyl Library*, forms of «cultural restoration» as part of a postapocalyptic, post-

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<sup>1</sup> Healy D., *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia. The Regulation of Gender and Sexual Dissent*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Kulpa R., *Nations and Sexualities – ‘West’ and ‘East’*, in *De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Western European Perspectives*, eds. Kulpa R. and Mizielińska J., Farnham-Surrey, Ashgate, 2011, 43.

modern project. This restorative cultural project she attributes to «the binary of completeness/incompleteness, which played a role in the processes of cultural development in Ukraine in the 1980s and 1990s»<sup>3</sup>. While more recent emergence of queerness and queer sex in the post-Soviet Ukrainian literary context has certainly challenged existing norms around sex and sexuality, I consider the extent to which it has also been imbricated in the development of nationalist rhetoric. By placing Andrukhovych and Zabuzhko's texts in conversation with the work of contemporary Ukrainian transgender poet, Friedrich Chernyshov, whose poetry confronts nationalism and militarized state violence through its embodied representations of queer sex, I trace the extent to which the emergence of a queer, post-Soviet Ukrainian literary genealogy has been entangled in the rhetorics of nationalism and martyrology. Moreover, I consider Jasbir Puar's work on homonationalism in *Terrorist Assemblages*, as well as Kulpa's critiques regarding Western framings of nationalism in the context of CEE, to consider the relationship between Ukraine's LGBT rights with its processes of liberalization and democratization. In many ways, these processes that rely on neoliberal values have undermined more liberatory articulations of queer identities. In the context of early post-Soviet Ukrainian literature, I see this emerging through the inclusion of queer desire as a pathologized symptom of a fraught and uncertain national identity. The symbolic presence of homosexuality, in other words, is not a narrative antidote to violent histories, it is, rather, a pathological outcome of those histories.

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<sup>3</sup> Hundorova T., *The Post-Chornobyl Library. Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s*, tr. S. Yakovenko, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute Press, 2019, 56.



Emily Channell-Justice describes this tension among the development of LGBT+ rights and leftist politics and an independent Ukraine as part of Ukraine's ongoing relationship with «'Europe' – real and imagined», in which she explores the extent to which «gay rights [are] an essential component of Ukraine being 'part of' Europe»<sup>4</sup>. I include this tension in my own exploration because LGBTQ+ rights – as part of a broader human rights framework – have often been positioned as barometers for evaluating the development of a free society. These measurements of social equality are frequently entangled in progress narratives that are incomplete at best, and moreover, established through a reliance on particularly Western imaginaries of sexuality and sexual behavior. Such modes of identity formation have been vital to the production of sexual subjectivities through both the regulation and control of bodies as well as the structural establishments of social belonging, through which such regulation is sustained. These apparatuses ultimately ensure the maintenance of structural power under capitalism – what Michel Foucault refers to as biopower, or the ways in which, «the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed»<sup>5</sup>. My consideration of these heteropatriarchal deployments in the Ukrainian context relates to a problem that is twofold: Ukraine's history as an object of imperial domination,

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<sup>4</sup> Channell-Justice E., *LGBT+ Rights, European Values, and Radical Critique: Leftist Challenges to LGBT+ Mainstreaming in Ukraine*, in *Decolonizing Queer Experience: LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. Id., Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020, 76.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault M., *The History of Sexuality Volume 1. An Introduction*, tr. R. Hurley, New York, Vintage Books, 1990, 139.

and the ways in which such forms of domination have manifested in the language of martyrology.

To explore this sexual relationship to a national idea, I consider critiques of Puar's work on homonationalism in *Terrorist Assemblages* as an entry point for complicating Ukraine's post-Soviet negotiation of more expansive conceptions of sexual citizenship as a way of aligning itself with an idea of "Europeanness". While Puar's focus is on the US context, and moreover, the ways in which sexual subjectivity has, more recently, been used as a counterpoint (what she refers to as «sexual exceptionalism») to terrorism, her analysis bears some usefulness for other national and political contexts. She observes how «the contemporary U.S. heteronormative nation actually relies on and benefits from the proliferation of queerness, especially in regard to sexually exceptional homonational and its evil counterpart, the queer terrorist of elsewhere»<sup>6</sup>. Yet as scholars of CEE have pointed out, this framing does not accurately fit a post-socialist context. As Channell-Justice and Tamar Shirinian write, post-socialist nationalisms themselves have not yet «taken up the ideological project of homonationalism», and have instead relied on what Kevin Moss calls «good old fashioned heteronationalism»<sup>7</sup>. Scholars have, moreover, critiqued the use of homonationalism in the region as yet another way of reproducing colonialist intellectual interventions. For instance, Roman Leksikov and Dafna Rafchok argue that post-socialist contexts have little in common with the settler-colonial contexts of the U.S. and Israel through which the term emerged. They, instead, offer the term "homo-neoliberalism" as a way of nuancing some of the political

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<sup>6</sup> Puar J., *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, Duke, 2007, xxv.

<sup>7</sup> Channell-Justice E., T. Shirinian, *Introduction*, in *Decolonizing Queer Experience*, cit., 5.

and ideological conditions of the post-socialist world<sup>8</sup>. Channell-Justice, on the other hand, while acknowledging the problems Leksikov and Rafchok articulate, includes Puar in the Ukrainian case by responding to her assertion that homonationalism materializes when «some homosexual bodies [are seen] as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental re-orientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality»<sup>9</sup>. In Ukraine, as Channell-Justice considers, «we do not see that some LGBT+ bodies are worth protecting; rather, we see that all LGBT+ bodies are *only sometimes* worth protecting – only when Ukraine is making a claim on a European identity»<sup>10</sup>.

In addressing the workings of nationalisms past and present, I oppose a framing of Ukrainian nationalism that reproduces a colonialist “othering” through an oppositional “good” versus “bad” nationalism – with Western nationalism implicitly viewed as “progressive,” “LGBTQ friendly,” and non-Western nationalisms as symptomatic of an endemic backwardness, or “homophobic,” “traditional,” “authoritarian.” Leksikov and Rachok describe this in their discussion of the recent derivative term, *vyshyvatsnik*<sup>11</sup>, or «bad Ukrainian nationalist», this is another way of constructing

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<sup>8</sup> Leksikov R., Rafchok D., *Beyond Western Theories: On the Use and Abuse of ‘Homonationalism’ in Eastern Europe*, in *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Resistance, Representation and Identity*, eds. Buyantueva R. and Shevtsova M., New York, Plagrave-MacMillan, 2020, 25-49.

<sup>9</sup> Puar J., *Terrorist Assemblages*, cit., 337.

<sup>10</sup> Channell-Justice E., *LGBT+ Rights*, cit., 88.

<sup>11</sup> *Vyshyvatsnik*, according to Leksikov and Rachok, is a neologism that emerged in the Ukrainian LGBTI community – *vyshy* referring to an ethnic and cultural Ukrainian identity, and *vatsnik* referring to a nostalgia for the Soviet Union or equally, a pro-Stalin, authoritarian politics (40). They reject this term, considering its potential to participate in «social racism». I agree that this exhibits ethnocentric prejudices, but the racism in this context requires further complication, so as to articulate the processes of racialization unique to CEE contexts.

a dichotomous «progressive west» and «backwards east»<sup>12</sup>. I would add, this is another way of disqualifying so-called “second world” epistemologies, thus privileging Eurocentric, and thus colonialist, framings. In the context of gender and sexuality studies (which I see as intimately tied to deployments of nationalism), these framings produce narrow, incomplete imaginaries around these categories – which are themselves, epistemological sites.

Considering these definitional problems and limitations, I resist a superimposition of Western liberatory frameworks in former Soviet world and I agree that nationalism’s presence in Ukraine requires more precise and localized tools for its reckoning. My purpose in this chapter is to explore shifts toward more explicit literary representations of queerness *vis-à-vis* the shifts in the language around nationalism and liberalism, and I agree with Chanell-Justice that a critique of the coupling of democratic and capitalist development in Ukraine is merited. For this reason, I include the term homonationalism provisionally and in combination with a discussion of the martyrological – what Uilleam Blacker refers to as «a romantically-inflected paradigm» and a «paradigm of memory»<sup>13</sup> – to consider how the triangulation of liberalization, nationalism, and LGBT equality are often positioned as evidence of Ukraine’s alignment with Europe. My turn to literature, in this sense, maps how some of the shifting representations of queerness and queer desire participate in and disrupt the ways in which gender and sexuality have been embedded in the development of a national idea. Likewise, equally significant for Ukraine’s national

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<sup>12</sup> Leksikov R., Rachok D., *Beyond Western Theories*, cit., 40.

<sup>13</sup> Blacker U., *Martyrdom, Spectacle, and Public Space: Ukraine’s National Martyrology from Shevchenko to the Maidan*, in *Martyrdom and Memory in Eastern Europe*, eds. Blacker U. and Fedor J., special issue of *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, 2015, 1, 2, 257-292.

identity has been the presence and subversion of the martyrological in shaping national memory. In the case of Andrukhovych and Zabuzhko, neither include martyrological language as a form of nostalgia, in fact, their inclusion of pathologized queer desire subverts this expectation, particularly for Andrukhovych. However, I consider how the martyrological, as a “built-in” narrative for national “myth creation,” is deployed especially through literature as an opposition to oppressive forms of imperialism and colonialism and, I argue, relies on “acceptable” and thus legible performances of gendered and sexual citizenship.

### **Queer Deviations: Sexing the National Idea**

My emphasis on the post-Soviet literary shift toward more visible representations of queerness and queer sex is not to invest in a progress narrative regarding LGBT rights in Eastern Europe. Moreover, in the context of Andrukhovych and Zabuzhko, I do not view their respective representations as attempts to elevate a gay rights political framework, nor do I view them as entirely ambivalent. Rather, I see both authors as integrating homosexuality – which, like feminism, was viewed throughout the Soviet Union as a Western import – thematically as a gesture toward Ukraine’s complicated relationship with both itself and the West. In this regard, I consider how forms of nationalism (or nationalisms) were in concert with the transformation of Ukraine’s political landscape in the 1990s, and likewise, both Andrukhovych and Zabuzhko’s work during this period narrativize the embodied entanglements of a shifting national consciousness. These representations are not necessarily positive renderings of homosexuality or queer desire, and in the case of *Recreations*, mention of Khomo’s queerness is often more of a punchline about his general “perverseness” rather than a defining feature. Yet both texts do, at the very least, bring visibility – and

perhaps legibility – to non-normative sexual identities and bonds despite histories of censorship of non-normative sex and sexuality.

Andrukhovych and Zabuzhko have equally been at the forefront of Ukraine's literary scene throughout the end of the Soviet years and up through the present, contributing poetry, fiction, essays, and criticism. Born in Ivano-Frankivsk, Andrukhovych was a founding member of the *Bu-Ba-Bu*<sup>14</sup> group of poets established in 1985, at the onset of perestroika, and who sought to reflect through poetry and performance the ways in which they saw Ukraine's changing political and cultural domains becoming more carnivalesque<sup>15</sup>, signaling a move away from Soviet realism and literature's role as a utilitarian tool. The sweep of Andrukhovych's work, particularly in the 1990s, reflects anxieties around Ukraine's shifting intellectual and cultural landscape throughout glasnost and into the present period. As Mark Andryczyk observes, «transformation and change are the key ideas of this person, accompanied by an uncertainty of what exactly Ukraine will change into»<sup>16</sup>. Zabuzhko's work, similarly, responds to the relationship between Ukraine's national history and individual lives. Born in Lutsk, Zabuzhko emerged as a poet in the last Soviet years, honing her voice as one of the leading feminist writers in Ukraine, responding and bringing attention to long censored themes including sex, sexual violence, rape, masturbation, and menstruation<sup>17</sup>. However, like Andrukho-

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<sup>14</sup> The three syllables *Bu-Ba-Bu* stand for «бурлеск, балаган, буфоната» [burlesque, balagan, and buffonada], and along with Andrukhovych, the group also included fellow members Yuri Vynnychuk, Les Poderviansky, and Mukhailo Brynykh.

<sup>15</sup> For further reading on the Ukrainian literary carnivalesque, please see Tamara Hundorova's *The post-Chornobyl Library*, cit. and Rostyslav Semkiv's *The Return of Burlesque*, cit.

<sup>16</sup> Andryczyk M., *The Intellectual as Hero in 1990s Ukrainian Fiction*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> This was particularly evident in Zabuzhko's *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, which was initially not well-received, but is now widely regarded as groundbreaking

vych, I do not see her portrayal of a sapphic relationship in *Girls* as a positive rendering of queerness (nor is it entirely negative), rather, I see it as representative of the ways in which Zabuzhko sees sex and sexuality as instrumentalized and weaponized in the development of a national idea.

Andrukhovych's *Recreations* begins with the novel's four main characters, Orest Khomsky, Rostyslav Martofliak, Hyrts Shtundera, and Iurii Nemyrich – all poets – who are on their way to the fictional town of Chortopil (Devilsville) for the equally fictional Festival of the Resurrecting Spirit just prior to the end of the Soviet period. In nearly every regard, these four men are antithetical to previous imaginaries of Ukrainian national poets – neither national servants nor modest. Moreover, the presence of “deviant” performances of gender and sexuality allows Andrukhovych's parody of Ukraine at the cusp of independence to become more “promiscuous,” or what Hundorova refers to as the «vortex of the carnivalized», emphasizing the «phallic Festival» the poets are attending, and in so doing, he ultimately «demystifies both the image of the national poet and the carnival itself»<sup>18</sup>. The audience is given this information through Martofliak's wife, Marta, who describes the poets as, «talented boys, honest, not mercenary, flower of the nation, children of the new age, thirty-year-old poets, each imagines he's the centre of the universe, but really it's only their sexual frustration and feverish egomania»<sup>19</sup>. They are, at once, anticipated to represent a national imaginary of a “new generation” of Ukrainian poets, moving the country toward a brighter future through poetry; while at the same, they are at the mercy of their

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text in contemporary Ukrainian feminist thought.

<sup>18</sup> Hundorova T., *The Post-Chornobyl* Library, cit., 118-119.

<sup>19</sup> Andrukhovych Y., *Recreations*, tr. Marko Pavlyshyn, Edmonton, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1998, 24.

basest desires, preoccupied with sex, and too drunk to write or read their poetry. Andrukhovych, moreover, is, in a large sense, writing against a tradition of martyrological portrayals of Ukraine's national poets (for instance Taras Shevchenko), portraying them instead as erratic, self-serving hedonists who are incapable of elevating a national consciousness.

While scholars including Hundorova, Andryczyk, and Pavlyshyn have analyzed promiscuity in the novel more generally, here I narrow in on Andrukhovych's inclusion of queer representations of sexuality and gender. I do so to consider not only how he subverts his readers' moral expectations for what literature "does," but also as part of how the figure of the homosexual specifically challenges particularly gendered imaginaries around sexual citizenship, particularly with regards to Soviet (particularly Stalinist) constructions of masculinity. This is evident in Marta's description of Khomsky's "queer deviations" not only in his sexual behaviors but also in his performance of gender:

Anyway, what do they know about legs, all their fantasies about women are twisted and pathological, treatment is what they need, particularly Khomsky with his queer deviations, Khomo-homo, he got dressed up as a hooker for Oleksa's birthday party, put on make-up, flashed his thighs in fishnet stockings, danced a tango with Nemyrych, then announced he was going to do a striptease and, gyrating to some endless disco tune, began to undress, the interesting thing was that he really did have a bra on, I was on the point of closing my eyes because that idiot really might have stripped naked, but instead he pulled that thing out of his panties, a rubber one admittedly, someone had brought it back for him from the States, it was full of water and he began squirting everybody with it, and then he threw it to the girls, who just about fainted from overexcitement, the moron<sup>20</sup>.

Not only does Andrukhovych give his readers an image of Khomsky's "playing" with his gender and sexuality in this drag per-

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<sup>20</sup> Andrukhovych Y., *Recreations*, cit., 24.



formance, but he also deploys this image through the narrative eyes of Marta, who sees his behavior as part of his “twisted and pathological” condition, entangled in what she sees as his deviant fantasies about women, and symptomatic of his need for psychological intervention. He is, effectively, “failing” in both categories. The presumable dildo he pulls out of his pants is – like his queerness – an American import, gesturing at Ukraine’s shifting relationship with the West. Andrukhovych approaches these identities with neither sensitivity nor explicit moralization, as, again, sexuality in the carnivalesque space of Chortopil is a part of its production and continuity.

In *Girls*, Zabuzhko’s representation of homosexuality is equally embedded in the language of pathologization, not only with regards to sexuality, but as part of the experience of being socialized as female in late Soviet Ukraine. In this regard, the experiences of gender and sexuality are bound up in a shifting national narrative – one that, like the experiences of its central characters – is rooted in uncertainty and turbulence. Hundorova comments on the ways in which Zabuzhko’s writing, in thematizing forms of kinship among women, she is seeking out «the intimate space of life destroyed by the totalitarian past»<sup>21</sup>. I would further this assessment by emphasizing not only Zabuzhko’s gendering of these intimate bonds, but the extent to which queer desire makes and unmakes new spaces of intimacy and belonging through the body and the discovery of one’s own body. She engages Hélène Cixous’ notion of *écriture féminine* – the practice of writing against or out of «the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system»<sup>22</sup>. For Zabuzhko, this «phallogocentric system» is also bound up in Ukraine’s political ecologies,

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<sup>21</sup> Hundorova T., *The Post-Chornobyl Library*, cit., 192.

<sup>22</sup> Cixous H., *The Laugh of the Medusa*, in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship*, eds. Abel E. and Abel E.K., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983, 200.

particularly the ways in which violence has been transmitted through sexual systems of domination.

*Girls* follows two women, Darka and Effie, through adolescence and into adulthood, unraveling their complicated, sapphic relationship. While their relationship is never explicitly named as “lesbian,” it carries the markings of an erotic, queer bond that does not expressly “fit” into normative structures of belonging, and for this reason, it is treated as pathological. Zabuzhko, moreover, invites her reader into this embodied, eroticized gaze with immediacy, as the story begins with an adult Darka seeing Effie on a trolley, describing the «sweaty, June-soaked trolley, brimming with people and their smells: sweet, almost corpse-like, female, heavy, equestrian, yet oddly palatable, and even stimulating, sexual, distinctly male»<sup>23</sup>. Their relationship, moreover, moves in tandem with a changing national landscape – though not stated explicitly, but noted through the objects that make up their world, as the narrator observes an adult Darka, now in her 30s, moving through Kyiv on a trolley, «turns her eyes away, and looks politely out the window where at this moment out of the dappled green of Mariinsky Park rises the monument – to Vatutindull, bald, and smug, a sculptural epitaph to Khrushchev’s era: a peer, Darka sneers (the monument went up the year she was born)»<sup>24</sup>. Zabuzhko brings her readers into this national history, and likewise, the history of Effie and Darka, through the materiality of Empire.

The bond between Effie and Darka, as described through the lens of the narrator, emerges through Zabuzhko’s characteristically embodied language, which is at once chaotic and deliberate. It is, moreover, built through Darka’s memory and observation. It is, in

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<sup>23</sup> Zabuzhko O., *Girls*, tr. Askold Melnyczuk, *Words Without Borders*, 2005: <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/girls-oksana>, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Zabuzhko O., *Girls*, cit., 1.

a sense, circulating through temporality, spatiality, and experience – positioning queer desire as a participant in a shifting national consciousness, as well as in Zabuzhko’s critiques of late socialism, as evidenced through Darka’s early memory of Effie:

What Darka remembered were Effie’s panty hose – most of the girls in the class still wore white and brown cotton ones, wrinkled, droopy-kneed, and for some reason eternally sagging too short, oh this damned command economy (did socialism set as one of its goals the breeding of short-legged and suspiciously tubby little girls?), with the crotch always sagging out from under one’s skirt so that everyone, above all the wearer, expected that any moment they would fall off, and so our childhood passed, in the Land of the Falling Panty Hose.

Zabuzhko’s emphasis on the body, and the way her clothes did not “fit” onto Effie’s body, metaphorizes the relationship between women’s bodies and the contours of state socialism as itself “ill-fitting”. Hundorova refers to this as «biologism» – «not a naturalistic biologism, as it may seem at the first sight, but an existential one. She talks about life not in abstract terms but from the inside, and thinks this inside-ness not only socially but also biologically». This biologism, she argues, allows Zabuzhko to «emphatically [accuse] the inhumanity and monstrosity of the Soviet system», which was established to «spread fear»<sup>25</sup>. I would build on Hundorova’s use of «biologism» by invoking Donna Haraway’s language of naturecultures, or the extent to which the co-formations of “nature” and “culture” make their disentanglement impossible. A natureculture, moreover, resists essentializing gendered experience. In other words, I view Zabuzhko’s representation of desire between women as less of a response to a shared “female” experience (one that Hundorova sees as a tied to a unified «maternal instinct» or «female authenticity for the authenticity of the world»), which

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<sup>25</sup> Hundorova T., *The Post-Chornobyl Library*, cit., 192-193.

reproduces gender norms, and more of a writing against the ways in which politicized power instrumentalizes and subjugates particular of bodies. Reflected in Zabuzhko's response to this history of Soviet patriarchal structures is an emphasis on a queer, Sapphic gaze – one that “undoes” both the expectations for what bodies “do” (or their performances), and how they can (or cannot) be and belong in the world.

Zabuzhko's “writing back” emerges most legibly in the most explicitly erotic moment between Effie and Darka, as the speaker observes:

Effie's fingers stumbled over her buttons as though asking permission, began cautiously unbuttoning Darka's shirt and she saw, alongside Effie's, her own nipple only darker, redder, like a cherry pit, here blood rushed to Darka's head and everything grew blurred, Effie leaned lightly over her breast and Darka felt her wet, gathering mouth, and goose bumps, and her own rapid breaking, and everything began flowing, was it her, Darka, who was slipping into the unknown, something forbidden and tempting<sup>26</sup>.

Zabuzhko brings her reader into this sexual experience, and in some sense, into Darka's own head, as she gives into this embodied moment of queer desire and pleasure. Yet it is contrasted with her own anxieties about who she is told she *ought* to be, as the narrator continues, «compared with which all of Darka's steady will to power, being first in her class, academic triumphs, captain of the volleyball team, all of this was small and insignificant as she went down and emerged new, dark, dangerous, as big as the world»<sup>27</sup>. While Darka's two worlds – a model Soviet “female” citizen versus the “unknown” and “forbidden” deviation – are seemingly in opposition, this moment is also legible as a kind of worldmaking

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<sup>26</sup> Zabuzhko O., *Girls*, cit., 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, 7.

for Zabuzhko's protagonist. While it is "dark" and "dangerous" it is also "as big as the world," instrumentalizing this sapphic exchange as both a divergence and an act of creation.

### Homofuturity?

To return to this triangulation of LGBT+ rights, Ukraine's liberalization, and nationalism, I want to put Andrukhovych and Zabuzhko's early post-Soviet representations of queerness and queer desire into conversation with the work of contemporary Ukrainian poet, Friedrich Chernyshov (1989-). Born in Donetsk, and now living in Kyiv, Chernyshov came out as transgender at nineteen. In her note on translating his poem *Are These Guys Gay or Merely*<sup>28</sup>, Tatiana Retivov notes that «to be trans\*gender in Ukraine means to belong to a subculture, thus in his poetry there are recurring theme of otherness, unacceptability, and frustration». She observes how this sense of displacement is multilayered, not only displaced from his city of origin, but also Chernyshov's «internal displacement» and «self-willed exile». For him, it is the condition of one's gender and sexuality not accommodating the social context in which one lives, thus making him «illegible».

Unlike Andrukhovych and Zabuzhko, who use queerness as a way of "(re)writing" the nation through its pathologization, Chernyshov writes his gender and sexuality *against* the state; they are a form of resistance to forms of nationalism and state violence – both of which limit trans citizens' life chances. This resistance can be seen in *Are These Guys Gay or Merely*<sup>29</sup>:

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<sup>28</sup> Chernyshov's original poem in the Russian/Ukrainian is untitled. The English translation borrows its title from the first line.

<sup>29</sup> Chernyshov F., *Are These Guys Gay or Merely*, tr. Tatiana Retivov, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, special issue of *The House of Thirst*, 2018, 2: <https://modern->

are these guys gay or merely  
 from Moscow  
 you enjoy Ukrainian Russian  
 mixing up the prepositions  
 hugging in the Tretyakov gallery  
 diluting Russian with Ukrainian  
 arguing about where it's better  
 dear  
 what difference does it make in what metro we're disguised  
 what difference does it make from whom we run  
 from a redneck with the mug of a killer and a cap saying Russia  
 or from young skinheads with swastikas  
 at Lybedskaya station

He continues, describing a border crossing on a train from Moscow to Odes(s)a:  
 all I can think about in my seat #31  
 of the Moscow-Odesa train with the misgendering  
 conductor is that  
 no scum with insignia  
 assuming that I am a foreign agent  
 no shmuck spewing out  
 his verbal officialese deliberately and carelessly  
 and then  
 surprisingly articulately asking in front of everyone  
 what year did I have my gender reassigned  
 no stinking fsb trash  
 fuckers with rotten teeth and tridents in camouflage  
 no bad Russian air  
 nor nationalist Ukrainian dream  
 no moustached customs bedbugs

Chernyshov relies on subversive, often salacious imagery as a way of building queerness into a larger critique of nationalism, colonialism as well as of homophobia and transphobia. As Retivov observes, he «seems to belong more to international than

national poetry...there is a sense of breaking with the old culture, as well as traditional forms of poetry, in technique, style, as well as content». By engaging «newness» and defying «traditional» poetry, and moreover, through his lived defiance of normative gender and sexuality, Chernyshov is positioned as more «European» than «Ukrainian». Yet this framing of Eastern Europe as always antithetical to LGBTQ+ rights risks assuming a colonial gaze, overlooking the ways in which homophobia and transphobia are also entangled in American and western European systems of domination – particularly through, as Kulpa points out, the fierceness of homosociality's cultural «built-in-ness» to national institutions<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, Chernyshov *is* a Ukrainian poet, as he is also a trans and queer poet, and one whose work can transgress national and political boundaries.

Finally, as this chapter is emerging amid Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine wherein each day brings new images of brutality and devastation, the discourses around nationalism in the Ukrainian context continues to evolve as the war unfolds. These enduring questions regarding national and LGBTQ+ identities carry immense historical complexity and deserve intellectual rigor and care in their examinations. Further research regarding these issues will be vital to gender and sexuality studies and Ukrainian studies alike. LGBTQ+ activists in Ukraine have, moreover, been at the forefront of its liberation, particularly for marginalized populations, including serving in the military as well as organizations aiding the evacuation of Roma and BIPOC peoples. Queer and trans poetics (and their translations) remain vital to Ukraine's spaces of liberation, and likewise, they are crucial practices for not only identity-formation but also for national and cultural critique.

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<sup>30</sup> Kulpa R., *Nations and Sexualities*, cit., 54.

# Between God and the Graphic Novel: Victoria Lomasko's LGBT Art as Protest

JILL MARTINIUK

## Introduction

Recently, graphic novels and comic books have come under attack in Russia when officials banned Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus* as Nazi propaganda in 2014 and then later when Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky publicly called adults who read comics «pathetic» in 2019. However, many contemporary Russian artists and storytellers have seen the power of comic books, graphic novels, and graphic journalism to tell unique stories and access new audiences.

Victoria Lomasko is a contemporary Russian graphic storyteller and activist who uses her art to tell the stories of those who have been marginalized and “othered” within Russia. Her medium, style, and ability to anonymize her subjects allow her to tell the story of these marginalized communities without putting individuals at risk. Moreover, her prolific internet presence on platforms such as LiveJournal and Instagram gives her access to an audience beyond Russia even when her work has been censored in Russia.

This chapter explores Lomasko's use of graphic journalism as an act of civil disobedience that allows her to comment on social issues in Russia. Specifically, her 2013 series *Side by Side: Homosex-*



*uals and Homophobes*, which covers the events surrounding the St. Petersburg film festival Side by Side [*Bok o bok*], allows Lomasko to amplify the work of LGBT activists and citizens while blurring the lines between art and journalism in a genre she calls graphic reportage. Through her graphic journalism, Lomasko amplifies the voices of the individuals she interviews to tell their stories, allowing them to share experiences that are not often openly shared due to Russia's restrictive press. Moreover, graphic journalism makes these stories of marginalized groups more accessible to a broad audience both within Russia and beyond its borders. Finally, this chapter examines how Lomasko's art uses marginalization to express the persecution of the LGBT community in Russia and the reception her work and activism have received in Russia and the West.

### **Who is Victoria Lomasko?**

Victoria Valentinovna Lomasko (1978-) is a graphic artist whose work has focused on marginalized communities in and around Russia. She obtained her degree in book design and graphic art from Moscow State University of the Printing Arts in 2003 and began to see art as a means of advocacy after volunteering at juvenile detention centers and prisons around Russia. As she encountered more people who lived beyond the major cities in Russia and on the fringes of society, Lomasko began to tell their stories through her art as a means of protest against the alienation of the artist from the viewer<sup>1</sup>. Lomasko's work became more well known in the art world in 2010 after drawing images to accompany Anton Nikolayev's stories on the trial of art curators Andrei Yerofeyev and Yuri Samodurov who were charged and subsequently found guilty

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<sup>1</sup> Lomasko V., *Other Russias*, New York, n+1, 2017, 9.

of inciting religious and ethnic hatred after their gallery displayed banned works. In 2012, she returned to the courtroom to cover the Pussy Riot trial, bringing her more international acclaim and making her more of an outsider in Russia's increasingly conservative art scene.

Although Lomasko's work is not officially censored in Russia, her art and publications are difficult to find in the country through main channels like galleries, museums, and bookstores. In 2013, curators at the Manezh Museum and Exhibition Center in Moscow pulled four of her pieces, including one depicting protestors with a rainbow flag, from the exhibition *International Women's Day Feminism: From the Avant-Garde to the Present*<sup>2</sup>. In 2017, Garage Museum of Contemporary Arts featured an exhibition of her work. However, copies of her books *Forbidden Art* (2012) and *Other Russias* (2017), the largest single publication of her collective works, were not available for purchase at the show or in the museum's bookstore. The journalist Michael McCanne has likened her work to a modern-day form of *tamizdat*<sup>3</sup>. Although the censorship is not official, government connections and pressure from extremist groups make publishing abroad the only viable option. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2018, Lomasko explained:

You don't get arrested or interrogated. Just no curators or gallery owners want to work with you. It's a little death of sorts, for any artist. My work does come out in Russia, but only on alternative

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<sup>2</sup> Victoria Lomasko's Pussy Riot Drawings Censored from Feminist Exhibition 'International Women's Day', in *ArtLeaks*, 8 March 2013: <https://art-leaks.org/2013/03/08/victoria-lomaskos-pussy-riot-drawings-censored-from-feminist-exhibition-international-womens-day-moscow-russia/>.

<sup>3</sup> McCanne M., *We Exist: Victoria Lomasko's Graphic Journalism*, in *Art in America*, 4 April 2017: <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/we-exist-victoria-lomaskos-graphic-journalism-59918/>.

websites that have a liberal audience in St. Petersburg or Moscow. Anything more mainstream, it's not possible<sup>4</sup>.

However, Lomasko's work has made it to a broader audience through her social media accounts (@victorialomasko on Instagram), international exhibitions, and published collections of her work.

## Style

Lomasko has frequently referred to her style in interviews as graphic reportage<sup>5</sup>. Since she has conversations with her subjects as she constructs her pieces, her style has a loose cartoon-like or comic strip-like quality. In interviews with art publications, she has frequently discussed drawing inspiration from Russian artists from lubok and woodcuts to military artists like Stepan Yaremich and Vasily Vereshchagin<sup>6</sup>. She is inspired by works created by «Russian soldiers, concentration camp inmates and people who experienced the Nazi siege of Leningrad»<sup>7</sup>. Her work has the same «in the moment» urgency. She notes that her works are created entirely in the moment at the events she covers rather than recreating them later from photographs or videos. To accomplish this, she works primarily with pencil or marker, which, when combined with the loose quality of her sketches, allows her to obscure the exact features of

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<sup>4</sup> Groskup V., *Victoria Lomasko: The Brutally Funny Artist no Gallery in Russia Will Touch*, in *The Guardian*, 2 March 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/mar/02/victoria-lomasko-brutally-funny-artist-russia-on-the-eve-putin-election>.

<sup>5</sup> Her style is also referred to as graphic journalism in articles.

<sup>6</sup> Hacizade N., *The Art of Empathy: An Interview with Russian Graphic Artist Victoria Lomasko*, in *5 Harfliler*, 5 May 2017: <https://www.Sharfliler.com/the-art-of-empathy-an-interview-with-russian-graphic-artist-victoria-lomasko/>.

<sup>7</sup> Lomasko V., *Other Russias*, cit., 8.

her subjects, giving them anonymity as they frankly discuss social issues. Lomasko has noted that photography and video have the potential to endanger the lives of the people she interviews, and her drawings allow her to obscure her subject while allowing them to tell their story, «They want for their demands, voices, resentments, to be public space, but just not at the cost of making their immediate situation even worse»<sup>8</sup>. Although her work has been published in collections, her work does not align with Western documentary comics since her stories are not linear like comic strips or graphic novels. While a single subject, like the Pussy Riot trials, may extend over several pages, her images act more as individual snapshots rather than a more extended narrative.

In interviews and her reflections on her work, Lomasko consistently points to what her work is not. In the introduction to *Other Russias*, she states that her art opposes Western conceptualism, which became the norm in Russian art circles after the collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>9</sup>. She also rejects the identity of a journalist even as she interviews her subjects and explicitly states that she is an artist and not a reporter. Likewise, she insists that her work is not political but rather a slice of Russian society that shows people and realities that are often overlooked or willfully ignored by those in power.

### **Graphic Art in Russia**

Comic books, graphic novels, and manga have been used to tell not just stories but to make complex social and political issues more accessible to a broader audience. From Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer

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<sup>8</sup> Hacızade N., *The Art of Empathy*, cit.

<sup>9</sup> Lomasko V., *Other Russias*, cit., 8.

Prize-winning work *Maus* (1991) to Alison Bechdel's National Book Critics Circle Award *Fun Home* (2006), graphic works receive levels of prestige that belie Medinsky's criticism of the genre<sup>10</sup>. Even works planted firmly and pedantically in the comic book niche like Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (2002) and Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (2008) won accolades beyond the field for both storytelling and art<sup>11</sup>. In shorter forms such as comic strips, graphic works have been recognized for reporting on political issues. Garry Trudeau's long-running comic series *Doonesbury* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 and nominations for the award in 1990, 2004, and 2005. At the well-known Radio and Television Correspondents Dinner that same year, Gerald Ford joked about the impact of Trudeau's work by saying, «There are only three major vehicles to keep us informed as to what is going on in Washington: the electronic media, the print media, and *Doonesbury*, not necessarily in that order»<sup>12</sup>. Ford's joke shows the power that graphic works can have in shaping how the public views divisive political issues.

However, comics and graphic novels have become controversial in Russia in the past few years. In December of 2014, officials removed Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, which tells the story of his family's experience during the holocaust, from bookstores under a new law that bans Nazi propaganda. Officials justified the removal of *Maus* because the book features a swastika on the cover<sup>13</sup>. In September of 2019, Vladimir Medinsky, the Russian Min-

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<sup>10</sup> In January of 2022, the McMinn County school board in Tennessee, United States, decided to ban Spiegelman's *Maus*.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Moore's graphic novel *V for Vendetta* was named one of the 100 most influential novels by BBC News.

<sup>12</sup> Blair W., Hill H., *America's Humor. From Poor Richard to Doonesbury*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980, 511.

<sup>13</sup> In January of 2022, the McMinn County school board in Tennessee, United States decided to ban Spiegelman's *Maus* and pulled it from classrooms. The board

ister of Culture, declared that comic books are for morons. While he acknowledged that comics were acceptable for children to read, «For an adult to read comics instead of books is to admit that ‘I am a moron’»<sup>14</sup>. Medinsky’s declaration sparked immediate outrage online among comic book readers, writers, and publishers in Russia and worldwide. On social media, the hashtag #ячитаюкомиксы (#Ireadcomics) went viral as users shared their opinions on the value of comic books. On Twitter, readers voiced their enthusiasm for the genre:

#ячитаюкомиксы I’ve been reading comics for almost 20 years. And as it happens, I’m not going to stop. Nothing anyone says is going to make me give reading them up. Why? Because they’ve given me too much. I’ve learned too much. They’ve shown me too much. And I’m not a moron to deny it<sup>15</sup>.

Medinsky clarified and reaffirmed his position in response to the outrage by publishing an op-ed in *Novosti Isskustva*. In the 30 October 2019 piece entitled *He Who Reads Books Controls Those Who Live in the World of Comics*, Medinsky acknowledges the long history of storytelling through images around the world. However, although his words are less caustic in the op-ed than in his speech, Medinsky reiterates that comics are not meant for the educated brain<sup>16</sup>. Medinsky’s op-ed is interesting because he acknowledges

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claims that the graphic novel on the Holocaust was pulled due to nudity and profanity.

<sup>14</sup> V. Medinskiy *vyskazalsya protiv prepodavaniya istorii v formate komiksov*, in *Agentsvo gorodskikh novostei Moskva*, 4 September 2019: <https://www.mskagency.ru/materials/2924177>.

<sup>15</sup> Khubiev R. (@ruslankhubiev), *Yachitaukomiksy uzhe pochti*, in *Twitter Post*, 4 September 2019: <https://twitter.com/RuslanKhubiev>.

<sup>16</sup> Medinsky V., *Tot, kto chitayet knigi, upravliayet temi, kto zhivet v mire komiksov*, in *Novosti Isskustva*, 30 October 2019: <https://www.theartnewspaper.ru/posts/7474/>.

the long history of storytelling through the interplay of words and images in religious and secular texts. His piece shows an understanding of the long and nuanced history of the genre. Moreover, the sweeping history he gives on the topic makes it seem like his stance is a well-thought-out criticism rather than a rash declaration made in the heat of the moment.

And indeed, his statements are a deliberate attack on the genre and must be considered through the lens of his conservative political agenda and anti-LGBT stance and the popularity of comic books and graphic novels as educational tools in the West and online. His commentary on comic books a love scene between two male characters is not the first time Medinsky's proclamations have gained international attention<sup>17</sup>. Later in 2017, Medinsky threatened to ban the live-action version of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, which featured a gay love scene. That same year, Russian newspapers linked Medinsky to the cancelation of the Bolshoi Theater's showing of a biography on dancer Rudolf Nureyev.

Medinsky's comments reflect Russia's 2013 anti-gay propaganda ban, which prohibits the distribution of "propaganda of homosexuality" or "nontraditional behavior to minors". Specifically, the law states:

Distribution of information aimed at forming nontraditional sexual attitudes among minors, the attractiveness of nontraditional sexual relations, misperceptions of the social equivalence of traditional and nontraditional sexual relations, or imposition of information on nontraditional sexual relations causing interest in such relations<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> *Beauty and the Beast: Russia Considers Ban Over 'Gay Moment'*, in *BBC News*, 4 March 2017: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-39168153>.

<sup>18</sup> Federal Law of the Russian Federation, (2 July 2013). On the introduction of amendments to Article 5 of the Federal Law. «On the protection of our children from information causing harm to their health and development and separate acts of

In considering Medinsky's attack on graphic arts, we must also consider that comic books and graphic novels have had an association with the LGBT community. In their article *Introduction: Queer About Comics*, Darieck Scott and Ramzi Fawaz declare:

There's something queer about comics. Whether one looks to the alternative mutant kinship of superhero stories (the epitome of queer world-making), the ironic and socially negative narratives of independent comics (the epitome of queer antinormativity), or the social stigma that makes the medium marginal, juvenile, and outcast from "proper" art (the epitome of queer identity), comics are rife with the social and aesthetic cues commonly attached to queer life<sup>19</sup>.

Additionally, educators use comic books and graphic novels in the classroom and online to encourage discussions about inclusiveness. Scholars such as Ashley Manchester (2017), Charles Hatfield (2009), Mollie V. Blackburn and Jill M. Smith (2010) have examined the positive role that using comics and graphic novels that feature queer characters can have in the classroom. Manchester argues that comics are productive pedagogical tools because they use textual, visual, spatial, temporal, and sensory modes, which then allow students to understand complex ideas better<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the American Library Association promote LGBT comics and graphic novels to create an inclusive discussion.

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the Russian Federation, aimed at the protection of children from information propagandizing the refutation of traditional family values». Federal Law of the Russian Federation, n. 135-FZ, Moscow.

<sup>19</sup> Scott D., Fawaz R., *Introduction: Queer about Comics*, in *American Literature*, 1 June 2018, 90, 2, 197-219.

<sup>20</sup> Manchester A., *Teaching Critical Looking: Pedagogical Approaches to Using Comics as Queer Theory*, in *SANE Journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*, 2017, 2, 2, 4.



Medinsky's attack on comics shame readers of the genre, especially those for whom comic books and graphic novels create an inclusive space. It also discounts the genre as an «acceptable» form of literature and thereby dismisses their creators as having anything significant to say. For writers like Lomasko, Medinsky's attack on the genre discredits their work. His message is that these works have less literary merit than other genres and tell stories that are insignificant despite their popularity, subject matter, and reach. Lomasko's work, like *Other Russias*, tells the stories of already marginalized communities. By attacking the genre, Medinsky discourages readers from learning such stories and further marginalizes such groups by making reading about them a shameful act.

### **Side by Side: Homosexuals and Homophobes**

Although Lomasko has featured LGBT community members in some of her previous pieces, her first extended writing on the community occurred in 2013 when the organizers of the Side by Side Film Festival invited her to be a jury member. That year the festival, which took place in Saint Petersburg from 21 November through 30 November, received significant national and international attention after Russian officials charged the festival with being a foreign agent. On 6 June 2013, the courts delivered the guilty verdict, which came with a fine of 400,000 rubles. However, the decision was overturned on 14 October 2013, just weeks before the festival began<sup>21</sup>. The festival also drew ire from Vitali Milonov, a deputy in the St. Petersburg's Legislative Assembly, who was one of the proponents of the 2013 law that banned “gay propaganda” for minors.

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<sup>21</sup> Pulver A., *Russian LGBT Film Festival Wins Appeal Against 'Foreign Agent' Ruling*, in *The Guardian*, 14 October 2013: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/oct/14/russia-lgbt-film-festival-wins-appeal-foreign-agent>.

Milonov unsuccessfully tried to have the festival's license revoked under the country's anti-LGBT propaganda laws, and during the festival he accused the festival-goers of forcibly showing the films to minors<sup>22</sup>.

Due to these events, the festival, even before it officially started, became the target for nationalist groups like Soprotivlenie [Resistance] and Narodny Sobor [People's Assembly], who showed up to protest the festival<sup>23</sup>. Over the ten days, the festival received ten bomb threats causing events to be disrupted as theaters were evacuated or showings canceled entirely. Though Lomasko was at the event as a jury member, she extensively documented the festival's events, from the film panels and discussion to the confrontations between the festival-goers and protesting groups. Her reporting on the event first appeared online as a series of 23 images in her LiveJournal Soglyadatay on 10 December 2013. The entry titled *Side by Side: Homosexuals and Homophobes* and then reproduced later with minor changes as part of *Other Russias* under the same name in the section of the collected titled *Angry*<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> *Milonov trebuyet otozvat' iz prokata fil'my s LGBT-festivalya 'Bok o bok'*, in *Delovoy Peterburg*, 25 November 2013: [https://www.dp.ru/a/2013/11/25/Milonov\\_trebuyet\\_izjat\\_pr](https://www.dp.ru/a/2013/11/25/Milonov_trebuyet_izjat_pr). At the 2018 Side by Side Festival, Milonov physically blocked the entrance to the festival's opening night and called the police to report that it was a hostage situation.

<sup>23</sup> Chernov S., *Film Festival Faces Bomb Threats and Cancellations*, in *The Moscow Times*, 27 November 2013: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/11/27/film-festival-faces-bomb-threats-and-cancellations-a29975>.

<sup>24</sup> In the original series that appears on Lomasko's LiveJournal on 10 December 2003, the images *Na uglu stoyat gomofoby. Ochen' stremnyye, Ni odna ploshadka nas bol'she ne pustit*, and *A v nashem gorode mnogiye dazhe ne znayut slovo LGBT* feature the colors red and blue, however in the versions that later appear online and in *Other Russias* the images are in black and white. Likewise, many of the images in the same entry feature the names of Lomasko's subjects. Lomasko removed their names from the versions that appear in *Other Russias*.

Throughout the series of images and Lomasko's reflections on the event, she points to the very real danger attendees faced throughout the festival. In the first few images, Lomasko builds a sense of dread and anxiety that reflects the emotions of those attending the festival. On the opening day of the festival, anonymous protestors called in a bomb threat, and participants were forced to evacuate, which placed them in direct sight of the nationalist groups protesting the festival. The first image notes, «There are homophobes on the corner. They're really creepy»<sup>25</sup>. While this comment may initially seem like a personal judgment, Lomasko provides more context in her reporting that moves the groups outside from merely «creepy» to downright dangerous: protest groups at a previous LGBT event on the Field of Mars attacked attendees who threw rocks at them. At another event, protestors shot at them with air guns.

The sense of dread continues to build through a drawing of two police officers shown from behind who had to escort attendees to the subway as a protective measure against a potential bomb blast. Lomasko creates more tension in her series as she shows a panel of foreign filmmakers in the image *Predictions by Foreign Guests* as the one guest acknowledges, «I think the tough times are still ahead of you»<sup>26</sup>. As viewers find themselves five images into the series, what quickly becomes apparent is that the threats against the Side by Side festival overwhelm the films shown. Like the participants at the festival, it is impossible for the viewer to experience any of the actual events from the festival because the demonstrations against

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<sup>25</sup> Lomasko V., (@Soglyadatay), *Bok o bok: Gomoseksualy i gomofoby*, in *LiveJournal*, 10 December 2013: <https://soglyadatay.livejournal.com/152083.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Lomasko V., (@Soglyadatay), *Bok o bok*, cit.

the community and the danger have taken over the experience of watching the films or attending the panels. The threats, both from the groups standing outside and from politicians like Milonov, consume the festival. This allows for very little discourse about the films or how they portray the LGBT since the protests become the predominant focus of the festival.

However, in her reporting on the film festival, Lomasko does not shy away from showing sexism within the LGBT community in Russia. Her series highlights the sexism that can occur within the LGBT community. At several points during the festival, attendees specifically targeted lesbian films with sexist comments. Lomasko's writing and art from the festival express the frustration of some of the festival-goers who identify as lesbians and the comments that Lomasko received from male attendees. In two images entitled *Lesbiana*, Lomasko features a nameless lesbian couple at the film festival. In the first image, the couple has their arms around each other, and one of the women looks directly at the viewer while her partner in the foreground faces and stares off to the left of the scene. Although neither person in the image speaks, Lomasko's own experience with sexism and anti-lesbian sentiments at the festival accompanies the image:

Spotting my jury member badge, one young gay man asked me what movies I would be voting for. Hearing that I had chosen *Blue is the Warmest Color* and *Lesbiana: A Parallel Revolution*, he said, 'Those films are so boring. And lesbian sex is disgusting to watch'<sup>27</sup>.

In the second image, Lomasko features the same couple, but now the women sit next to each other at what appears to be a bar.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

In this image, the women are looking at each other directly. Once again, the couple is silent, and Lomasko's reflection accompanies the image:

Most of the films shown at Side by Side were shot by male directors and dealt with gay love. *Lesbiana* was the only feature film at the festival by women about women. The screening room was half-empty: the men did not attend<sup>28</sup>.

By pairing the first image of the couple with Lomasko's encounter with the man, she shows how the sexism that exists even within the community is placed upon the women attending the event. It is not just Lomasko who must deal with the man's hostile words and accusations after telling him which films she had decided to vote for. The woman's direct and seemingly hostile stare in the first image makes it seem as though the viewer and the man are both interrupting a private moment and casting judgment on their relationship. Lomasko contrasts the attendee's words that «lesbian sex is disgusting to watch» with two women minding their own business at the festival. Moreover, the lack of dialog attributed to the women reinforces the normalcy that Lomasko gives the scene. They are not responding to the man's comments, and if there were dialog from the women with the image, it might seem as though they were trying to engage with the hostility placed on them. Instead, they are two attendees trying to watch the films and enjoy each other's company.

The next image of the two women reinforces this sentiment. The two women are side-by-side at a bar, and the woman who stared at the viewer with hostility in the previous scene now looks at her partner with a drink in her hands and a slight smile on her face. As

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Lomasko reflects on the lack of representation of lesbian relationships and female directors in the film festival lineup, she also points out that when *Lesbiana* premiered, the screening room was devoid of male attendees. The image of the couple with their slight smiles and more relaxed demeanors suggests that they have a space away from the sexism and hostility of the previous encounter. In the next two images *Audience at 'Lesbiana'* and *Sharing our Impressions of 'Lesbiana' at a Café* Lomasko reflects on the idea of «feminine lands», «in those years, there were a lot of separatist lesbian communities, where women lived and engaged in painting, sculpture, literature, music, and performance»<sup>29</sup>. The group of women looks more at ease now in their own space. While it might not be one of the communes that the group discusses, it is a space of their own where they can escape from the hostility of the anti-LGBT protestors and even from the members of their community who seek to alienate them further.

*Side by Side: Homosexuals and Homophobes* is unique among Lomasko's work because of her active participation in the festival rather than an unobtrusive observer or interviewer. In her prologue to the series, Lomasko, who identifies as cisgender and heterosexual, notes the liminality of her position at the festival, «I'm not an expert on cinema, and I'm not a member of the LGBT community», and that for her attending the festival as a judge as a form of civic protest, «the festival had become a political event, and being involved in it was a clear way of expressing my political stance»<sup>30</sup>. Throughout the festival, Lomasko experienced the fear and the danger of being among the LGBT community in Russia. To the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

protestors and people calling in the bomb threats, the festival attendees are indistinguishable from the LGBT community in that same space. When protestors made yet another bomb threat, and the theater must evacuate, a police officer approaches Lomasko and tells her, «Tell *your* people not to stand in the street, but to hide in the café. They could be attacked»<sup>31</sup> (emphasis mine). The police officer sees no distinction between Lomasko and the LGBT community targeted at the event. If any of the alt-right groups attack, they will do so indiscriminately. Nevertheless, Lomasko is also aware of her privilege, which she acknowledges as the end of her series of images when she reflects on her experience at the festival.

I had felt frightened several times during the clashes with homophobes, and I was glad I was heterosexual. I would not be forced to live my entire life in a constant state of anxiety<sup>32</sup>.

Lomasko's *Side by Side* series is different from her previous work because her other series center on an event where both she and the viewer act as observers. In her coverage of the Pussy Riot trials, the viewer, like Lomasko, must silently observe the system at work against the group. In her coverage of the trucker protests, she interviews the protesters, and as viewers, we see their activities, but like Lomasko, we are never invited to engage in the protests. However, the *Side by Side* Festival images should be about the films and the other events at the festival. However, as viewers, we similarly experience the festival to how Lomasko and attendees at the festival experience it. In the series, most of the focus is on the events interrupting the experience of being at the festival and watching the

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

films. Just as the bomb threats, protestors, and homophobic comments interrupt an attendee's time at the festival, they also overwhelm the series so that the disruptions become the focus of our attention rather than the festival.

As viewers of the series, we do not get to experience what the festival should be: a celebration of LGBT art. Nora Fitzgerald's 2014 *Washington Post* article calls the festival «an oasis of art, but it is also a bastion of information where gay men, lesbians and transgender adults can find out about LGBT life in other parts of the world»<sup>33</sup>. However, Lomasko's series shows how the attacks against the festival overwhelm the experience of being there. Lomasko points out at the end of the series that she can walk away from the attacks once she leaves the festival: an ability a viewer of the series has as well. As viewers, we may briefly experience Lomasko's and her fellow attendees' fear as they are continually evacuated and shouted at. However, our experience is limited, just as Lomasko's is once she leaves the festival. For Russia's LGBT community, that fear and uncertainty live beyond the images and it is not limited to attending the festival. As Russia's anti-LGBT laws grow more restrictive, the danger permeates everyday life.

## Conclusion

Lomasko's experience at the Side by Side festival led her to seek out ostracized groups within already marginalized communities. In

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<sup>33</sup> Fitzgerald N., *In St. Petersburg, an LGBT Film Festival Hangs on in Face of Russia's Homophobia*, in *The Washington Post*, 14 November 2014: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/in-st-petersburg-an-lgbt-film-festival-hangs-on-in-face-of-russian-homophobia/2014/11/13/8548481c-68f2-11e4-b053-65cea7903f2e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/in-st-petersburg-an-lgbt-film-festival-hangs-on-in-face-of-russian-homophobia/2014/11/13/8548481c-68f2-11e4-b053-65cea7903f2e_story.html).



2015, her series *18+*, which centers on a collection of interviews at a private lesbian club, debuted at the Fumetto International Festival. Lomasko's experience at the 2013 Side by Side festival served as the genesis *18+*, «When I agreed to serve on the jury of the Side by Side Film LGBT Film Festival in 2013, I realized the extent to which the LGBT community was persecuted. It was only during the festival, however, that I found out there are different levels of secrecy within the community, in particular, that lesbians are more invisible and stigmatized than gays. Hence I deemed it important to quote the subjects of my series directly»<sup>34</sup>. Her latest work *Bishkek-Yerevan-Dagestan-Tbilisi: Investigations with a Sketchbook* (2016-present), centers on telling the stories of LGBT people, feminist collectives, and sex workers. Lomasko's experience at Side by Side allowed her to recognize that even as an artist whose work is censored in Russia, she still has a privilege that she can use to tell the stories of those whose very identities put them in danger due to Russia's increasingly conservative political system.

Lomasko's *Side by Side: Homosexuals and Homophobes* series only shows one year of the continual targeting and harassment the festival has undergone in Russia. Since 2013 the festival organizers have had to fight against annual bomb threats and harassment by protestors outside of the festival events. Politicians have also continued to target the festival. In 2018, the State Duma passed a new law that required film festivals to be on a "permitted list". That same year Milonov physically blocked the entrance to the festival to prevent people from entering the theater. In 2021, officials canceled the St. Petersburg's festival after anti-LGBT protestors called

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<sup>34</sup> Victoria Lomasko: *18+*, in *The Russian Reader*, 19 February 2015: <https://therussianreader.com/2015/02/19/victoria-lomasko-18-plus/>.

in covid-related health violations. Officials sealed off the entrances to the cinemas. Finally, in November of 2021, the Russian government placed the Side by Side Festival's website on the blacklist and restricted access to the website in Russia.

Lomasko's work shows that graphic arts do what its opponents, like Medinsky, fear it does: tell the stories that humanize its subjects. There is no singular voice or experience in Russia, and Lomasko's work allows a broad audience to see that there is a diverse set of experiences within Russia even when official channels refuse to acknowledge them. Lomasko's art highlights people who might not look or act like the "typical Russian" according to figures like Medinsky and Milonov, but her work shows the complexity of the Russian people that politicians would rather ignore.



# Symbols and Themes of Same-Sexed Affection in Russian Paintings: Stereotypes and /or Archetypes?

ALIONA VANOVA

What do the Russian “gay propaganda” law (2013) and the “heart-beat-abortion” law enacted in Texas, USA (2021) have in common? Both of them a) declare a “normative” standard and insist on a particular behavior; and b) demonstrate dominance and control by the state over an individual, especially over minority and vulnerable groups (because they are more easily intimidated).

One challenge for the LGBTQ community is the need to prove that «we are not a mistake» (quoted from the scandalous case of a Russian grocery store *VkusVill's* advert in summer 2021)<sup>1</sup>. *To question the definition of “normality”, I’ve conducted a quality study of symbols and topics in Russian paintings* portraying 1) nudity of two or more same-gendered people involved in physical activities such as bathing, playing, etc., and 2) the same-gendered individual’s interactions and physical touch such as kisses, hugs, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> *Russian LGBT family from Vkusvill ad leaves country after death threats*, in *Reuters.com*, 4 August 2021: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-lgbt-family-vkusvill-ad-leaves-country-after-death-threats-2021-08-04/>.

*A goal of the study is to find, describe and categorize some stereotypical and/or archetypal patterns that are considered “absolutely normal”, found in publicly-distributed and recognized art for decades and even centuries.*

*As a result of this study, I have collected 193 examples of fine visual art prints showing same-sex affection by Russian-speaking artists (examples from 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries). In the first period of the study, I just collected all images that I came across in posters, books, art-exhibitions and the Internet. In the second phase, when I had more than 150 examples, I systemized the pictures into four categories related to the pictures’ themes. I then described their subjects, values, rituals and symbols (examples and information about many of the pictures and their artists are found in the table).*

*Thus, there are four groupings in this study (which could be presented in any order): Playing and/or fighting (3 examples); Washing, sauna and bathing (34 examples); Getting rest, fun, socializing and/or sun-bathing (43 examples); Same-sexed individuals united by a common job, task, situation, mission and/or empathy; historical scenes/motifs; war; visiting same-sexed specialists (physicians, fortune-teller, etc.) (113 examples).*

*The theoretical background and inspiration for this study.* Before describing my methodology, procedure and some details of study results, I believe it’s important to define key terms that I had already mentioned in my lead. I propose to begin with the terms “norm”, “normality” and “normativity” (considering them synonyms) because their concepts are key to this discussion.

In 2014, at a Moscow public lecture, I met an America psychotherapist, author and educator Marilyn Murray who has dedicated her multiple-years-study of trauma and the “healing journey”. Ms. Murray has her Russian ancestors and she helps the people of

the former Soviet countries overcome their personal psychological challenges connected with abuse and trauma<sup>2</sup>.

The main idea embedded in her *The Murray Method* is a concept of “being normal”. In her Chapter *Common = Normal = Healthy, Or, Does It Really* she writes:

In most cultures, the most common behaviors set the standard for what is considered normal. That supposition is then extended to the point that most people tend to believe that what is normal is also healthy. [My comment: This is an example of a stereotype.]

People travel the familiar paths of their ancestors because those roads were considered common and normal. Today, however, we realize that quite frequently, common = normal = unhealthy. Not only can standard “normal” behaviors be unhealthy, they can also be dysfunctional and sometimes quite abusive.

From the beginning of time until the last century, our world was in what I term, a colonization mode. People went out to conquer the savage land, the savage beast, and what they assumed was the savage man. As such, they were constantly in a state of survival.

Because the average life expectancy in 1900 was age forty-seven (or less in some countries), most women died in their childbearing years. People rarely lived long enough to go beyond simply surviving. The majority of people lived in an agrarian society were often viewed as commodities; the more of them you had to work the farm, the better off you were.

Almost every family lost one or more children. A friend who researched our ancestors who lived in Russian villages, where loss of life in families was commonplace, told me that they had a saying: “Don’t become too attached to people or things, because you will always lose them.” [My comments: 1) I can confirm that such thinking is not uncommon even in modern Russian-speaking countries. 2) if Ms. Murray is correct in her assumptions, the logical consequence of a survival situation as described would be the priority of birthing as many children as possible.]

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<sup>2</sup> Here is some information about Marilyn Murray: <https://www.briltld.org/founder.shtml>.

How was the “baseline for normal” established in your family and culture? In many families that practice the old paradigm, children are seen as extensions of their parents, (the beliefs and actions of these parents are similar to some of the beliefs and actions of a narcissistic parent.)

As such, parents have the right to do anything they want with a child – they can treat them lovingly, poorly, or both. The child is there to meet the needs of the parents and the family. The family is more important than the individual. [...]

Today nearly every inch of the earth has been mapped and charted. We are no longer in a colonization mode, yet most of the world’s inhabitants continue to live as though they are still in a state of survival. Unfortunately, many people still do live in states of poverty, chaos, or war, and for those people, survival truly is the priority.

With global awareness, however, even some of those who are nearly destitute are beginning to understand they can move beyond just surviving. But what about the fortunate people who do not live in those circumstances? Why is it they also live as if in a survival mode?

The answer: because that mode is what has been common and normal for generations – it feels familiar. [My comment: Ms. Murray here describes a stereotypical pattern.] In the twenty-first century, we have the opportunity and privilege of moving beyond surviving to thriving. But where does one begin?<sup>3</sup>

Here is my idea related to Ms. Murray’s insights: art and an access to it has always been an indicator of being a “privileged”, educated and sophisticated person of a culture. To some, it suggests belonging to the elite. Over centuries, pictorial art was available only to the people living above “survival mode” who had leisure and could afford to express their true feelings. That is why I see potential in studies using fine art topics, analyzing their subjects, rituals and symbols as variables (here, I use a statistical term implying that they can be calculated).

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<sup>3</sup> Murray M., *The Murray Method. The Internationally Acclaimed Approach to Becoming a Healthy Balanced Person. Creating Wholeness Beyond Trauma, Abuse, Neglect, and Addiction*, s.l., VIVO Publications, 2012, 168-170.

I would also like to say that I quoted such a long extract from Ms. Murray's book because many pictures that I analyzed meet her "surviving code" ideas: we can vividly see very close bonds of same-sexed individuals sticking together due to some hardship, war, political situation, or obsession created by ideology, etc.

For the "survival-mode" unions I have formed a special category: «*Same-sexed individuals united by a common job, task, situation, mission and/or empathy...*». Here is a philosophical question: Are these same-sexed people bound together because they have no other choices or is it their own voluntary decision? My answer to this question would be: a) they could have chosen to bond with another/other same sex individual(s); or b) they could have preferred to live and/or die alone. Being physically close to the depicted same-gendered individuals was (maybe not ideal) but their situational choice.

There are some new approaches and studies trying to explain human bonding from a *neurobiological* perspective. One of the scholars in this field is Dr. Andrew D. Huberman who is an American professor in the Department of Neurobiology at Stanford University School of Medicine. His podcasts, for example, *Science of Social Bonding in Family, Friendship & Romantic Love | Huberman Lab Podcast #51* influenced some of my views connected with this "Russian art" study, as well<sup>4</sup>.

*Some disclaimers:* 1) In selecting examples for my study I intentionally avoided (many) pictures with nude children; 2) if a title/capture of a picture said that hugging and/or kissing women were sisters or relatives, I excluded them; 3) the art work is not system-

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<sup>4</sup> *Science of Social Bonding in Family, Friendship & Romantic Love*, in *Huberman Lab Podcast #51*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgAcOqVRfYA> (accessed: 20.12.2021).



ized chronologically and/or alphabetically due to lack of resources and time; 4) an image of each painting mentioned in my “table of systematization” might be located by its title and/or the name of the artist on the internet by using a copy-and-paste option (in the table of systematization, I left Russian titles of the pictures for copy-and-paste reasons and searching the images on the Internet); 5) each picture analyzed in my study is under copyright and, often, the Museum Law (in Russia); obtaining written permission from its owner(s) for a reproduction requires a lot of resources that I don’t have; I think that showing a selection out of the dozens of examples should be seen as avoiding my subjective favoritism for scholarly reasons; 6) in my “table of systematization” there is a column “*My comments and descriptions related to same sex affection’s discussion, stereotypes and archetypes*” where you can find not only the information about a picture but also some information relating to the results of my study; 7) I would be happy to continue this study if I find some support.

*An intention of this study* is to attract attention to a discussion about normality, same-sex bonding and affection by examining different fine-art pictures by Russian-speaking artists of the different periods.

*Procedure, methods and categorization:* It is a quality inductive study of the fine-art pictures by Russian-speaking artists. An indicator of the “Russianness” of a picture is/was the artist’s Russian/Soviet name and/or his/her place of birth: Russia and the territory of the previous USSR. So, there are some ex-Soviet names/pictures in this study, as well as some works/pictures by artists who emigrated from Russia/the USSR. I excluded the pictures by foreign artists even if they lived and/or placed their pictures’ settings in Russia. The time frames were not important for this study. Thus, there are

some pictures from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Soviet period, and contemporary ones, created after the 2000s.

As mentioned before, initially, I collected images of pictures by Russian artists depicting a bond of same sex individuals looking at their settings, topics/situations and emotional appeals. Simultaneously, I tried to find some information about a picture and its artists. Then, seeing some stereotypical patterns, I grouped more than a hundred pictures into four mentioned above categories. Each of the suggested category could be divided into sub-categories and/or more categories. For instance, war, historical scenes/motifs and others could be represented separately (I left such opportunity for further studies if any). There are no predetermined priorities for any category: we can't say which category is more "important". Here is only one thing that I should mention: originally, I started this study by looking at same-sexed naked individuals drawn/painted by famous Russian artists and exhibited in well-known prestigious museums. Such examples are naked women in the *Banya/Sauna* depicted by Zinaida Yevgenyevna Serebriakova (1884-1967) and Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Gerasimov (1881-1963); and a cult picture *Bathing of the Red Horse* by Kuzma Sergeevich Petrov-Vodkin (1878-1939) where a naked young man is sitting on a red horse (there are two other naked men with other horses nearby; an irony of this picture is it's stereotypically considered a "harbinger" of the Russian revolution), etc. When I wasn't sure which one of the four categories to place a picture in, I looked at a picture's title (which was a decisive principle for classification). For example, there are two nude women who are about to take a swim in a lake or a river which looks like it fits in the "Getting rest, fun, socializing and/or sun-bathing" category. However, the title of this picture by Arkady Alexandrovich Plastov (1893-1972) is *Female Tractor Drivers* (1944-1943), that is why I placed it into "*The same-sexed individual*

*united by their common job, task, situation, mission and/or empathy; historical scenes/motifs...*” category.

### **Results, conclusions and ideas:**

- Surveying dozens of pictures, I concluded that Soviet art is an area that should be researched more thoroughly. One of the reasons why is, that in the USSR, daily life was declared to be something that was far from the reality. For instance, it was said that “there is no sex in the USSR”. Simultaneously, there are many naturalistic, appealing and interesting pictures of that period.
- It occurred to me that one role of an artist is that his/her vision plays a significant part in such discussions. This occurred to me while looking at the nude female pictures by Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Gerasimov (1881-1963), the famous “godfather” of USSR Socialist Realism in art and a portraitist of Joseph Stalin. I recognized a vivid correlation in terms of depicting an affectionate bond and common passion in Gerasimov’s female bathing and the picture of the walk of two Soviet leaders, Stalin and Voroshilov, near the Moscow Kremlin, *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938).
- Washing, Russian sauna and bathing are one of the most popular topics where you can see nudes of same-sexed individuals having fun and/or absorbed in hygienic activity together. I also noticed that, for example, in *Banya/Sauna* (1913) by Zinaida Serebryakova (1884-1967), the picture that you can see in the State Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, and, for instance, the various nude bathing females at lakes and/or rivers (pictures drawn in 1932, 1941, 1944 and in 1952) by Aleksandr Deyneka (1899-1969) are completely different types of art having diverse impacts of

eroticism. I explain their differences by two factors: 1) despite living in the same historical period, Serebryakova and Deyneka represent various art schools, styles and concepts; 2) in drawing women, Serebryakova is an “insider” and projects her own inner, female erotism, whereas Deyneka is an “outsider” and he depicts the women touching each other from the male perspective. Anyway, it is all subjective and “Love is in the eye of beholder”. Whereas, objectively we see them all as pictures of nude females bathing together. There are 34 examples in the “*Washing, sauna and bathing*” group/category that might be extended. Thinking why this topic is so popular in Russian/Soviet art, I draw the conclusion that it is connected with the “survival reason”. From ancient times, access to water has been a privilege (especially to hot water during a long cold season). Bringing water from wells or other reservoirs, heating it with fire took a lot of effort, not affordable for one person. So, it was wiser, economically and socially, to create some “public baths” and/or practice group bathing. Traditionally in the East, (including, for example, Arab countries) bathing saunas, as well as places of prayer, are divided by gender. Women are separated from the men. (In some Western countries as, for example, in Finland people of all genders visit the sauna together; such a tradition has its own historical and cultural explanation).

- Observing some male artists’ pictures of female nudes, I thought about theories of *voyeurism* and *exhibitionism*. During my research, I came across a picture by a Ukrainian Soviet artist Vladimir Tarasenko (1938-2002). The artist depicted himself bitten by nude females who jumped out of a river. I couldn’t help but notice that the painter was a Peeping Tom drawing them. I didn’t include that picture into my study nor do I elaborate on stereotypically male *voyeurism*

and female *exhibitionism* (these theories are studied in the context of advertising); although I think that looking at the same-sexed bonds and affections from these perspectives would have also been interesting.

- Many professions are stereotyped by gender. For example, in Russia and many oriental countries a gynecologist is a predominantly a female occupation. In the Russian language, a gynecologist is literally a “female doctor” (although its meaning implies that it’s a doctor *for* females).
- In many countries there are separate (elite) schools for boys and girls; in the counties that I know, men and women are separated in prisons; men don’t compete with women in most sports’ rivalries including the Olympic Games (that is conceded normal and fair). Here is a rhetorical question connected with this study: if there are so many fields where same-sexed people spend so much time together, how is it possible for them to be emotionally neutral toward each other?
- One of the key conclusions of this study: a main reason for setting a norm and the concept of “normality” is a survival instinct. That is why there so many pictures (113 in this study but it’s just a “tip of the iceberg”; there are many more examples might be found) of “*The same-sexed individual united by their common job, task, situation, mission and/or empathy; historical scenes/motifs; war, etc.*” category. There is speculation that government or religious control over human bodies as, for example, in the ban on abortions, birth control as “one-child-policy” in China (1980-2015), the anti-gay environment in some societies are “survival-of-a-nation” desires and measures.
- The process of establishing a norm (how and who decides what is normal?) should be studied more because it might

help to explain some social standards, human behavior and related phenomena.

- Detecting and describing stereotypes (presented in mass communication and mass art) and archetypes (images connected with the collective subconsciousness presented in folklore, national cultures and art) might be a method of studying and explaining many social phenomena.

## Table of systematization of fine-art pictures showing same-sexed affection by Russian-speaking artists (examples from 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries)

A theme/topic showing the subjects, values, rituals and symbols of a picture put in four categories/groups. In the parenthesis is a number of pictures in each category.	The name of a painter in English and his/her birth-death dates.	The title of a picture in Russian and its English translation.  (A couple of pictures originally have only English titles and weren't translated into Russian.)	My comments and descriptions related to same-sexed affection, discussion, stereotypes and archetypes.
Playing and/or fighting  (3 examples)	Sergey Sovkov (1972-)	Cockfights (2014)	It's an openly gay title and depicts semi-naked young men playing and fighting. The artist emigrated from Russia.
	Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)	Игра в кости / Game of Dice (1899)	There are four women who are socializing and playing outdoors in the summer.
	Anatoly Nikolaevich Kalinnikov (1931-1983)	Игра в мяч / Ball Game (date?)	Most probably, it's a reference to "beach volleyball" that was popular in the USSR. At the center of the composition are, three young women. One is in a bikini; another is topless and the third one is changing her outfit. A ball, and a woman with another ball are in the background of the picture.
Washing, sauna and bathing  (34 examples)  In this category all images are naked bodies of the same gender.	Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Gerasimov (1881-1963)	1) Деревенская баня / Country Bath (1938) 2) Деревенская баня / Country Bath (1938-1956) 3) В общественной бане / In a Public Bath (1945) 4) В деревенской бане / In a Village Bath (1950) 5) В бане / In a Bath (1940)	With naturalistic details and nuances, the "godfather" of Socialist Realism in painting in the USSR depicts naked women in a public, village or other types of saunas. Many works by Gerasimov are displayed in top Russian museums.
	Zinaida Yevgenyevna Serebriakova (1884-1967)	Баня / Ванна/Sauna (1913)	There is a large group of closely packed naked women washing together in a bath. This picture is displayed in "Russkii Muzei" [The State Russian Museum] in Saint Petersburg.
	Arkady Alexandrovich Plastov (1893-1972)	Купание коней / Bathing Horses (1938)	There is a large group of totally naked young men sitting on horses and having fun bathing themselves in a pond or a river.

## SAME-SEXED AFFECTION IN RUSSIAN PAINTINGS

<p>Washing, sauna and bathing (34 examples)</p> <p>In this category all images are naked bodies of the same gender.</p>	<p>Anatoly Vladimirovich Treskin (1905-1986)</p>	<p>Котовцы купание коней / Kotovtsy Bathing Horses (1940)</p>	<p>There is a group of adult men sitting on horses and having fun bathing themselves. Most of the men are naked. There is a stereotypical similarity between Treskin and Plastov's picture "Bathing Horses".</p>
	<p>Kuzma Sergeevich Petrov-Vodkin (1878-1939)</p>	<p>Купание красного коня / Bathing a Red Horse (1912)</p>	<p>A naked young man is sitting on a red horse and bathing it. There are two other naked men with other horses nearby. Most probably, this picture set a trend of depicting naked men bathing horses in Russian art. This is an "iconic" picture and it is in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.</p>
	<p>Vladimir Alexandrovich Dianov (1930-2010)</p>	<p>Жарко / Hot (1964)</p>	<p>There is a group of five women on the shore; one is naked and entering the water (maybe for a swim). From the details of the painting, it looks like women of different ages who are on a working shift, are now having a break during a hot summer day.</p>
	<p>Ivan Nikolaevich Shulga (1889-1956)</p>	<p>На Днепре / On the Dnieper (1950)</p>	<p>From the title, we know that it's the Dnieper River. The group of naked women is swimming and bathing; one of the dressed women is washing an item of clothing there.</p>



<p>Washing, sauna and bathing (34 examples)</p> <p>In this category all images are naked bodies of the same gender.</p>	<p>Vitaly Gavrilovich Tikhov (1876-1939)</p>	<p>1) В русской бане / In the Russian Bath (1916)</p> <p>2) В бане / In the Bath (?)</p> <p>3) Купальщицы / Bathers (1919)</p> <p>4) Обнаженные в озере / Nudes in the Lake (1930)</p> <p>5) Купальщицы / Bathers (?)</p> <p>6) Купальщицы / Bathers (1935)</p>	<p>1) Four women in clouds of steam are washing. From their smiles and being in a close circle, they are presumably enjoying it. The picture is in blue colors.</p> <p>2) There are two women separated from each other while taking bath. The picture is in red colors.</p> <p>3) There is a large group of naked women bathing in a pond. The center of attention is on the female buttocks. This picture is in impressionistic colors similar to the style of Renoir (1841-1919).</p> <p>4) Two naked women, standing close together are stranded in the lake. The colors of this picture are bright, blue and impressionistic.</p> <p>5) There are two other naked female bathers in a nature. The colors of this picture are green, blue and brightly impressionistic.</p> <p>6) In a rural setting, a large group of laughing women are depicted. Two of the young women are in the water holding one another.</p>
	<p>Fyodor Afanasyevich Samusev (1913-1985)</p>	<p>После бани / After the Bath (?)</p>	<p>Two naked women (one standing, another sitting) are presumably having a talk or rest after their bath.</p>
	<p>Vladimir Alexandrovich Plotnikov (1866-1918)</p>	<p>В бане / In the Bath (?)</p>	<p>There is a huge group of naked women helping each other bathe. The picture is drawn in the traditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century art.</p>
	<p>Z.I. Letunov (?)</p>	<p>Русские бани / Russian Baths (?)</p>	<p>It looks like an old piece of art depicturing a large group of naked women bathing.</p>
	<p>Firs Sergeevich Zhuravlev (1836-1901)</p>	<p>Девичник в бане / Bachelorette Party in the Bath (?)</p>	<p>It looks like an orgy. The picture is drawn in the art traditions of the 17-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.</p>
	<p>Alexey Gavrilovich Venetsianov (1780-1847)</p>	<p>Купальщицы / Bathers (1829)</p>	<p>Two naked women are about to take a swim in a lake or river in the forest. It is in the possession of the "Russkii Muzei" (The State Russian Museum) in Saint Petersburg.</p>

## SAME-SEXED AFFECTION IN RUSSIAN PAINTINGS

<p>Washing, sauna and bathing (34 examples)</p> <p>In this category all images are naked bodies of the same gender.</p>	<p>Boris Anatolievich Sholokhov (1919-2003)</p>	<p>Баня / Banya / Sauna (1950)</p>	<p>There are two naked women posing close to one another. The composition centers on the female body.</p>
	<p>Emelyan Mikhailovich Korneev (1782-1839)</p>	<p>Русская баня / Russian Banya/Sauna (1812)</p>	<p>It's an old painting that looks more like a Roman bath than a Russian one.</p>
	<p>Boris Mikhaylovich Kustodiev (1878-1927)</p>	<p>1) Купание / Bathing (1922)</p> <p>2) Купальщица / Bather (1922)</p>	<p>Kustodiev is famous for painting voluptuous naked women; the settings of his pictures are often outdoors with Russian churches in the background.</p> <p>1) One nude is painted from her backside; another is in the pond. There is a birch tree on the right and a setting of a provincial Russian town in the distance.</p> <p>2) Although the title of the picture is singular, there are three naked women portrayed. Two are in the water and the main subject is depicted standing from the back. Her buttocks are the center of the composition. A provincial town graces the background.</p>
	<p>Konstantin Andreyevich Somov (1869-1939)</p>	<p>1) Купальщицы на солнце / Bathing in the Sun (1930)</p> <p>2) Купание / Bathing (1904)</p>	<p>1) It's a nude painting in the style of symbolism. At the center of the painting is a young woman exhibiting her breasts and leaning back against a tree, while a large group of naked women is having a rest in the background.</p> <p>2) Another example of symbolism depicting naked women exhibiting themselves.</p>

<p>Washing, sauna and bathing (34 examples)</p> <p>In this category all images are naked bodies of the same gender.</p>	<p>Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Deyneka (1899-1969)</p>	<p>1) Полдень / Noon (1932)</p> <p>2) Бегущие девушки / Running Girls (1941)</p> <p>3) Бегущие девушки / Running Girls (1944)</p> <p>4) Купальщицы / Female Bathers (1952)</p> <p>5) Купающиеся девушки / Bathing girls (1932)</p>	<p>Deyneka is a typical representative of Socialist Realism. But his works are also influenced by the Russian Avant-garde and Cubism.</p> <p>1) A group of five naked women running in a pond.</p> <p>2) Three grouped running nudes in a pond.</p> <p>3) There is another example of "Running Girls" by Deyneka. They are in some sporting underwear running from a pond or a river.</p> <p>4) It's an erotic picture of four women bathing in nature. Two of the women are entering the pond by holding each other's hands.</p> <p>5) An earlier picture showing two young women and the anatomical details of the female body (one women faces front; the other faces back).</p>
	<p>Vladimir Konstantinovich Zamkov (1925-1998)</p>	<p>Купальщицы / Female Bathers (1957)</p>	<p>In the context of Socialist Realism, a group of six women in the summer outdoors in nature. One woman is standing naked and depicted from her backside.</p>
	<p>Yuri Mikhailovich Raksha (Terebilov) (1937-1980)</p>	<p>Всё о Еве. Купальщицы. Левая часть триптиха / All about Eve. Female Bathers. Left side of the triptych (the 1970s)</p>	<p>A graphic drawing of two naked women entering a pond for a swim. This image was published in a Soviet Russian language literary magazine Yunost / Youth that caused a scandal because of the nudity without employing Socialist Realism.</p>
<p>Getting rest, fun, socializing and/or sun-bathing (43 examples)</p> <p>There is no opportunity to mention and describe all the pictures in this group/category. Here is the information about half of them.</p>	<p>Elsa Khokhlovkina (1934-?)</p>	<p>Утро / Morning (?)</p>	<p>There are two men in underpants who are sunbathing.</p>
	<p>Alexander Verbich (1965-)</p>	<p>Пляжницы / Beach-ladies (2018)</p>	<p>There are two women who are sunbathing on a beach. One of the women is naked. In the setting there are other people.</p>

## SAME-SEXED AFFECTION IN RUSSIAN PAINTINGS

<p>Getting rest, fun, socializing and/or sunbathing (43 examples)</p> <p>There is no opportunity to mention and describe all the pictures in this group/category. Here is the information about half of them.</p>	<p>Gavriil Nikitich Gorelov (1880-1966)</p>	<p>Обнаженные на солнце / Nudes in the Sun (1916)</p>	<p>There are two naked women who are sunbathing. Their bodies are very close to each other. The setting is a woodland. The colors of the picture are bright and impressionistic.</p>
	<p>Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)</p>	<p>1)Талисман / Mascot (1881)</p> <p>2) Новый браслет / New Bracelet (1883)</p>	<p>There are two dressed women who are touching each other's hands. The setting is summer outdoors and they are alone.</p> <p>2) There are two dressed women who are touching each other's hands. This picture is very similar to "Mascot" (another work by Henryk Siemiradzki); In the setting, the women are standing alone near a horse statue.</p>
	<p>Alexander Mikhailovich Gerasimov (1881-1963)</p>	<p>1) Прогулка на лодке / A Boat Trip (?)</p> <p>2) А. С. Пушкин и А. Мицкевич на Сенатской площади / A.S. Pushkin and A. Mitskevich on the Senate Square (1956)</p>	<p>1) There are three topless women sunbathing on a boat trip, sitting very close to one another.</p> <p>2) The two poets are depicted romantically holding hands while walking along Senate Square in Saint Petersburg.</p>
	<p>Sergei Mikhailovich Luppov (1893-1977)</p>	<p>Три грации / The Three Graces (the 1940s)</p>	<p>The Three Graces is a stereotypical motif in Russian, Soviet and international art that references Sandro Botticelli's "The Three Graces" Three nude women are sunbathing on a shore by themselves.</p>
	<p>Alexander Pavlovich Bubnov (1908-1964)</p>	<p>Полдень / Noon (?)</p>	<p>There are three women on a shore. Two of them are naked and one is swimming in a lake or a river.</p>

<p>Getting rest, fun, socializing and/or sunbathing</p> <p>(43 examples)</p> <p>There is no opportunity to mention and describe all the pictures in this group/category. Here is the information about half of them.</p>	<p>Victor Borisov-Musatov (1870-1905)</p>	<p>1) Гобелен / Tapestry (1904-1905)</p> <p>2) Водоём / Pond (1902)</p>	<p>1) There are two beautifully-dressed women, close to each other, outdoors for a walk or something. Most probably, the picture is named "Tapestry" because of its style of painting.</p> <p>2) Near a pond, two beautifully-dressed women stand close to each other. The painting style is similar to "Tapestry" by Victor Borisov-Musatov (it contains symbolism with similarities to impressionism).</p>
	<p>Nina Alekseevna Sergeeva (1921-2018)</p>	<p>1) Утренний сонет / Morning Sonnet (1975)</p> <p>2) Две нимфы / Two Nymphs (?)</p> <p>3) Девушки и море / Young women and the Sea (?)</p> <p>4) Пляж / Beach (?)</p>	<p>1) On a seaside terrace two young women: one is naked, wearing a hat and sitting at the table, while another is dressed and standing with a bouquet of daffodils.</p> <p>2) Like the "Morning Sonnet" picture, at the same seaside terrace, there are two women, both are almost naked (one is wearing a hat; another has a loincloth).</p> <p>3) There are three naked women in a shallow sea. The women are laughing and most probably playing. The two women are standing close to each other with spread legs.</p> <p>4) There are two young women in bikinis lying close to each other on a beach.</p>
	<p>Vladimir Nikolaevich Gavrilov (1923-1970)</p>	<p>Тёплый вечер / Warm Evening (1958)</p>	<p>There are two naked women standing on the wooden pier at a lake, pond, or a river. The women seem unconnected from each other.</p>
	<p>Viktor Vasilievich Bastyrykin (1954-)</p>	<p>1) На берегу / On the Shore (?)</p> <p>2) Купальщицы / Female Bathers (?)</p>	<p>1) There are five women, three horses and two dogs in this picture. Three women are naked, two women are seminaked. It looks they are having rest after swimming.</p> <p>2) This picture is similar to "On the Shore" by the same artist. Now we see four women, one horse and one dog. All the women are naked. One woman is sitting with her spread legs; she is the center of the composition.</p>

## SAME-SEXED AFFECTION IN RUSSIAN PAINTINGS

<p>Getting rest, fun, socializing and/or sunbathing</p> <p>(43 examples)</p> <p>There is no opportunity to mention and describe all the pictures in this group/category. Here is the information about half of them.</p>	<p>Dmitry Mikhailovich Nekrasov (1960-)</p>	<p>На закате / At Sunset (?)</p>	<p>There are two nude women in this socialism realist picture done with impressionistic colors. One is entering a pond for a swim. Another, unconnected nude is standing with her spread legs and chatting with a dressed man who looks like a truck-driver because a vehicle is standing nearby.</p>
	<p>Boris Petrovich Sveshnikov (1927-1998)</p>	<p>Две дамы / Two Ladies (1970)</p>	<p>There are two dressed women sitting opposite each other at a table. There is something "magical" about this picture because of its pointillist technique, and Russian winter in the background. It might be even suggested that it's a portrait of the same woman in two roles.</p>
	<p>Shilovskaya Tamara Andreevna (1916-2001)</p>	<p>Под елкой / Under the Christmas/fir-tree (the 1960s)</p>	<p>There are three young women sitting very close to each other. There is some annoyance, anger, and/or disinterest in posing for this picture. There was no Christmas in the USSR (religion was forbidden); people celebrated New Year's Eve and used to have festive trees in their homes.</p>
	<p>Andrey Alekseevich Yakovlev (1934-2012)</p>	<p>Ч а е п и т и е и з с е р и и «Чукотка» / Tea-drinking From Chukotka series (1959)</p>	<p>Chukotka is a region located in the Russian Far East. There are two North-native women making and drinking tea in open nature and fire surrounded by snow. There are herds of elk in the background.</p>
	<p>Vadim Alekseevich Kulakov (1939-2017)</p>	<p>Трое на отдыхе / Three on Vacation (1989)</p>	<p>The ironic title of this picture captures a long tradition. The silhouettes of three men who are sitting in a close circle are drinking vodka outdoors in a wasteland. Drinking vodka by three men was a Soviet "ritual" because it was convenient to share by thirds the price and amount of liquid in a bottle.</p>

<p>Same-sexed individuals united by common job, task, situation, mission and/or empathy; historical scenes/motifs; war; visiting same-sexed specialists (physicians, fortune-teller, etc.)</p> <p>(113 examples)</p> <p>This is the biggest group/category in the study. Its description and analysis could/should be a separate study because of the richness and historical context of the pictures. Here are just a dozen of its examples.</p>	<p>Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Gerasimov (1881-1963)</p>	<p>И. В. Сталин и К. Е. Ворошилов в Кремле / Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin (1938)</p>	<p>Aleksandr Gerasimov was the favorite artist of Joseph Stalin. Gerasimov drew many Soviet leaders including Lenin. Gerasimov is a key hero of this study because it's been learned that he painted a lot of nudity and affectionate bonds between those of the same gender.</p> <p>In this picture Joseph Stalin and Kliment Voroshilov are walking close to each other near the Kremlin. Since 1941 this picture is in the exposition of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. A slang name for this picture is "Два вождя после дождя" / "Two Leaders After the Rain". Here is a question: Why did Stalin and Voroshilov walk together after a rain at sunrise or at sundown?</p>
	<p>Arkady Alexandrovich Plastov (1893-1972)</p>	<p>Трактористки / Female Tractor Drivers (1942-1943)</p>	<p>By the picture dating, we understand that it's WWII in the USSR. There are two young women workers disrobing (we see them naked) near a pond on a hot summer's day. By the cloud of a steam near the tractor, we understand that they haven't turn off its engine.</p>

## SAME-SEXED AFFECTION IN RUSSIAN PAINTINGS

<p>Same-sexed individuals united by common job, task, situation, mission and/or empathy; historical scenes/motifs; war; visiting same-sexed specialists (physicians, fortune-teller, etc.)</p> <p>(113 examples)</p> <p>This is the biggest group/category in the study. Its description and analysis could/should be a separate study because of the richness and historical context of the pictures. Here are just a dozen of its examples.</p>	<p>Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)</p>	<p>1) Ночь на Св. Андрея. Гадание / Night at St. Andrew. Divination (1867)</p> <p>2) Alexander the Great and physician Philip of Acarnania (?)</p> <p>3) Св. Александр Невский в Орде; Эскиз росписи для Храма Христа Спасителя / St. Alexander Nevsky in the Horde; Mural sketch for the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (1876)</p> <p>4) Две фигуры у статуи сфинкса; Эскиз к картине «Светочи христианства» / Two Figures by a Statue of Sphinx; Sketch for the painting "Lights of Christianity" (1876)</p> <p>5) «Корсары» Изаврйские пираты, продающие добычу (Пещера пиратов) / "Corsairs" Isaurian pirates selling loot (Pirates' Cave) (1880)</p> <p>6) Песня рабыни / A Song of the Female Slave (1884)</p>	<p>1) Two young women are visiting a female fortune-teller. One young woman looks like she is being hypnotized.</p> <p>2) There are only men in the picture. Supposedly, Alexander the Great is depicted shirtless lying in bed.</p> <p>3) Alexander Nevsky (1221-1263) is a historical Russian figure who served as a ruler during some of the difficult times in Kievan Rus' history. Alexander Nevsky is recognized as a saint. In this picture Alexander Nevsky is portrayed with a halo surrounded entirely by males.</p> <p>4) There are two men, whose bodies are lightly covered with loincloths, standing very close together nearby a statue of the Sphinx.</p> <p>5) Here is a historical motif depicting warriors in armor, as well as naked and semi-naked men in a cave.</p> <p>6) In a close circle, there are three women spending time outdoors in the summer. One is presumably a slave singing a song and entertaining the two others (the slave's mistresses?).</p>
	<p>Irina Ivanovna Vitman (1916-2012)</p>	<p>После смены / After the Shift (1961)</p>	<p>Presumably, the work shift was at a factory and now we see a female changing room. Some women are naked and dressing after taking a shower.</p>
	<p>Alexey Gavrilovich Venetsianov (1780-1847)</p>	<p>На жатве. Лето / At the harvest. Summer (Mid 1820s)</p>	<p>It's one of the many pictures by Venetsianov from his "peasant series". There is a group of women working the harvest and taking a break. This picture is interesting from an ethnographical point of view. It's in the collection of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.</p>



<p>Same-sexed individuals united by common job, task, situation, mission and/or empathy; historical scenes/motifs; war; visiting same-sexed specialists (physicians, fortune-teller, etc.)</p> <p>(113 examples)</p> <p>This is the biggest group/category in the study. Its description and analysis could/should be a separate study because of the richness and historical context of the pictures. Here are just a dozen of its examples.</p>	<p>Dmitry Dmitrievich Zhilinsky (1927-2015)</p>	<p>Купающиеся строители моста / Bathing Bridge Builders (1959)</p>	<p>There is a big group of naked and semi-naked men who are entering the water of a river near a bridge for a swim or a bath. We can speculate from the context and the picture's title that the men are the builders of the bridge taking a break or reaching the end of their working shift. The colors of the picture and the depicted faces of the men are a mixture of joy, excitement, seriousness and tiredness. The picture is an example of the Socialist Realism presented in impressionistic colors.</p>
	<p>Pyotr Petrovich Konchalovsky (1876-1956)</p>	<p>Ученики в мастерской / Students in the Workshop (1932)</p>	<p>There are two naked fine-art male models depicted close to one another. One man is sitting with his spread legs and we see in detail his male body parts.</p>

## How to find the images/pictures described in this study?

Not all, but many of the studied pictures, are mentioned in my final *“Table of systematization”*. If you would like to see an image, as an option, you can use this “algorithm”:

*Step # 1.* Choose a category that you are interested in. It's the left-hand column *“A theme/topic showing the subjects, values, rituals and symbols of a picture put in four categories/groups. In the parenthesis are the number of pictures in each category”*. For instance, you are interested in the upper mentioned topic that is *“Playing and/or fighting”*.

*Step # 2.* In a chosen category select a picture that you would like to view (three columns: a painter's name; the title of a picture and my comments might influence your choice). So, make your own choice.

*Step # 3.* Copy the title of a picture that you would like to find. For example, in the upper row you see *Cockfights* by Sergey Sovkov. In this case you don't see a Russian title, so this means you copy the

English word. The next row in the table is *Игра в кости / Game of Dice* by Henryk Siemiradzki. In this example you need to copy only the Russian words *Игра в кости*.

I translated many Russian titles into English for those who don't know Russian. To locate an image in the Internet, you need to copy only the Russian words/title because, in most cases, a picture is known by its Russian title.

*Step # 4.* Paste the copied title (*Step # 3*) into your Internet browser, for example, Google. Simultaneously, in your browser you click on the "Images" icon if you are looking for a picture.

Often, an image of a picture might be found at various Internet sites and on social media. However, links can be changed at any time for any reason. For example, the picture *Игра в кости / Game of Dice* by Henryk Siemiradzki is the property of the National Art Museum of Belorussia but I wasn't able to find its image at their official site. Thus, finding an image needs some skills, time and determination.

*I was asked if I could specify a group of 8-10 pieces of art that I believe are more indicative and that best illustrate what I demonstrate with my essay.* If I compare my study with a picture, I would say that each one of the 193 pieces are like a color, a stroke, a detail that support my ideas about stereotypes and archetypes in the paintings depicting same-sexed affection as a norm and/or normality created by Russian artists during different eras.

As your "tour guide", I would invite you into my favorite Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and, for example, show you *И. В. Сталин и К. Е. Ворошилов в Кремле / Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938) by Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Gerasimov (1881-1963). Then, I would ask you some questions about the painting that I refer to in my comments: Why are Joseph Stalin and Kliment Voroshilov walking so close to each other? Why are Stalin and Voro-

shilov strolling together after a rain? Is it sunrise or sundown? Why are they depicted near the Kremlin instead of working inside the Kremlin?

In the Tretyakov Gallery there are many iconic paintings such as, for example, *Купание красного коня / Bathing a Red Horse* (1912) by Kuzma Sergeevich Petrov-Vodkin (1878-1939). Pictured is a naked young man on a red horse, stereotypically considered a “harbinger” of the “Red” October Revolution of 1917. Looking at the painting we see that there are two other naked men with other horses nearby. For more than a century, this was viewed politically, and nobody saw this picture from an erotic perspective. It’s a standard of “normality” that doesn’t raise any questions.

Bathing horses by naked men is a stereotypical image in Russian art that can be seen in top Russian galleries such as, for instance, the *Russkii Muzei* (the State Russian Museum) in Saint Petersburg. For example, *Купание коней / Bathing horses* (1938) by Arkady Plastov (1893-1972).

In the same museum, there is a picture by Zinaida Yevgenyevna Serebriakova (1884-1967) *Баня / Banya/Sauna* (1913). Depicted in it is a large group of closely-packed naked women washing together in a bathhouse. This female artist portrayed a stereotypical scene of bathing with different expressiveness and creativity.

On another note, a special artist for my study has become Henryk Siemiradzki (1843 – 1902)<sup>5</sup>. Siemiradzki is a painter who some consider Polish because of his ethnicity and place of death; Ukrainians believe that he is Ukrainian because of his birthplace and childhood in the territory of modern Ukraine; Russians label him Russian because he graduated from the Russian Academy of Arts in

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<sup>5</sup> Henryk Siemiradzki’s name can be found in other different spellings such as Genrix Semiradskiy, Genrikh Semiradskiy and/or Semiradsky.

Saint Petersburg (1873) and he represents Russian “monumental academic art”. There are many pictures by Siemiradzki where we can see same-sex-affiliations of males and/or females. I was privileged to visit the exhibition of Henryk Siemiradzki’s works organized by the Tretyakov Gallery from April 28-July 3, 2022 in Moscow. There were about 100 various pieces by Siemiradzki and other items of art connected with this artist by topic, style and/or by his epoch<sup>6</sup>.

The largest and the most significant part of my study centered on Soviet socialist realism. United by the “survival-mode” unions, I grouped them into the largest category: “*Same-sexed individuals united by a common job, task, situation, mission and/or empathy...*”. If you are looking for humor, one of the funniest pictures within this category might be considered *Epod / Boat/Crossing Place* (1990) by Alexander Stepanovich Sedov (1928-2012) where the earthy female collective farm-workers are crossing a pond or a river showing that they lack any underwear (most probably because they didn’t want it to get wet).

One of my favorite Russian artists of the Soviet period is Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Deyneka (1899-1969). Deyneka is famous for creating the sketches for mosaic panels for two Moscow Metro stations (Mayakovskaya and Novokuznetstskaya). If you look at his selected works, even in the English section of Wikipedia, you will see that he is significant in many other areas. In the context of this study, I can say that there are many different pictures where Deyneka pictured groups of males and females who work and/or have fun in groups of their own gender.

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<sup>6</sup> The exhibition of Henryk Siemiradzki’s works organized by the *Tretyakov Gallery* from April 28-July 3: <https://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/exhibitions/o/genrikh-semiradzkiy-po-primeru-bogov/>.

I hope you will be able to find “your” pictures by Russian artists and draw your own conclusions about “norms”, “normality” and “standards of behavior”.

*My acknowledgments:* I am thankful to all the artists because with their skills and visions they create a reality that enriches us, the art-lovers, and give us esthetic pleasure. My special gratitude and affection goes to all Russian-speaking painters and the Soviet ones, in particular.

Sometimes I looked at a date of a painting and understood that it was, for example, created at a pinnacle of Stalin’s repressions in the USSR or, for instance, painted in the middle of the World War Two. Still, from those pictures, I still felt the full power of erotism, affection and bonding. This study has supported my belief in the power of love, including the love of living, love for your profession and occupation, and loves of various shades and depths.

**POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES  
AS A SPACE OF TRANSNATIONAL  
QUEER ACTIVISM**



# LGBTQ Rights in the EU-Russia 'Shared Neighbourhood'. Geopoliticisation and the Possibility of Critique

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## Introduction

In Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights seem to have acquired the status of a geopolitical issue. In the media, public and political discourse, LGBTQ rights increasingly tend to be represented as victims of geopolitics: this is done by depicting the European Union (EU) as a staunch supporter of equality in opposition to Russia – the main source of homophobic sentiments. In 2015, the *EUobserver* wrote: «protection of sexual minorities used to be a human rights issue. But Russia, in its propaganda war against the EU and the US, has made it geopolitical»<sup>1</sup>. Later events taking place in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital city, provide a more concrete example of how this framing works. On 5 July 2021, Tbilisi was shaken by an unprecedented wave of homophobic violence, on the

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<sup>1</sup> Rettman A., *Gay rights fall victims to EU-Russia geopolitics*, in *EUobserver*, 27 May 2015: <https://euobserver.com/world/128842> (accessed: 13.04.2022).



day when it was supposed to host a Pride march. Faced with the government's inability – or unwillingness – to protect participants, the organisers called off the planned “Dignity March”. Meanwhile, homophobic groups tore down the EU flag from the parliament building, erecting a cross in front of it. Media and pundits quickly pointed to a «geopolitical faultline» around LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia<sup>2</sup>: according to this interpretation, the homophobic mobs were part of a Kremlin's plan to undermine Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy.

This framing has been mobilised extensively in a context of growing EU-Russia antagonism over what is often described as these two powers' “shared” or “contested” neighbourhood. In the past ten years, the EU has made the promotion of equality and non-discrimination a cornerstone of its human rights policies, including in the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the framework covering political and economic relations with the former Soviet countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus<sup>3</sup>. While “LGBT-friendliness” became synonym with “Europeanisation” and a key feature of the EU's identity as a global actor<sup>4</sup>, around the mid-2010s Russia started embodying a different kind of gender norms entrepreneur, projecting its own model based on the defence of “traditional values”<sup>5</sup>. This dimension is equally present in the Eurasian Economic

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<sup>2</sup> MackInnon A., *The Geopolitical Fault Line Behind the Attack on Tbilisi Pride*, in *Foreign Policy*, 7 July 2021: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/07/tbilisi-pride-attack-lgbt-rights-georgia/> (accessed: 13.04.2022).

<sup>3</sup> These are Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

<sup>4</sup> Slootmaeckers K., *Constructing European Union Identity through LGBT Equality Promotion: Crises and Shifting Othering Processes in the European Union Enlargement*, in *Political Studies Review*, August 2020, 18, 3, 346-361.

<sup>5</sup> Edenborg E., *Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia's Domestic and International Promotion of “Traditional Values”*, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, online first, 2021.

Union, a Russia-led intergovernmental organisation in which Belarus and Armenia, as well as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, participate. In EaP countries, which are represented in policy discourse as navigating “in-between” the competing centres of EU and Russia, based on their «acceptance (or not) of the EU’s developmental model»<sup>6</sup>, LGBTQ rights worked as a catalyst of the competition between two regional integration projects, presented as mutually exclusive civilisational endeavours<sup>7</sup>. These dynamics have produced an understanding of LGBTQ rights as a geopolitical problem, which I qualify as *geopoliticisation*: the «use of geopolitical signifiers to describe attitudes to LGBTQ equality, which crystallizes the idea of a value-based divide between the West/Europe and the East/Russia» – with the Eastern neighbourhood occupying a liminal position therein<sup>8</sup>.

In this chapter, I argue that the geopolitical framing of LGBTQ rights conceals more than it reveals, and that it has depoliticising outcomes: first, as it obscures the power/knowledge struggles that underpin LGBTQ rights promotion and contestation; second, as it forecloses the space for “radical critiques” of how LGBTQ rights are mainstreamed in international relations and enacted in specific

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<sup>6</sup> Browning C., Christou G., *The Constitutive Power of Outsiders: The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Dimension*, in *Political Geography*, February 2010, 29, 2, 109-118.

<sup>7</sup> Shevtsova M., *Fighting “Gayropa”: Europeanization and Instrumentalization of LGBTI Rights in Ukrainian Public Debate*, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2020, 67, 6, 500-510; Shirinian T., *The illiberal east: the gender and sexuality of the imagined geography of Eurasia in Armenia*, in *Gender, Place & Culture*, 2021, 28, 7, 955-974.

<sup>8</sup> Luciani L., *Where the Personal is (Geo)Political. Performing Queer Visibility in Georgia in the Context of EU Association*, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, online first, 2021.

locales<sup>9</sup>. My discussion is informed by critical re-conceptualisations of geopolitics which seek «to unmask geopolitical discourses and imaginations as social and political constructions, querying how such constructions and discourses create “realities”»<sup>10</sup>. Rather than deterministically examining the geographic or power politics influences on LGBTQ rights, I aim at denaturalising the discursive construction of this issue as a geopolitical problem and interrogating the outcomes this produces. Drawing on queer and poststructuralist theorisations of international relations, I first examine how LGBTQ rights are mobilised to maintain and contest a particular geo-political order in the “shared neighbourhood”. Then, building on my research on LGBTQ visibility-raising strategies in Georgia in the context of EU association<sup>11</sup>, I show that the geopoliticisation shapes queer lives and activism in ambiguous ways. Finally, I discuss queer critiques in the making and the possibility of imagining alternatives to geopoliticised LGBTQ agendas.

### The geo-politics of LGBTQ rights

Following the end of the Cold war, LGBTQ rights became «a geopoliticised symbol in international affairs»<sup>12</sup>, sustaining the af-

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<sup>9</sup> Channell-Justice E., *LGBT+ Rights, European Values, and Radical Critique. Leftist Challenges to LGBT+ Mainstreaming in Ukraine*, in *Decolonizing Queer Experience LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. Id., Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020, 75–94.

<sup>10</sup> Bachmann V., Bialasiewicz L., *Critical Geopolitics*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical European Studies*, eds. Bigo D., Diez T., Fanoulis E., Rosamond B., Stivachtis Y.A., London, Routledge, 2020, 85–98.

<sup>11</sup> Luciani L., *Where the Personal*, cit.

<sup>12</sup> Baker C., *Transnational ‘LGBT’ politics after the Cold War and Implications for Gender History*, in *Gender in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe and the USSR*, ed. Id., London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 228–251.

firmation of a specific geo-political order. The homonationalist re-framing of LGBTQ rights as “standards of civility” (re)produced a hierarchy between the “tolerant” West and the “homophobic” rest, portrayed as culturally backward and in need to be “brought up” to the “right” standards of modernity<sup>13</sup>. In postsocialist Eastern Europe, this process was shaped by EU enlargements and the related “Europeanisation” processes. LGBTQ rights protection and promotion were progressively enshrined in EU conditionality mechanisms and foreign policy guidelines – laying the basis for the EU’s «Pink Agenda»<sup>14</sup>. This worked to establish symbolic geographies of equality and repression, underpinned by spatial and temporal hierarchies: while “the West/Europe” is presented as a space where LGBTQ rights are already fully realised, “the East” is posited as constantly “catching up”, in transition, «not liberal, not yet, not enough»<sup>15</sup>. This also implied that Western experiences of the formation of LGBTQ identities and politics, and of the socio-cultural conditions that allowed for their recognition – such as liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism – were purported as universally applicable and transferable to different contexts, following a «progress model»<sup>16</sup>. The imperialist export of norms, politics, and rights regimes related to sexuality simultaneously reinstated

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<sup>13</sup> Puar J., *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Ammaturo F.R., *The 'Pink Agenda': Questioning and Challenging European Homonationalist Sexual Citizenship*, in *Sociology*, December 2015, 49, 6, 1151-66.

<sup>15</sup> Kulpa R., *Western Leveraged Pedagogy of Central and Eastern Europe: Discourses of Homophobia, Tolerance, and Nationhood*, in *Gender, Place & Culture*, 2014, 21, 4, 431-48.

<sup>16</sup> Rahman M., *What Makes LGBT Sexualities Political? Understanding Oppression in Sociological, Historical and Cultural Context*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*, eds. Bosia M.J., McEvoy S.M., and Rahman M., New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, 15-30.

non-Western countries' difference and the West's own "sexual exceptionalism" in global politics<sup>17</sup>.

Undoubtedly, EU political conditionality and monitoring have contributed to the creation or improvement of LGBTQ+ human rights and anti-discrimination frameworks in postsocialist countries; however, this has happened «in a top-down fashion, often without the existence of a strong LGBT movement or firm public support for the legal change»<sup>18</sup>. These policy practices illustrate the EU's willingness to «promote its own established order inside-out», in an attempt to discipline and align external realities to its own "normality"<sup>19</sup>. In poststructuralist terms, they could be described as *depoliticising*: they constitute interventions performed in the realm of "politics", operating «within a settled agenda or framework that is taken for granted»<sup>20</sup>. Still, the local relevance and (unintended) consequences of these practices, based on an individualistic human rights framework, institutional-legal changes, visibility- and awareness-raising strategies, call for more nuanced assessments; particularly, the EU's increased focus on the appropriate handling of Pride marches in candidate and, more recently, neighbouring countries has been the object of critical scrutiny<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Szulc L., *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Korosteleva E., *Eastern Partnership: bringing "the political" back in*, in *East European Politics*, 2017, 33, 3, 321-337.

<sup>20</sup> Edkins J., *Poststructuralism*, in *International Relations Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Griffiths M., Oxon, New York, Routledge, 88-98.

<sup>21</sup> Butterfield N., *Sexual Rights as a Tool for Mapping Europe: Discourses of Human Rights and European Identity in Activists' Struggles in Croatia*, in *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*, eds. Fejes N., Balogh A.P., Bristol, Chicago, Intellect, 2013, 11-33; Kahlina K., *Local Histories, European LGBT Designs: Sexual Citizenship, Nationalism, and "Europeanisation" in Post-Yugoslav Croatia and Serbia*, in *Women's Studies International Forum*, March-April 2015, 49, 73-83; *The*

While LGBTQ visibility is considered in the West as «the latest stage of social and political progress»<sup>22</sup>, the experience of many LGBTQ people in the former Soviet region suggests that «greater visibility has frequently been accompanied by increased vulnerability, danger, and insecurity [...] as contestations over LGBT human rights intensify resistance as well as support»<sup>23</sup>.

LGBTQ rights' elevation to civilisational standards has in fact caused backlash «in those countries resisting the homonationalist interpretation of modernity»<sup>24</sup>. In Central-Eastern Europe, Pride marches became a «geopolitical-ideological space» where “Europeanness” could be claimed, as well as (violently) resisted<sup>25</sup>. In the EaP, the symbolic association between “Europe” and “LGBT-friendliness” became increasingly complicated in the wake of Crimea’s annexation and invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, when the Russian neologism *Gayropa* (Gay-Europe) surfaced as a «geopolitical signifier of difference» between Brussels and Moscow<sup>26</sup>. Besides casting the EU’s liberal approach to sexuality as a deviancy from (and a deliberate attack on) the traditional gender order upheld from Russia, *Gayropa* was also used as a geopolitical argument to undermine Ukraine’s and Armenia’s willingness

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*EU Enlargement and Gay Politics: The Impact of Eastern Enlargement on Rights, Activism and Prejudice*, eds. Slootmaeckers K., Touquet H., and Vermeersch P., London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016; Slootmaeckers K., *The Litmus Test of Pride: Analysing the Emergence of the Belgrade ‘Ghost’ Pride in the Context of EU Accession*, in *East European Politics*, 2017, 33, 4, 517-35; Luciani L., *Where the Personal*, cit.

<sup>22</sup> Rahman M., *What Makes*, cit., 16.

<sup>23</sup> Wilkinson C., *LGBT Rights in the Former Soviet Union: The Evolution of Hypervisibility*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT*, cit., 233-48.

<sup>24</sup> Slootmaeckers K., *The Litmus Test*, cit., 520.

<sup>25</sup> Baker C., *Transnational ‘LGBT’ Politics*, cit., 235.

<sup>26</sup> Foxall A., *From Evropa to Gayropa: A Critical Geopolitics of the European Union as Seen from Russia*, in *Geopolitics*, 2017, 24, 1, 174-193.

to associate with the EU<sup>27</sup>. Pre-existing articulations of a value-based East-West dichotomy crystallised around new signifiers: a «geo-normative debate» emerged<sup>28</sup>, linking attitudes to LGBTQ rights with discourses related to a country's foreign policy orientation and participation in competing geopolitical alliances<sup>29</sup>. As LGBTQ rights were framed as a new battleground for pro-European (=liberal) and pro-Russian (= homophobic) constituencies, the imagined East-West divide became sharper than ever<sup>30</sup>.

These developments show how LGBTQ rights have become key sites for the «on-going restructuring of symbolic and geopolitical hierarchies at the global level»<sup>31</sup>. As argued by Edenborg, the “traditional values” discourse has enabled a diverse set of actors in specific contexts to produce political interventions<sup>32</sup>: for Russia, this serves the (re)construction of national identity and re-assertion of its influence in the neighbourhood<sup>33</sup>; in other Central-Eastern European locales, homophobic and heteronormative politics have been mobilised by governments and right-wing nationalists «as a means to claim power, sovereignty, but also to contest the hierarchical relation and persisting material inequalities between

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<sup>27</sup> Ryabov O. and Ryabova T., *The Decline of Gayropa? How Russia Intends to Save the World*, in *Eurozine*, 5 February 2014: <https://www.eurozine.com/the-decline-of-gayropa/> (accessed: 13.04.2022); Shirinian T., *The illiberal east*, cit.

<sup>28</sup> Verpoest L., *Geopolitical Othering versus Normative Isomorphism? LGBTI Rights in Russia and Ukraine*, in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 2018, 23, 1, 139-57.

<sup>29</sup> Shevtsova M., *Fighting “Gayropa”*, cit.; Shirinian T., *The illiberal east*, cit.; Luciani L., *Where the Personal*, cit.

<sup>30</sup> Baker C., *Transnational ‘LGBT’ Politics*, cit.

<sup>31</sup> Kahlina K., Ristivojević D., *LGBT Rights, Standards of ‘Civilisation’ and the Multipolar World Order, E-International Relations*, 10 September 2015: <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/09/10/lgbt-rights-standards-of-civilisation-and-the-multipolar-world-order/> (accessed: 21.11.2022).

<sup>32</sup> Edenborg E., *Anti-gender politics*, cit.

<sup>33</sup> Ryabov O., Ryabova T., *The decline of Gayropa*, cit.

East and West»<sup>34</sup>. As will be seen, the devastating consequences of the market transition need to be taken seriously when examining “moral panics” in postsocialist Eurasia – whereby gender becomes a proxy to reject the neoliberal order and resist perceived Euro-American imperialism<sup>35</sup>.

Through a poststructuralist lens, we could see these processes as an interruption of “politics” and opening of the “*Political*” – something which takes place when the established order «is called into question»<sup>36</sup>. This represents an opportunity for «openness» and dialogue, allowing «new circuits of power to emerge and re-align in co-existence»<sup>37</sup>. For the EU, this could have meant reappraising and seeking «sufficient legitimation and reciprocation» for and through its normative agenda<sup>38</sup> – to address the root causes for resistance. Instead, a major revision of the neighbourhood policy in 2015 further reaffirmed EU norms and rules as “the normal”, reinstating the need for their projection onto partner countries, only «at a differing pace and level»<sup>39</sup>. With the EaP being increasingly framed as an endeavour aimed at “winning over” countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus and “rolling back” Russia’s influence<sup>40</sup>, the logic that prevailed, Korosteleva writes, «was to step up a gear of “politics” and move it to [...] “higher security pol-

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<sup>34</sup> Kováts E., *Anti-gender politics in East-Central Europe: Right-wing defiance to West-Eurocentrism*, in *GENDER – Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft*, 2021, 1, 76-90.

<sup>35</sup> Kováts E., *Anti-gender politics*, cit.; Shirinian T., *The illiberal east*, cit.

<sup>36</sup> Edkins J., *Poststructuralism*, cit., 93.

<sup>37</sup> Korosteleva E., *Eastern Partnership*, cit., 322.

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, 329.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Cadier D., *The Geopoliticisation of the EU’s Eastern Partnership*, in *Geopolitics*, 2019, 24, 1, 71-99.



itics”»<sup>41</sup>. When an issue is securitised or, as in the context at hand, geopoliticised, it is removed from the sphere of contestation<sup>42</sup> – resulting in its extreme depoliticisation: in an attempt to secure the established order, the space for the *Political* was foreclosed, and *politics* were colonised by geopolitics. By exploring how these processes play out in Georgia, in the next section I will show how the imbrication of international and domestic discourses concretely affects queer lives and activism.

### Georgia: the “litmus test” of Pride?

Georgian LGBTQ politics are entangled with colonial legacies, geopolitical rivalries, modernisation projects and attempts to fix the country’s place in the world in-between two competing centres<sup>43</sup>. Following the 2003 Rose Revolution, then-president Mikheil Saakashvili set to “transition” the country from “past” to “future”, by pursuing integration in Euro-Atlantic structures and radical neoliberal transformations. Under this conjuncture, the Council of Europe and EU conditionality mechanisms have allowed Georgian advocacy groups to secure achievements in LGBTQ rights legislation. A law «On the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination», banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, was adopted in 2014 under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Formal improvements and commitment to equality have helped (part

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<sup>41</sup> Korosteleva E., *Eastern Partnership*, cit., 325.

<sup>42</sup> Cadier D., *The Geopoliticisation*, cit.

<sup>43</sup> Tskhadadze T., ‘*The West’ and Georgian ‘Difference’: Discursive Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Georgia*, in *Gender in Georgia. Feminist Perspectives on Culture, Nation, and History in the South Caucasus*, eds. Barkaia M. and Waterston A., New York, Oxford, Berghan Books, 2017, 47-60.

of) Georgian political elite portray the country as “European” and “modern” in opposition to Russia, the former colonial power from which Tbilisi continues to face military threat. For instance, in the face of contestation by conservative groups, parliamentary speaker Davit Usupashvili framed the adoption of the EU-sponsored anti-discrimination bill as a civilisational choice: «we have to take decisions that are acceptable in the civilized world in order not to stay in the uncivilized world with Russia»<sup>44</sup>.

Still, LGBTQ people form one of the most vulnerable and excluded groups in society, whose «chances of living freely are substantially limited in relation to all human rights»<sup>45</sup>. Social conservatism and anxieties *vis-à-vis* LGBTQ equality are manipulated by the Georgian Orthodox Church as well as a range of nativist groups, which portray issues of gender and sexuality as a Western conspiracy to destroy Georgian traditions<sup>46</sup>. Although these groups’ narratives align with the Russian discourse on “traditional values”, resulting in their mainstream labelling as “pro-Russian”, Georgian nativists’ ties with the Kremlin are not obvious and they also take inspiration from like-minded groups and political parties in the West<sup>47</sup>. In this context, visible manifestations of LGBTQ rights in

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<sup>44</sup> “Usupashvili: “Anti-Discrimination Bill is about Choosing between Europe and Russia”, in *Civil.ge*, 30 April 2014: <https://civil.ge/archives/123670> (accessed: 13.04.2022).

<sup>45</sup> Jalagania L., *Social Exclusion of LGBTQ Group in Georgia. Quantitative research Analysis*. [https://socialjustice.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/Social\\_Exclusion\\_of\\_LGBTQ\\_Group\\_1612128635.pdf](https://socialjustice.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/Social_Exclusion_of_LGBTQ_Group_1612128635.pdf) (accessed: 13.04.2022).

<sup>46</sup> Nodia G., *Nativists versus Global Liberalism in Georgia*, in *The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society*, eds. Youngs R., Washington, DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, 45-50.

<sup>47</sup> Kincha S., *Labelling Georgia’s Far Right ‘Pro-Russian’ is Reductionist and Counterproductive*, in *OC Media*, 13 August 2018, <https://oc-media.org/opinions/opinionlabelling-georgias-far-right-pro-russian-is-redujtionist-andjounterprodujtive/> (accessed: 13 April 2022).

the public space have become the target of (violent) resistance. This is epitomised by the tensions surrounding the celebrations for May 17, the International Day Against Homo-bi-transphobia: since 2014, these have effectively been hijacked by the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has established on the same date a “Family Purity Day” consisting of a march through Tbilisi’s main street.

The “making of” a first Tbilisi Pride Week, comprising a public Dignity March, in summer 2019 further intensified these struggles. Thanks to the organisers’ quest for international solidarity, the Tbilisi Pride obtained an unprecedented level of media visibility and political attention at home and abroad. Georgia’s geo-political conjuncture (i.e., its geographical location in a non-LGBT-friendly neighbourhood and aspirations for EU integration) contributed to this success. The holding of a Pride was presented by the organisers and their allies as a test for Georgia’s commitment to “European values”, implying further differentiation and distance from Russia. This was described as a strategy to hold the government accountable *vis-à-vis* its Western partners. Commenting on the government’s initial refusal to protect the Dignity March, should this take place in the centre of Tbilisi, then-Member of the European Parliament Rebecca Harms declared that she was «amazed that Georgia cannot do what the other countries associated with the EU have been able to do» since «Pride was organized in Moldova and Ukraine»<sup>48</sup>. At the same time, one Pride organiser noted, this strategy required a balancing act: «we were not strongly pushing this [geopolitical] message, we were saying it here and there. But we didn’t want to undermine the EU, to put it in a way that the EU

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<sup>48</sup> Luciani L., *Where the Personal*, cit., 7.

is seen as “spreading” this. We just wanted to say that equality and human rights are European values»<sup>49</sup>.

Most importantly for the purpose of my argument, the making of the first Tbilisi Pride exposed pre-existing ideological conflicts within the Georgian LGBTQ community. Prominent NGOs such as the *Equality Movement* and the *Women's Initiatives Supporting Group*, as well as individual activists, dissociated themselves from the event; this choice was dictated not only by safety concerns (as hate crimes tend to increase in correspondence with public demonstrations, targeting socio-economically vulnerable members of the community such as trans sex workers) but also by diverging views regarding Pride's political meaning, contextual appropriateness and (dis)connection with queer people's lived experience. Some argued that the focus on internationally-sanctioned visibility practices may divert attention from more locally-relevant conversations – for instance, on queers' socio-economic exclusion and the need to forge intersectional coalitions around shared concerns, including poverty, labour rights, access to housing and health. While remaining sceptical of Pride events, other activists argued for a renewed approach to visibility, which would resonate not only with “progressives” but also with “the movable middle” in society, without “othering” them because of their “backwardness”. This would involve reframing homophobia as a «deeply entrenched, systemic and structural problem», rather than as «a criterion by which groups of people should be rigidly differentiated and opposed to each other»<sup>50</sup>.

However, these critiques were downplayed in mainstream media coverage of the Pride – or even dismissed as a consequence of Rus-

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<sup>49</sup> *Ivi*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ivi*, 9.

sia's disinformation campaigns. As mentioned by one interviewee, the pervasive framing of «liberal/pro-European vs. conservative/pro-Russian» in Georgian public debates precluded the possibility for leftist critiques to be taken seriously, as they do not fit either label<sup>51</sup>. While the Tbilisi Pride became a geo-political field of manipulation for religious and political forces – which framed it as either a threat to the nation or a matter of European progress – the desires and diversity of queer people were side-lined from public discussions.

### **The possibility of critique**

The dissenting activist positions on Tbilisi Pride illuminate the possibility of critique regarding how LGBTQ rights are mainstreamed and practiced in a geopoliticised context, and the limits thereof. Three main implications can be drawn. First, and perhaps most obviously, the debates reviewed above bring into question Western assumptions that privilege Pride marches as a symbolic response to queer oppression and posit an empowering relationship between LGBT+ visibility and political belonging<sup>52</sup>. Against established understandings of Pride as the highest benchmark in the “progress model” of LGBTQ politics, part of the Georgian LGBTQ activist community reclaimed the possibility to question the detachment between one-day institutionalised recognitions of LGBTQ rights and their everyday discrimination and marginalisation. In so doing, they also shed light on the pitfalls of “Europeanisation” as a discursive device to demand equality: while it can encourage governments to adopt LGBT-friendly policies and legislation, this is

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Wilkinson C., *LGBT Rights*, cit.

no linear process, and lack of implementation and later pushbacks are possible. For instance, despite Russia’s and conservative groups’ attempts to frame Europeanisation as a threat to “traditional values”, commitment to EU integration has not prevented the Georgian government from inscribing in the constitution a definition of marriage as the “union of a woman and a man” and turning a blind-eye to far-right, homophobic violence<sup>53</sup>.

Second, echoing Channell-Justice’s assessment of Pride marches in Kyiv, these constitute sites where criticisms of a country’s «precarious future in a global, neoliberal capitalist economy play out in a moment that espouses progressive values and democratic representation but demands no substantive change»<sup>54</sup>. In this sense, the discursive conflation of Pride with “European values” and the related geopolitical imaginaries also risks normalising a framing of homophobia in merely cultural terms, while obscuring both the political-economic realities that generate suspicion *vis-à-vis* the West and the need for redistributive interventions. Georgia’s «fast-paced liberalization since 2003 accompanied by widening social inequality», supported by Western financial institutions and enacted in the name of a “return to Europe”, has opened space for actors that produce homophobic discourses and created «fertile ground for hate»<sup>55</sup> – which cannot simply be blamed on Russian propaganda or societal backwardness. However, as Kincha observed, the liberal logic of recognition to which Georgian “pro-European” political parties subscribe expects LGBTQ people «to march on their ‘in-

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<sup>53</sup> Luciani L., *Where the Personal*, cit.

<sup>54</sup> Channell-Justice E., *LGBT+ Rights*, cit., 83.

<sup>55</sup> Gelashvili T., *Blame it on Russia? The danger of geopolitical takes on Georgia’s far right*, in *Eurasianet*, 10 July 2021: <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-blame-it-on-russia-the-danger-of-geopolitical-takes-on-georgias-far-right> (accessed 13.04.2022).

ternational days’ and to keep challenging conservative society, but not to question the economic policies that feed social anxieties»<sup>56</sup>.

Interestingly, Shirinian shows that a reverse kind of culture talk – which politicises culture and depoliticises political-economy – is present in the discourse of Armenian right-wing nationalists, who manipulate issues of gender and sexual difference to resist Western imperialism; paradoxically, imaginations of an “illiberal East” as a distinct civilisational project result in geopolitical alignment with an equally imperialist, neo-colonial and neoliberal Russia<sup>57</sup>. Cautioning against the production of culture/civilisational talk which may have «unintentional uses», Shirinian also calls for «global neoliberal hegemonies», as they take root in competing geopolitical alliances, to be centred in activism<sup>58</sup>. In a geopoliticised context, however, critiques which do not neatly fit in a dichotomous EU-Russia frame tend to be relegated to the margins of debate.

Lastly, the debates surrounding Pride interrogate the ambiguous role played by Western donors, including the EU, in supporting domestic LGBTQ agendas. Transnational support for LGBTQ movements should foster the debate on the types of sexual rights that local communities need in the first place, rather than promoting homogenising outcomes based on a pre-established “progress model”<sup>59</sup>. However, LGBTQ rights NGOs in Georgia (and beyond) remain largely dependent on Western donors’ grant economy and priorities – mostly revolving around institution-building through cooperation with governmental bodies, measurable improvements of the legal framework and visibility-raising in the

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<sup>56</sup> Kincha S., *Labelling Georgia’s Far Right*, cit.

<sup>57</sup> Shirinian T., *The illiberal east*, cit.

<sup>58</sup> *Ivi*, 971.

<sup>59</sup> Butterfield N., *Sexual Rights*, cit.

form of public demonstrations<sup>60</sup>. This limits the space for radical critiques – meaning visions of LGBTQ emancipation which would go beyond the anti-discrimination and human rights frameworks, to criticise the very neoliberal capitalist system which reproduces inequalities<sup>61</sup>. This would mean re-politicising the LGBTQ cause as being not simply about «expanding individual human rights for a previously under-represented set of people», but rather a «fundamental challenge to a dominant form of organizing resources according to gender identity and division»<sup>62</sup>. Perhaps, a delinking from geopoliticised LGBTQ rights discourses, «turning the discussion away from Europe and focusing more on community building and self-organization»<sup>63</sup>, may only emerge from outside the boundaries of Western funding schemes.

## Conclusions

This chapter has examined the geopoliticisation of LGBTQ rights, i.e. their discursive construction as a geopolitical problem, and the outcomes this produces in the contested ideological environment of the Eastern neighbourhood. I argued that the use of geopolitical signifiers to describe processes of support and resistance to LGBTQ rights has depoliticising outcomes, besides having double-edged implications for queer people and activists in the countries that are constituted as “in-between” the EU and Russia. By discussing the case of Georgia, I showed how the geopoliticization of LGBTQ rights has led to the «immense shrinking of knowledge produc-

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<sup>60</sup> Luciani L., *Where the Personal*, cit.

<sup>61</sup> Channell-Justice E., *LGBT+ Rights*, cit.

<sup>62</sup> Rahman M., *What Makes*, cit., 18.

<sup>63</sup> Channell-Justice E., *LGBT+ Rights*, cit., 90.



tion to a binary space of the EU–Russia regional contestation»<sup>64</sup>. In turn, this has foreclosed the possibility to reappraise the Eurocentric, neoliberal assumptions underpinning the EU’s promotion of LGBTQ rights abroad and engage with critiques emerging from the ground-up.

In light of recent geo-political developments, these options may be further precluded: first, the launch of a new “geopolitical” agenda for human rights and democracy within the framework of the EU Action Plan 2020-24 has further normalised a power rivalries discourse around human and LGBTQ rights. As EU officials interviewed for my research claimed that adopting a geopolitical posture means promoting “European standards” elsewhere more strongly<sup>65</sup>, this leaves little room for self-reflexive criticism, adopting a listening mode and taking contestation and critique seriously. Second, and most crucially, as Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine is being justified as «a crusade for “traditional values”»<sup>66</sup>, critical deconstructions of geopoliticised LGBTQ discourses may seem naïve or even misplaced. Still, by prefiguring alternatives to mainstream LGBTQ rights agendas and models of activism, the critiques discussed here challenge us to imagine alternative futures that may avoid the drawbacks of (homo)nationalism, imperialism and neoliberalism. While the deadly consequences of «Putin’s anti-gay war» on Ukraine need to be denounced and resisted<sup>67</sup>, reclaiming the possibility of critique in an increasingly securitised and geopoliticised regional environment is crucial, even in times of war.

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<sup>64</sup> Korosteleva E., *Eastern Partnership*, cit., 326.

<sup>65</sup> Luciani L., *Where the Personal*, cit.

<sup>66</sup> Edenborg E., *Putin’s Anti-Gay War on Ukraine*, in *Boston Review*, 14 March 2022: <https://bostonreview.net/articles/putins-anti-gay-war-on-ukraine/> (accessed: 13.04.2022).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

# Post-Soviet Transgender Activisms: History, Typology and Main Issues

YANA KIREY-SITNIKOVA

Transgender (trans) movement has not been adequately theorized yet. Many scholars continuously conflate it with the broader LGBT movement, neglecting important differences and tensions between them. LGBT movements are frequently analyzed as new social movements, with an emphasis on identity, protest and cultural change. Research following this tradition focuses on formation of shared “transgender” identities<sup>1</sup>. When trans movements are analyzed on their own, it is mainly in the US context, with a focus on interest groups lobbying for policy adoption and legislative amendments<sup>2</sup>. While the aforementioned theoretical lenses describe important parts of trans organizing, they fail to cover others. This text

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<sup>1</sup> Broad K.L., *GLB+T?: Gender/sexuality movements and transgender collective identity (de) constructions*, in *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 2002, 7, 4, 241-264.

<sup>2</sup> *Transgender rights and politics: Groups, issue framing, and policy adoption*, eds. Taylor J.K. and Haider-Markel D.P., Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2014; Murib Z., *Transgender: Examining an emerging political identity using three political processes*, in *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 2015, 3, 3, 381-397; Nownes A.J., *Organizing for transgender rights: Collective action, group development, and the rise of a new social movement*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2019.

seeks to draw a complex picture of trans activism on the example of post-Soviet countries.

### **A typology of trans activisms**

In a previous publication<sup>3</sup>, we identified four modalities of trans activism. The classification is developed on observation of post-Soviet activisms but can be applied in other contexts. The four modalities are: (a) Horizontal mutual support networks appeared in early 2000s with the spread of internet in post-Soviet countries and aimed at providing decentralized peer-to-peer support and consultation on issues related to gender transition. (b) State and biomedical oriented advocacy appeared in the latter part of the 2000s and focused on improving access to transition-related healthcare and legal gender recognition. (c) LGBT-style trans activism grew as an offspring of LGBT NGOs and led to establishment of several trans-led organizations. (d) Finally, cultural queer activism sought to alter discourse around trans issues. Although this classification is still relevant, here I'd like to add another dimension to it. I will focus on issues which are addressed by these modalities of activism. Those can be divided into three domains: social, legal and health. When we talk about the social domain, it is about discrimination and violence that many trans people experience in their everyday life. These also concern visibility, awareness and other issues that have a lot in common with LGBT agenda. As for the legal domain, it is about legal gender recognition (LGR) and anti-discrimination legislation. As for the health domain, it is about access to health-

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<sup>3</sup> Kirey-Sitnikova Y., Kirey A., *Sexual politics in post-Soviet societies: A preliminary cartography*, in *SexPolitics: Mapping Key Trends and Tensions in the Early 21st Century*, eds. Corrêa S., Parker R., in *Sexual Policy Watch*, 2019: <https://sxpolitics.org/trendsandtensions/uploads/volume1-2018-21092018.pdf>.

care, both general and trans-specific (also known as gender-affirming which includes hormonal therapy and surgeries).

Before we proceed, it is useful to clarify some terminology. What is activism and how is it different from social movements on which abundant literature exists? Activism may be defined as «an action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine»<sup>4</sup>. In that sense, activism is a broader notion than a “social movement”, definitions of which generally focus on collective actions towards a cause<sup>5</sup>. To put it in other words, «given that the term social movement implies activism on a large scale and existing over time, activism can be separate from, precede, follow, or include social movement activity»<sup>6</sup>. Thus, trans activism in post-Soviet countries existed for several years before it became possible to call it a movement. Nevertheless, it’s difficult to draw a clear cut-off, partly because “activist” is an identity. As shown on the example of Estonian LGBT activism, many individuals who may be called activists shy away from identifying as activists, partly out of negative connotations the term had in Soviet times<sup>7</sup>.

As far as distinction between social, legal and medical spheres is concerned, it is also impossible to draw clear-cut lines. Health is defined as «a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity»<sup>8</sup>. Social

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<sup>4</sup> Martin B., *Activism, social and political*, in *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, eds. Andersen G.L. and Herr K.G., London, SAGE Publications, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Opp K.D., *Theories of political protest and social movements: A multidisciplinary introduction, critique, and synthesis*, London, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Zoller H.M., *Health activism: Communication theory and action for social change*, in *Communication Theory*, 2005, 15, 4, 341-364.

<sup>7</sup> Tiidenberg K., Allaste A.A., *LGBT activism in Estonia: Identities, enactment and perceptions of LGBT people*, in *Sexualities*, 2020, 23, 3, 307-324.

<sup>8</sup> World Health Organization, *The Constitution of the World Health Organization*, in *WHO chronicle*, 1947, 1, 1-2, 29.

and economic factors are increasingly recognized as determining health outcomes<sup>9</sup>. For example, poor mental health among trans people is often attributed to the so called minority stress resulting from the lack of acceptance in society<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, LGR (legal domain) was shown to decrease the level of distress<sup>11</sup>. Thus, roughly speaking, any activism addressing social and economic disparities might be understood as health activism. In most literature, however, health activism is considered narrowly as activities addressing disease and treatment. In some cases it is useful to apply a broader perspective, while in others a narrow may suffice.

Speaking of health social movements in a narrow sense, Brown et al.<sup>12</sup> subdivided them into three categories: health access movements, constituency-based health movements, and embodied health movements. Health access movements address broad issues relevant to large groups of the population, such as national healthcare reforms, medical insurance or underfunding of the healthcare sector. Trans activism rarely if ever intervenes in those broader areas, focusing narrowly on health issues of relevance to trans people, such as gender transition medical procedures, HIV, health of sex workers and drug users. Thus, we are left with two types of movements: constituency-based health movements and

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<sup>9</sup> Braveman P., Gottlieb L., *The social determinants of health: it's time to consider the causes of the causes*, in *Public Health Reports*, 2014, 129, 1, suppl. 2, 19-31.

<sup>10</sup> Testa R.J., Habarth J., Peta J., Balsam K., Bockting W., *Development of the gender minority stress and resilience measure*, in *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2015, 2, 1, 65-77.

<sup>11</sup> Scheim A.I., Perez-Brumer A.G., Bauer G.R., *Gender-concordant identity documents and mental health among transgender adults in the USA: a cross-sectional study*, in *The Lancet Public Health*, 2020, 5, 4, e196-e203.

<sup>12</sup> Brown P., Zavestoski S., McCormick S., Mayer B., Morello-Frosch R., Gasior Altman R., *Embodied health movements: new approaches to social movements in health*, in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 2004, 26, 1, 50-80.

embodied health movements. As is evident from their name, constituency-based health movements are primarily concerned with their constituency, in our case – trans people. At the same time, embodied health movements challenge medical science on the etiology, diagnosis, treatment and prevention of certain diseases or conditions regarded as such. The difference is that constituency-based health movements are working within the established medical paradigm, while embodied health movements are seeking to change it. When it comes to trans health, the dominant paradigm until recently has been recognition of transsexualism as a mental health disorder. Movements aiming to provide trans people with care under this so called “pathologizing” model fall under the rubric of constituency-based health movements, while movements promoting an alternative “depathologizing” model (i.e. being trans is not a disease) are embodied health movements. As the World Health Organization adopted the 11th version of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) which partly implemented the depathologization perspective, the boundaries between these types of movements are likely to shift in the coming years.

Although the lines between these subtypes are blurred, I believe these labels can be useful in the further discussion of post-Soviet trans activisms.

### **Emergence of trans organizations**

Modern trans activisms in the region can be traced back to two sources: web forums devoted to trans issues (from the beginning of 2000s) and LGBT organizing (2010s). With the internet becoming widely available in post-Soviet countries at the turn of the millennium, a number of web forums and personal websites were created by trans individuals. Some examples include: *transsexuals.ru*, *trans-gender.ru*, *ftmperehod.com*, *trans-tema.com*, *mtfclub*.

*ru*, *genderfree.net*. These websites typically had sections devoted to social aspects of transition (how to tell the family, how to pass, discrimination, etc.), legal gender recognition, medical transition (advising which hormones to take, list of surgeons, etc.). The participants shared information and engaged in mutual support activities. Participants living in big cities organized offline meetings. This “activism” can be characterized by decentralization and lack of institutionalization and funding.

Nevertheless, the forums became an important basis for mingling of trans people, some of them becoming trans activists. For example, T-Action was founded in 2014 in St. Petersburg. The organization grew out of a secret group of trans people who got acquainted at online forums and met offline in bars since around 2008. The 2012-13 “anti-propaganda” bills that contributed to further marginalization of trans people became a catalyst for this group to come out and defend their rights<sup>13</sup>. They joined Center for Social-Informational Initiatives “Action”, an organization specializing in HIV prevention, psychological support and research for LGBT and MSM communities, but soon split off to form an independent organization.

Another kind of trans activism emerged in relation to the development of LGBT activism. As shown elsewhere<sup>14</sup>, the acronym “LGBT” was transported to the post-Soviet soil without critical reflection. LGBT organizations that used it in its names often had little understanding of specific challenges faced by trans people. Oftentimes the trans community was represented by one or two

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<sup>13</sup> T-Action T-Deistvie, *5 let T-Deistviia!* 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5kGvDLdXmU4>.

<sup>14</sup> Kirey-Sitnikova Y., *Borrowing and Imitation in Post-Soviet Trans Activisms*, in *The SAGE Handbook of Global Sexualities*, eds. Zowie D., Santos A.C., Bertone C., Thoreson R., and Wieringa S., Los Angeles, SAGE, 2020.

trans individuals, if ever. However, later more trans people came which sometimes led to strengthening of trans agenda within LGBT organizations. For example, Kyrgyzstan's Labrys, Ukraine's Insight and Russia's Vyhod emerged as strong proponents of trans rights. Where trans people could not fully realize themselves within LGBT organizing, they soon split to form independent trans-led groups. This is most evident in Russia where Turmalin was established by former members of Ekaterinburg Resource Center for LGBT, T\*Revers – by members of Revers, etc.

In recent years, more trans-led groups are being established from scratch – without association with either web forums and LGBT organizations. This is facilitated by developments in international philanthropy, i.e. donors requiring organizations to be trans-led to receive funding for trans agenda. Several groups were formed to focus on needs of specific subpopulations within trans communities or specific issues. For example, Myrzayim in Kyrgyzstan and My Docha in Kazakhstan promote rights of trans sex workers, SNeG in Russia is a support group for non-binary people, while Trans\* People for the Access to Healthcare, also in Russia, focuses on clinical practice guidelines<sup>15</sup> and other aspects of trans healthcare.

A few region-level organizations were established. In 2013, Trans\* Coalition on post-Soviet space was established which now includes members from ten countries. For the first time in the region, the Coalition endorsed depathologization, feminism, intersectionality and other progressive values. The Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity (ECOM), which used to focus on HIV among men having sex with men (MSM),

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<sup>15</sup> Kirey-Sitnikova Y., *Some challenges of developing clinical practice guidelines on gender dysphoria and gender incongruence*, in *Health Care Standardization Problems*, 2021, 9-10, 47-53.



now has a working group on trans issues which includes representatives from five post-Soviet countries.

### **Legal and medical advocacy**

In Kyrgyzstan, legislation permitting legal gender recognition existed since 2005 until 2020. The amendment of legal gender was possible «if a document of the established form about the change of sex issued by a medical organization [was] submitted». However, LGR was not possible in practice. In 2007, LBT organization Labrys approached the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health to establish a working group to develop the form<sup>16</sup>. After several setbacks related to political instability, activists were able to secure adoption of the form, as well as the Guideline on Provision of Medico-Social Care to Transgender, Transsexual and Gender Nonconfirming People<sup>17</sup> in 2017. The guideline established principles of diagnostics of “transsexualism” and hormone-replacement treatment. In 2020, in the wake of reforms initiated by president Sadyr Japarov, LGR was removed from legislation. This example clearly demonstrates how broader politics intervenes in the lives of trans people and prospects of trans activism.

On the other hand, examples of other countries reveal that dynamics of trans activism are largely independent of broader political processes. In Ukraine, advocacy efforts led to decentralization

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<sup>16</sup> Kirey A., *The Process of (De) Regulation of Homosexuality and Gender Identity Issues in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan*, Master’s Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Healthcare, Republican Center of Mental Health, City Endocrinology Dispensary, Kyrgyz State Medical Academy, *Manual on provision of medical and social care for transgender, transsexual and gender nonconfirming people for medical professionals of all levels of the Kyrgyz Republic healthcare system and other institutions*, Bishkek, 2017.

and simplification of psychiatric assessment and LGR in 2016<sup>18</sup>. According to activists, political events (including the Maidan in 2014) played no significant role in this achievement. In 2018, a very progressive procedure of LGR was adopted in Russia which coincided with governmental attacks against the civil society. Such seeming contradictions might be explained by trans issues being framed as medical issues – unlike LGBT politics which is largely conceived as “cultural” and thus related to geopolitics, especially Western influence.

Advocacy is not limited to the state level. In several Russian cities medical commissions issuing diagnosis “transsexualism” and permission for LGR were established in private clinics as a result of activists’ efforts<sup>19</sup>. Trans activists regularly organize trainings for doctors to raise their awareness on trans issues. For example, in Russia, T-Action established courses for endocrinologists in a state-run institution. Another group, Human-to-Human, conducts trainings for psychiatrists, psychologists and sexologists.

### **Contested issues**

While reducing discrimination, improving access to LGR and trans-specific healthcare form an agenda common to most trans activists in the region, there are a number of contested topics raised primarily by the “cultural” modality of trans activism, as outlined in the classification above.

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<sup>18</sup> Kirey-Sitnikova Y., *Changing Landscape of Legal Gender Recognition in the Post-Soviet Region*, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*, *Access to Trans Healthcare in Russia*, in *Trans & Gender Diverse Care: International Perspectives*, eds. Appenroth M. and Varela M., Bielefeld, transcript Independent Academic Publishing, 2022.

Trans depathologization is a movement that challenges official recognition of “transsexualism” as a mental health problem and insists on amending medical classifications. In Russia, activists mounted the first street action calling for depathologization in 2011<sup>20</sup>. However, depathologization has remained not without opponents both among post-Soviet doctors<sup>21</sup> and trans communities<sup>22</sup>. Many trans people expressed concern that depathologization would deprive them of whatever access to trans-specific healthcare they had. Moreover, the diagnosis acted as a shield protecting trans people from homo- and transphobic attacks: a sick person is not responsible for their condition. Furthermore, the movement for depathologization was perceived as a “foreign” idea brought up by Western donors and allied activists, while constituency-based health activism rooted in understanding of “transsexualism” as a mental condition had more local roots in the works by Soviet psychiatrists<sup>23</sup>. Now that depathologization is a fait accompli, these debates almost ceased. Everywhere across the post-Soviet space activists are currently planning advocacy efforts to implement ICD-11 at the national level.

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<sup>20</sup> Racheva E., *Aktsiia transgenderov okolo Minzdravsoṣrazvitiia razognana politseiĭ*, in *Novaia gazeta*, 2011. Retrieved from: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2011/10/22/51089-aktsiya-transgenderov-okolo-minzdravsoṣrazvitiya-razognana-politsiyei>.

<sup>21</sup> Vvedensky G.E., Matevosyan S.N., *Sexual disorders in draft ICD-11: methodological and clinical challenges*, in *Sotsial'naia i klinicheskaia psikhiatriia*, 2017, 27, 3, 102-105.

<sup>22</sup> Kirey-Sitnikova Y., *Who rejects depathologization? Attitudes of Russian-speaking trans people toward revision of the International Classification of Diseases*, in *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 2017, 18, 1, 79-90.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*, *Borrowing and Imitation*, cit., 784.

Transfeminism is another topic which received significant opposition both from trans communities and cisgender feminists<sup>24</sup>. In contrast to Western countries, Russian transfeminism arose not as a reaction against transphobia in feminism but as a Western import which was later followed by emergence of so called trans-exclusive radical feminists (TERF), the later movement also borrowing significantly from English-language sources. As for trans people, their opposition to transfeminism (and feminism in general) was conditioned by their acceptance of traditional gender roles and their desire to “fit”.

Attempts to introduce language reforms in Russian also face opposition among trans people. The two main approaches to deconstruct the “male as norm” principle (so called “generic masculines”) are feminization and neutralization<sup>25</sup>. The former focuses on invention of new words with feminine suffices and endings. The latter attempts to deconstruct the male-female binary altogether by introducing new forms with “gender gaps” whereby a masculine stem is supplemented with an underscore (“gap”) and a feminine suffix/ending: e.g. *aktivist\_ka*. Many individuals (both cis and trans) claim that both approaches sound unnatural and make the text difficult to comprehend. Furthermore, there are debates among proponents of two approaches.

## Conclusion

Post-Soviet trans activism manifests itself in a plethora of various forms. Those include horizontal mutual support networks, legal

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<sup>24</sup> *Id.*, *The emergence of transfeminism in Russia: opposition from cisnormative feminists and trans\* people*, in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2016, 3, 1-2, 165-174.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*, *Prospects and challenges of gender neutralization in Russian*, in *Russian Linguistics*, 2021, 45, 143-158.

and medical advocacy, LGBT-style activism and cultural activism. Besides, trans activism can be categorized in relation to issues they focus on, such as social, legal or health issues. Trans activism which started with web forums in early 2000s or inside LGBT organizations in 2010s later got institutionalized in a number of independent trans-led NGOs, while other activists continued to operate as independent activists or as part of LGBT NGOs. Trans activists were instrumental in improving access to legal gender recognition and medical services, despite authoritarian tendencies and conservative backlash. In many countries they work to educate doctors, psychologists, lawyers and other specialists. While this legal and medical advocacy usually goes unopposed by broader trans communities, there's no consensus on certain issues raised by the cultural mode of activism. Examples include trans depathologization, transfeminism and attempts to introduce gender-neutral Russian. All in all, trans activism in the post-Soviet region is characterized by rich diversity, vivid dynamics and resilience in the face of adverse circumstances.

# Queer/LGBTQI+ Rights in Ukraine: Striving for Equality through Feminism, Resistance, and the War<sup>1</sup>

EUGENIA BENIGNI

## Background

Since November 2013, the Euromaidan (or Revolution of Dignity, as Ukrainians call it)<sup>2</sup> represented a unique opportunity for Ukrainian civil society to influence political institutions and further democratization and human rights from the bottom up. In all fields, old and new civil-society organizations (CSOs), incl. LGBTQIA+, have grown and increased political pressure through participatory mechanisms and advocacy which have driven an ambitious and probably unparalleled reform agenda in the post-Soviet space. The international community (United Nations agencies,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the author's field work observations and interviews in and on Ukraine as Gender Adviser of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, Head of Office (Country Director) in Ukraine for the Swedish *Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation* and as an independent consultant between 2014 and 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Mass protests were held in Kyiv and other cities after the failed signature of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement by the then President Viktor Yanukovich, which were followed by his departure and new presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014.

the European Union, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and other international donors, non-governmental organizations [NGOs] and institutions) have provided financial and capacity-building support, but the process has been principally driven and owned by Ukraine<sup>3</sup>.

Initially the women's and LGBTQIA+ rights agenda was largely driven by Kyiv-based, well-established and well-connected (with state institutions) NGOs and activists. Since 2016, co-operation with the international community prompted a critical self-reflection which led to more inclusivity, outreach and participation of smaller CSOs, incl. from the Donbass. This is particularly true for women's rights organizations<sup>4</sup>, but also to some extent for LGBTQIA+ CSOs. Overall, LGBTQIA+ rights in Ukraine have partly improved, esp. if compared with Russia, while many challenges remain. In the latest ILGA's Rainbow Europe, Ukraine ranked 39 out of 49 countries, with a score of almost 19%, while Russia was 46<sup>th</sup> with an 8.45% score<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> As in other countries, international support was not exempt of shortcomings, e.g. co-ordination, NGO competition for funding, inadequate support for newer organizations, and limited flexibility to adapt to new priorities as voiced by NGOs, esp. in the face of 2022 Russia's invasion.

<sup>4</sup> The UN Women, Peace and Security Agenda consists of a package of UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR), the first being the 2000 UNSCR 1325 which promoted women's rights, participation and agency at all levels and in all the phases of conflict management: prevention, management, resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction. Ukraine was the first country globally to adopt a UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan during an armed conflict in 2016, see Benigni E., *Women, Peace and Security in Ukraine: Women's hardship and power from the Maidan to the conflict*, in *Security and Human Rights*, 2016, 27, 1-2, 82.

<sup>5</sup> *International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association Europe's (ILGA-Europe) Rainbow Europe*. Countries are ranked according to their legislation and policies: 0% indicates gross human rights violations and discrimina-

## Pride events

After the first, crushed attempts to hold a Kyiv Pride in the early 2000's, the first “private” march gathered about 50 people in 2013 outside the capital's city center, after a court *de facto* banned any event unrelated to the Kyiv Day celebrations. In January 2014, LGBTQIA+ activists marched in central Kyiv amidst the Euromaidan demonstrations, but a Pride planned for later that year was annulled due to opposition by the anti-gay Love Against Homosexuality movement and a cancellation request by mayor Vitaly Klichko who considered the Pride “wrong” as war was waging in the east.

The Euromaidan and the 2014 armed conflict in the Donbass sparked strong opposition and cases of violence by veterans and far-right groups permeated by toxic masculinity, but also secured increasing support by national and local authorities which granted security. Police presence always largely outnumbered the demonstrators and effectively blocked anti-gay groups' violence by far-right, religious and “pro-traditional family values” movements, whose influence has decreased in recent years.

After another, this time failed appeal by Klichko to cancel it, since 2015 the Kyiv Pride, also called Equality March, has been organized every year except for 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and 2022 due to Russia's military aggression. Participation peaked in 2019 with 8,000 participants, incl. politicians, mayors and diplomats. The march is traditionally accompanied by weeks of events, such as thematic meetings and debates, art performances,

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tion, 100% respect for human rights and full equality. The EU reached 38%: <https://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking>.



film screenings and parties. In 2016 KyivPride<sup>6</sup> was registered as an NGO directed by Lenny Emson, holding activities throughout the year. The 2022 KyivPride joined the Warsaw Pride on 25 June with appeals to peace and freedom in Ukraine<sup>7</sup>, as well as other cities across Europe and America.

The success of the KyivPride has motivated LGBTQIA+ rights groups in other cities to organize similar events, often after years of negotiations with local authorities. These include the KharkivPride (which reached some 3,000 people in 2021), the OdessaPride, the KryvBas in Krivyi Rih, the Queer Forum in Kherson, the Equality Festival in L'viv, and the Rainbow Flashmob in Zaporozhzhya. In 2021 the first Trans march for the rights of transgender people took place in Kyiv and gathered about 100 participants, according to the organizers. Local groups applied slightly different formats in each location, depending on the socio-cultural context, their relations with local authorities, especially the police, and local activists' ingenuity and innovation, testifying to the diversity of the country.

In July 2021, activists held the first UkrainePride Rave in front of the Ukrainian President's office in Kyiv to call for long-awaited legislation and protest against a bill proposed by President Volodymyr Zelensky's political party Servant of the People, which rights groups had equated to Russian "anti-gay propaganda law". In February 2022, UkrainePride launched a mental health program for LGBTQIA+ people affected by the war.

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<sup>6</sup> *KyivPride* NGO's website at <https://kyivpride.org/en/>.

<sup>7</sup> *KyivPride* NGO's website at <https://kyivpride.org/en/kyivpride2022/>.

Some researchers have referred to LGBTQIA+ activists' participation in the Euromaidan as “invisible participation” or “strategic invisibility”, meaning that their choice not to be too visible in order to prevent violence «also prevented LGBT+ activists from being able to make claims on their rights after the protests ended» as they prioritized the Euromaidan's common goals<sup>8</sup>.

## Legislation

While Ukraine has made some progress in law, major norms long advocated for by both LGBTQIA+ activists and the international community have not made it into legislation. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbass in 2014, legal confusion and serious violations have spread in non-government-controlled areas (NGCA) which remain *de jure* part of Ukraine, but *de facto* apply either Russian or own norms<sup>9</sup>. Crimea has applied Russian law, while the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (hereafter D/LPR) have adopted own “constitutions” and “laws” that often mirror their Russian equivalent or are even stricter and have often been used in combination with Ukrainian procedural law<sup>10</sup>. Legal uncertainty, international

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<sup>8</sup> Channel-Justice E., *LGBT+ Rights, European Values, and Radical Critique – Leftist Challenges to LGBT+ Mainstreaming in Ukraine*, in *Decolonizing Queer Experience – LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. *Id.*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020, 80.

<sup>9</sup> There is no international legal recognition of Crimea as part of the Russian Federation or of the D/LPR as independent subjects.

<sup>10</sup> Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial and Centre for Civil Liberties (ADC Memorial), *Violation of LGBTI Rights in Crimea and Donbass: the problem of homophobia in territories beyond Ukraine's control*, Brussels, ADC Memorial and Center for Civil Liberties, 2016, 6.

humanitarian and human rights violations amidst a climate of terror and total insecurity have been further exacerbated by Russia's full-scale invasion of 2022.

Both Ukraine's and Russia's Constitutions include the equality principle, as do the D/LPR "constitutions". Soviet Ukraine, like all Soviet republics, criminalized same-sex relations and "sodomy", which, along with "lesbianism", remained a crime after 1991 if combined with violence or threats. In Ukraine, these formulations were later replaced by «violent unnatural gratification of sexual desire»<sup>11</sup>, and in 2017, after years of advocacy by women's rights organizations, by legislation largely in line with the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) that reformed civil and criminal law on combating sexual and gender-based violence. The Convention was ratified by the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) on 20 June 2022, binding Ukraine with further protections for both cisgender and LGBTQIA+ women<sup>12</sup>. The ratification had been previously opposed by anti-gay parliamentarians, churches and conservative groups who associated the word "gender" with LGBTQIA+ rights.

In 2012 Ukraine adopted an anti-discrimination law<sup>13</sup> which has no equivalent in Russia. The Law did not explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) among the grounds for discrimination. The introduction of SOGI was planned in two consecutive Ukraine's National Actions Plan on the Human Rights

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<sup>11</sup> Art. 153 of the Criminal Code.

<sup>12</sup> Art. 4 of the Istanbul Convention.

<sup>13</sup> Law n. 5207-VI «On Principles of Prevention and Combating Discrimination in Ukraine».

Strategy for 2015-2020 and 2021-2023 (NAPs) but has not yet been integrated into anti-discrimination law.

So far SOGI has been explicitly included in Ukraine's Labor Code (art. 21)<sup>14</sup> and a few more laws. It has not been introduced into article 161 of the Criminal Code as a ground for hate crimes, and same-sex registered partnerships or marriage have not been legalized, despite being planned in both NAPs and the strong advocacy of LGBTQIA+ groups and the international community. Both the Ukrainian and the Russian Family Codes envisage marriage only between a man and a woman<sup>15</sup>. In Ukraine there have been cases where marriages between a biological and a transexual woman have been registered, as the gender marker in the latter's identification document was male, but problems may arise when the marker changes. Child adoption, incl. stepchild adoption, has not been legalized.

The D/LPR have adopted similar restrictive formulations to those of Russian family law. In 2015, the LNR explicitly prohibited same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by foreign same-sex couples<sup>16</sup>.

The 2013 Russian «Law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values» (often referred to as the (“antigay propaganda law”) is *de facto* applied in Crimea. It forbids the «promotion of non-traditional sexual relations to minors», effectively banning information for children and adolescents on LGBTQIA+ rights in the media

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<sup>14</sup> As a requirement for the visa-free regime with the EU.

<sup>15</sup> Art. 21 of Ukraine's Family Code, and art. 12 of Russia's Family Code.

<sup>16</sup> ADC Memorial, *Violation of LGBTI Rights*, cit., 12.

and on the internet (and *de facto* also in education). Analogous formulations were introduced in the Russian Code of Administrative Offences and the law «On Protecting Children from Information Harmful to their Health and Development». A similar bill was proposed by the Verkhovna Rada in Ukraine in 2013, causing outrage and protests among rights groups and critical legal opinions by international organizations which led to its withdrawal.

The 2012 Russian «Law On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organizations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent» (often referred to as the “Law on foreign agents”<sup>17</sup>), which requires NGOs, media and individuals who receive foreign funding to register as foreign agents (a formulation associated with espionage in Soviet times), has had a chilling effect on the work of LGBTQIA+ CSOs and individuals in Crimea, Donbass and other NGCA areas.

### **Opposition by the churches, far-right and other conservative groups**

The All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations<sup>18</sup>, as well as individual churches, religious leaders and far-right wing groups, have played a major role in influencing politics

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<sup>17</sup> Later amendments further tightened the scope of the law.

<sup>18</sup> The Council was formed in 1996 by then Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma as an interconfessional and advisory body which gathers all major religions represented in Ukraine. The body enjoys consultative status in government ministries and many parliamentary committees, which is unparalleled by other associations or NGOs: [https://risu.ua/en/all-ukrainian-council-of-churches-and-religious-organizations\\_n33568](https://risu.ua/en/all-ukrainian-council-of-churches-and-religious-organizations_n33568).

and opposing LGBTQIA+ rights. In recent years most Ukrainian churches, with the exception of the Moscow Patriarchate, have moved from open calls for discrimination into somewhat “milder”, but not less effective appeals to combat “gender ideology” and protect free speech and “traditional family values” through petitions and demonstrations which pressured both local and national institutions against legalized LGBTQIA+ rights. These include legalization of same-sex marriages or civil unions and bill 5488 on introducing SOGI as a ground for hate crimes. Although the Nash Mir/Nash Svit Ukrainian NGO reports that in 2021 the number of such petitions had sharply decreased<sup>19</sup>, as of 2020 Patriarch Filaret, head of the Kyiv Patriarchy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, resorted to homophobic speech like blaming the spread of the COVID-19 virus on same-sex marriages<sup>20</sup>. The Insight NGO filed a lawsuit against Filaret later that year whose claims remained unsatisfied.

The increased visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community after the 2013-2014 Maidan uprising has been followed by growing violence by far-right groups. These groups have emboldened since the 2014 armed conflict often further reinforcing patriarchal models where LGBTQIA+ activists were seen as a threat to stereotypical male roles as defenders of the land. These groups include the Right Sector, National Corps, Tradition and Order, Katekhon, Carpathian Sich, C14<sup>21</sup>, as well as conservative political parties, such as

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<sup>19</sup> LGBT Human Rights Nash Mir Center NGO, *LGBT Situation in Ukraine in 2021*, Kyiv, Nash Mir Center, 2022, 4: <https://gay.org.ua/en/blog/category/situation-of-lgbt-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ukraine 4th Channel’s interview with Patriarch Filaret of 19 March 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Visit to Ukraine, Report of the United Nations’ Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, 27 April 2020, A/HRC/44/53/Add. 1, parr. 33-35.

Svoboda, although they largely lost political representation at the Verkhovna Rada in the 2019 legislature<sup>22</sup>.

Hate crimes, triggered by hate speech online and offline, have included attacks on LGBTQIA+ activists, their offices and events. Bullying has also resulted in violating the right to education and a safe environment: a 2021 survey found that 80% of LGBTQIA+ students felt unsafe at school, and in the month prior to the survey, 40% of LGBTQIA+ children had missed school for fear of security threats<sup>23</sup>.

Although police protection of Pride events and other activities increased in recent years, civil society has denounced the inaction of the police and the overall justice system on investigating and punishing hate crimes against the LGBTQIA+ community. The police tend to fail to record these cases, often classifying them as “hooliganism” (if at all), an offence that results in minor sanctions than hate crimes. Increasing awareness and political will within the National Police and Public Prosecutor’s Office has recently matured in support of bill 5488<sup>24</sup>.

Since 2014, homophobia has partly declined, as LGTBQIA+ people among soldiers, combatants and the police increased their visibility and formed their own Union of the LGBT military, veterans and volunteers, headed by Viktor Pylypenko of the Donbas Volunteer Battalion. The Union formed a separate column at the 2018 KyivPride<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Nash Mir Center, *LGBT Situation*, cit., 5.

<sup>23</sup> Nash Mir Center, *LGBT Situation*, cit., 7.

<sup>24</sup> Nash Mir Center, *LGBT Situation*, cit., 4.

<sup>25</sup> <https://lgbtmilitary.org.ua/eng>.

## **Impact of the war, esp. in Donbass, Crimea and other occupied territories since 2014**

Even before Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity in 2014, homophobia and discrimination had been widespread in Crimea and the Donbass, pushing into hiding and isolation gender-diverse people who felt safe only in private houses and few gay-friendly clubs.

Since 2014, the armed conflict has reinforced homophobia, violence, lawlessness and repression in these regions and the newly Russian-occupied territories since February 2022. Due to overwhelming violence, oppression and secrecy, limited information has emerged from on LGBTQIA+ residents remaining there, except for those who managed to escape and spoke out. Existing evidence shows that the situation is extremely dangerous for gender-diverse people in these areas, and even more difficult for transgender persons. In Crimea, since 2014 residents have been pressured to obtain Russian passports which is impossible when a person's appearance does not coincide with their IDs' gender marker. As people crossing the contact line from D/LPR into government-controlled areas must produce IDs at checkpoints, transgender women with a female appearance and a male gender marker on their IDs have been arrested or gone into total hiding<sup>26</sup>. Throughout Ukraine, war has also affected healthcare and the lack of medicines, including hormone therapy and LGBTQIA+-friendly medical staff, with a particularly acute problem in Crimea, the Donbass and newly occupied regions in 2014 and 2022.

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<sup>26</sup> ADC Memorial, *Violation of LGBTI Rights*, cit., 28.



LGBTQIA+ NGOs have had to move to government-controlled territories both in 2014 and 2022 in search of security. The two war waves have forced old LGBTQIA+-friendly clubs and new NGO branches and community centers, such as the Babylon club, the Izolyatsya, the TYU art centers, and the Insight NGOs in Donetsk, Kramatorsk and Mariupol, respectively, to shut down, depriving local LGBTQIA+ persons of local support. In 2022, transgender women with a male gender marker on their passport or a mismatch between their appearance and IDs have been stopped at the Ukrainian border and sometimes not welcomed in other countries, especially Poland<sup>27</sup>. Ukrainian and foreign LGBTQIA+ NGOs' assistance has been necessary to facilitate their expatriation.

Since 2014, homophobia has shaped also into new derogatory terms that have been coined in NCGAs, such as «Gayrope» and «tolerasts»<sup>28</sup>. Sexual and gender-based violence against both men and women, incl. “corrective rape”, has been one of the most hidden crimes, even more so for LGBTQIA+ persons. LBTI women have been particularly at risk of sexual violence just for failing to “appreciate” militiamen’s appearance or obey their orders.

The anti-LGBTQIA+ movement *Occupy Pedophilia* and similar groups in Crimea and D/LNR have used social media to arrange false dates with gender-diverse persons, humiliate and beat them<sup>29</sup>. In D/LPR, armed formations have included extremely ho-

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<sup>27</sup> On 24 February 2022, Ukraine introduced martial law and a ban for males aged 18-60 to leave the country.

<sup>28</sup> «Gayrope» and «Tolerast» are derogatory terms for “Gay-friendly Europe” and a pun with the words “tolerant” and “pederast”. See ADC Memorial, *Violation of LGBTI Rights*, cit., 24.

<sup>29</sup> ADC Memorial, *Violation of LGBTI Rights*, cit., 21-22.

mophobic nationalistic groups, such as the Cossacks, Chechens, Russian Orthodox Army, and Oplot<sup>30</sup>. Kidnappings, forced labor, incl. for digging trenches, torture, “forced espionage” against mates were reported by LGBTQIA+ persons.

### **Queer/LBTI and Feminist Organizing: cases from Kyiv, Kharkiv and Kherson**

As in other countries, in Ukraine gay men’s groups such as Nash Mir/Nash Svit<sup>31</sup> and Gay Alliance emerged in the late 1990’s through programs countering HIV, gaining a prominent role, visibility and international funding. The Euromaidan prompted women’s rights and LBTI<sup>32</sup> activists to self-organize in separate CSOs with a more intersectional, inclusive and feminist agenda. While civil society in different cities has remained fragmented, mainstream LGBTQIA+ NGOs have been joined by LBTI women’s groups around few, specific advocacy issues such as same-sex relationships and hate crimes, but not on others, such as the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ persons from national minorities, persons with disabilities or the rights of transgender people.

LBTI feminists have joined women’s rights struggles such as the 8 March demonstrations and advocacy on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Three CSOs are identified here due to their different location, focus and experience of the war in both 2014 and 2022, when they had to re-orient their work towards humani-

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<sup>30</sup> ADC Memorial, *Violation of LGBTI Rights*, cit., 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Nash Mir* (Rus.) and *Nash Svit* (Ukr.) means “Our World”.

<sup>32</sup> LBTI stands for Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex and is used with reference to women or persons who identify themselves as women who belong to the Queer or LGBTQIA+ community.

tarian aid to support internally displaced people and those fleeing abroad<sup>33</sup>.

### The Insight NGO

The Insight NGO, headed by Olena Shevchenko, was set up in Kyiv in 2008 to raise awareness, promote and protect LGBTQIA+ rights through cultural and social events and street protests and later opened an office and a community center. The NGO provides legal, psychological and social assistance to LGBTQIA+ persons and promotes gender equality and feminism. The latter is integrated both in its organizational structure<sup>34</sup> and activities, in the conviction that in a patriarchal society the struggle for LGBTQIA+ and women's rights are closely interlinked. Insight has pioneered the promotion of the rights of bisexual, intersex and transgender people, as well as those of sex workers in Ukraine.

Since the Euromaidan, Insight expanded its work both in Kyiv and across Ukraine, opening new offices in Chernyhiv, Chernyvt-sy, Dnypro, Kramatorsk, Lutsk, L'viv, Odesa, Uzhhorod, Zapory-zhzhya, Zhytomyr. The NGO has been at the forefront of women's rights advocacy, incl. as a co-organizer of the yearly 8 March

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<sup>33</sup> In the first six weeks since Russia's invasion of 24 February 2022, aid funding was almost entirely raised within Ukraine. Stoddard A., Harvey P., Timmins N., Pakhomenko V., Breckenridge M.-J., Czwaro M., Enabling the local response. Emerging humanitarian priorities in Ukraine March-May 2022, London, Humanitarian Outcomes, 2022, 3: [https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/Ukraine\\_review\\_June\\_2022](https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/Ukraine_review_June_2022).

<sup>34</sup> Insight's management consists of lesbian and bisexual women and transgender men and women, but no cisgender men. Social Unrest Archive, Interview with O. Shevchenko, *Insight (Ukraine): We urge absolutely all women to join us, because we believe in women's solidarity*: <https://movementsarchive.wordpress.com/2020/01/09/insight-ukraine/>.

Women's March and an advocate of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. It successfully lobbied for a new legal gender recognition procedure which removed the requirement of sterilization for obtaining new legal documents, and campaigns for the legalization of same-sex marriage and SOGI among hate crimes.

According to Shevchenko, sexism persists after the Euromaidan: «Many began to believe that [during] a war is not the right time to worry about human rights [...] Since then, the LGBTQI\* environment can be described as homonationalistic, where everyone is encouraged to sing hymns and be patriots. The beginning of the Pride movement coincided with the beginning of the war... Some people from the gay community also do not want to discuss women's rights»<sup>35</sup>.

Its activism on LGBTI women's rights led to the hosting in Kyiv of the second Eurasian Lesbian Conference (EL\*C)<sup>36</sup> in 2019 where about 300 activists from Europe, Central Asia and the Americas discussed priority issues for research and advocacy. Access to the conference venue was aggressively obstructed by “pro-traditional family” and far-right wing groups such as Tradition and Order who blocked the entrance and displayed homophobic placards in front of the venue. In 2020, Insight further raised its international profile by becoming a member of ILGA-Europe's Board.

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<sup>35</sup> Social Unrest Archive, Interview with Olena Shevchenko, *We urge absolutely*, cit.

<sup>36</sup> The EL\*C is an international conference organized by lesbian activists from Europe and Central Asia who at the 2016 ILGA-Europe conference felt the need to organize separately on lesbians' rights. The first conference was held in Vienna in 2017: <https://europeanlesbianconference.org/>.

When the war started in 2014, Insight opened a shelter in Kyiv for LGBTQIA+ displaced persons, as well as those expelled by parents due to their SOGI or who had become jobless or homeless due to discrimination. Immediately after Russia's February 2022 invasion, the NGO started crowdfunding<sup>37</sup>, set up a hotline for psychological help, and co-operated with Airbnb to provide free accommodation<sup>38</sup>. Soon after it opened new shelters in Chernyvtvy and L'viv, where Shevchenko moved for a couple of months. Insight has co-operated with foreign NGOs to help gender diverse persons, mostly women, to relocate abroad, esp. in more LGBTQIA+-friendly countries, as same-sex couples have faced difficulties in finding common housing because they cannot prove a registered partnership.

Between February and May 2022, Insight processed over 8,000 calls for help, incl. from (cisgender) women with children and survivors of domestic violence who appealed for help. The NGO also crowdfunded for LGBTQIA+ military and paramedics, especially due to the lack of equipment for women (e.g. bulletproof vests and hygiene products.)

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<sup>37</sup> Insight, as other NGOs, resorted to crowdfunding to promptly respond to emergency needs as international humanitarian organizations stepped in several weeks after the war started.

<sup>38</sup> WOMO online magazine interview, Olena Shevchenko pro te, iak "Insight" ta "Marsh zhinok" dopomahaiut' Ukraïnkam ta LGBTKI spil'noty pid chas viïny [Olena Shevchenko on how Insight and the Women's March help Ukrainian women and the LGBTQI community during the war – trad. by the author], Kyiv, May 2022:

[https://womo.ua/olena-shevchenko-pro-te-yak-insayt-ta-marsh-zhinok-dopomagayut-ukrayinkam-ta-lgbtqi-spilnoti-pid-chas-viyni/?fbclid=IwAR<sup>0</sup>HN<sup>5</sup>x<sup>0</sup>\\_Qd<sup>89</sup>lACLoHqf-kEbrMkK<sup>7</sup>hefxKpIrqIA<sup>2</sup>VpscXYrSgiGEEzA\\_A](https://womo.ua/olena-shevchenko-pro-te-yak-insayt-ta-marsh-zhinok-dopomagayut-ukrayinkam-ta-lgbtqi-spilnoti-pid-chas-viyni/?fbclid=IwAR<sup>0</sup>HN<sup>5</sup>x<sup>0</sup>_Qd<sup>89</sup>lACLoHqf-kEbrMkK<sup>7</sup>hefxKpIrqIA<sup>2</sup>VpscXYrSgiGEEzA_A).

### Kharkiv: the Sphere NGO (Sfera)

Kharkiv is Ukraine's first capital and second largest city, a major industrial and scientific hub hosting one of the oldest, largest and most multi-cultural university communities in Europe since Soviet times. Kharkiv also hosts one of the oldest gender and women's rights expert community, with gender advisers at local and regional institutions and universities, and a unique Museum of Women's and Gender History set up in 2008, dedicated to Ukrainian and world women's achievements.

The Sphere NGO, headed by Anna Sharykhina<sup>39</sup>, was set up in 2006 by a group of feminist and LGBTI women to become eastern Ukraine's largest LGBTQIA+ organization. It has opened a community center (PrideHub) which promotes LGBTQIA+ and women's rights and gender equality in Kharkiv through social, cultural and educational activities, incl. the Women's Solidarity Week every March, and the Kharkiv Pride.

In recent years, as her activism grew, Sharykhina and her office were repeatedly attacked by far-right and conservative groups, amidst impunity and the inaction of the police. After Russia's invasion in 2022, Sharykhina decided to remain in Kharkiv to help her community despite the heavy shelling and the relocation, death or disappearance of part of her team. In the first months she moved to a safe (and windowless)<sup>40</sup> apartment with her partner and dog, and supported over 600 applicants in Eastern Ukraine<sup>41</sup> through medicines, healthcare and psychological help, safe housing in Ukraine

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<sup>39</sup> Sharykhina is also a co-founder of the KyivPride.

<sup>40</sup> In a war zone staying away from windows helps to prevent the glass shattered from shelling to injure people.

<sup>41</sup> Most requests came from the Kharkiv and Donetsk regions, and partly from other regions as applicants relocated.

and abroad, and fundraising for protective military equipment for LGBTQIA+ combatants.

Sharykhina and her team have held symbolic performances among the destroyed buildings of Kharkiv. On 9 April 2022, she held a performance outside the former Russian Federation Consulate on whose street board she wrote «Wives of Russian Rapists» and displayed a suitcase full of clothes and a laptop to symbolize war rape and the thefts committed by Russian soldiers. She called on rape survivors to bring other items to the venue to help them to speak out and cope with trauma. On 26 April 2022, for Lesbian Visibility Day she and her partner wore a Ukrainian and a Lesbian flag among destroyed buildings.

Sharykhina has run a daily vlog on Instagram where she speaks about the atrocities shared by her community, incl. the impossibility of leaving her apartment during the shelling, the difficulty to buy food and medicines and to face the emotions and trauma caused by war. She has criticized the way in which the media and public discourse depict the war, which almost exclusively focuses on men and the militarized aspects of war, while excluding women, despite their agency and capacity to help communities to resist and survive. As wars provide opportunities for women's further emancipation, Sharykhina fears that their leadership may be lost during post-war peacebuilding and reconstruction.

### **Kherson: The Other<sup>42</sup> NGO (*Insha/Inaya*)**

The Other NGO is based in Kherson in south-west Ukraine, near Crimea and on the Dnipro river's estuary. According to its founder

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<sup>42</sup> Kherson being a predominantly a Russophone/bilingual Russian-Ukrainian city, the NGO designates itself in both languages, *Insha* (Ukr.)/*Inaya* (Rus.) which

Marina Usmanova, the city has always been multi-cultural and tolerant since its foundation in the late 1700's by Catherine II, with a small presence of and influence by far-right groups and no significant clashes against the LGBTQIA+ community.

Initially the NGO consisted of an informal group of women who published a unique at the time Ukrainian lesbian feminist publication called *Other*. In the wake of Euromaidan's grassroots organizing and following Russia's increasingly sexist and homophobic policies which spread inter alia to the Kherson region, the group registered as an NGO in 2014 and adopted a broader, queer approach, considered as more inclusive.

Its activism has been characterized by arts and performances, starting from a movie filmed on internally displaced women after the war started in 2014. The 2017 Kyiv Pride violent clashes pushed Kerson, as other cities, to organize a first small Pride gathering. Thanks to its good co-operation with the local police, since 2018 Other organized yearly one-week Queer Fora which initially gathered about 150-200 participants from different regions and constantly grew over the years. The festival program was defined with a horizontal, grassroots, intersectional and intergenerational approach where anyone from the community could propose an initiative. Their activities have included exhibitions, a cinema festival, theatre performances, art spaces, an urban garden, educational events and conferences on queer, feminist and post-colonial theory.

According to Usmanova, Kherson's tolerant atmosphere led to fruitful co-operation between queer and women's rights organizations, as well as religious and even far-right groups (incl. Nation-

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can be translated as "Other" or "Different" referred to gender diversity. Interview with Marina Usmanova, 12 June 2022.



al Corps) around issues of common interest such as animal rights and the preservation of historical venues. Co-operation with local women's and religious groups led to the opening of a shelter for survivors of gender violence in 2019.

With Russia advancing into the Kherson region in March 2022, Usmanova moved to Germany before it became nearly impossible to cross the frontline into Ukrainian government-controlled territory. Like other activists, she re-oriented the NGO's work to humanitarian aid for her community, whether they remained in occupied territories or decided to flee, a trip that could cost up to USD 1,000 without success guarantees, she says.

Usmanova describes the situation in occupied Kherson as extremely lawless and dangerous. At the beginning of the occupation, Kherson residents gathered in street protests that were followed by kidnappings and illegal detentions by occupants. Her NGO's new office has been taken by Russian and pro-Russian combatants. Another volunteer has disappeared.

The local police who had been friendly towards the queer community has either fled, been killed, kidnapped or shifted loyalty to Russian occupants. According to Usmanova there are cases of rape and gender-based violence against queer persons and all genders, but they remain unrecorded by the police and by physicians who are afraid to be considered as witnesses of crimes in the lawlessness and terror of Russian-controlled areas.

## **Conclusions**

Ukrainian Queer/LBTI+ women's feminist NGOs have gone a long way since the Euromaidan and through two waves of the war, showing unprecedented resilience, credibility and the capacity to

promote LGBTQIA+ and women's rights by engaging their communities in an inclusive and creative way. As they address multiple intersectional forms of discrimination, they deserve more trust, visibility and opportunities to grow and access funding. NGOs have proven to be very resourceful in promptly mobilizing Ukrainian funding and responding to urgent needs in the first months of the 2022 war before international aid could be delivered. They have criticized international donors for a perceived lack of flexibility and urgent response<sup>43</sup>. It is crucial that international support prioritizes flexibility and core funding centered around civil society's agency, context knowledge and self-determined priorities. In an international context where increasing attempts are being made to revert historical gains on women's and LGBTQIA+ rights and undermine democracies, it is critical that international aid increasingly supports women's and LGBTI organizations, esp. by stepping up feminist foreign policies, following the good practices of Sweden, Canada and other countries<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> LGBTI organizations have mentioned the Netherlands COC and the Swedish RFSL international NGOs as good examples of flexible and responsive donors.

<sup>44</sup> The Centre for Foreign Policy (CFFP) has defined feminist foreign policy (FFP) as "a multidimensional policy framework that aims to elevate women's and marginalised groups' experiences and agency to scrutinise the destructive forces of patriarchy, colonisation, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, imperialism, and militarism. CFFP believes a feminist approach to foreign policy provides a powerful lens through which we can interrogate the violent global systems of power that leave millions of people in perpetual states of vulnerability". At present about ten countries have adopted an FFP, the first one being Sweden in 2014: <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-foreign-policy>.



# Chronotopoi of Queer Post-Soviet Diaspora

MASHA BEKETOVA

## Introduction

This chapter examines the critical potential of non-mainstream queer diasporic chronotopoi<sup>1</sup> of post-Soviet non-cis-heteronormative migrants. Diasporic queers are confronted with implicit or overt accusations of “backwardness” from the Western LGBTIQ+ actors, but also from some activists from their countries of origin. In some other narratives, diasporic spaces are constructed as “ahead of time”, full of critical potential. It seems that queer diaspora produces specific chronotopoi. In case of post-Soviet queer diaspora these geotemporal metaphors are semantically connected to the complex field of post-Soviet cultural differences and commonalities. This spatio-temporal displacement leads to the entry question:

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<sup>1</sup> Chronotopoi in this article are understood as metaphors indicating connection of time and space, more on the term in the next section. Bakhtin M., *Formy vremeni i khronotopa v romane. Ocherki po istoricheskoi poetike*, in *Id., Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, Moskva, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1975, 234-407; Tlostanova M., *Postkontinentalnaia teoriia i rehabilitatsiia mesta, ili sushestvuet li postsovetskii khronotop?*, in *Galereia “Triumf”*, 12 September 2015: [https://syg.ma/@triumphgallery/postkontinentalnaia-teoriia-i-rieabilitatsiia-miesta-ili-sushchiestvuiet-li-postsovietskii-khronotop?roistat\\_visit=6542891](https://syg.ma/@triumphgallery/postkontinentalnaia-teoriia-i-rieabilitatsiia-miesta-ili-sushchiestvuiet-li-postsovietskii-khronotop?roistat_visit=6542891) (accessed: 18.05.2022).

what are the frequently used metaphors of time and space, which post-Soviet queers in diaspora use themselves? What can these narratives tell about the power mechanisms affecting post-Soviet queer individuals and communities in diaspora?

I will argue that between 2014 and 2022, in the post-Soviet queer diaspora in Germany specific chronotopoi could be observed, which were distinct from discourses produced by broader queer diaspora, narratives inherent to post-Soviet countries of origin and the non-diasporic LGBTIQ discourses. I argue that the queer geotemporality of diaspora is not only a limbo of invisibility and social death (exclusion from both societies – post-Soviet homelands as a queer person, and Germany as a migrant), but is also a «site of potential» in Fatima El-Tayeb's words<sup>2</sup>. In the case of the post-Soviet queer diaspora, these chronotopoi have been taking unusual shape, which is barely intelligible, due to multiple aspects of this complex positionality in time and space. Metaphors of time and space and their entanglement reveal much about the situation of diasporic queers, transnational relationships and limitations of discourses. For my analysis I am going to trace the narrative constructions of the connections between the space and time in relation of post-Soviet diasporic queers, as well as their contextual antagonists.

### **Post-soviet chronotope in post-migrant Germany**

My analysis seeks to contribute to the intersection of the research fields of queer diaspora studies, critical (post-)migration studies in Germany, and research of post-Soviet sexualities and genders. This

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<sup>2</sup> El-Tayeb F., *Time Travelers and Queer Heterotopias: Narratives from the Muslim Underground*, in *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 2013, 88, 3, 305-319.

section gives a theoretical and methodical frame of the chapter. Questions, formulated by the editors have sparked my interest, as they touched the foci of my PhD thesis on queer post-Soviet diaspora in Germany, on which I am currently working. The data and the theoretical readings were gathered before 2022. Now also this diasporic queer post-Soviet life seems to be broken and changed forever by the Russian military invasion in Ukraine. Terms such as post-Soviet and queer are rapidly changing their meanings<sup>3</sup>, as the structure of diasporic communities is changing<sup>4</sup>.

This chapter captures first research results of the broader PhD project on queer post-Soviet diaspora, and includes only one group of codes. The data used for the analysis includes narrative interviews, literary and social media sources and results of participant observation. All recognizable traits and contexts of individual participants were anonymized for safety reasons. The analysis has been conducted with elements of grounded theory, narrative analysis and decolonial methods<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> “Post-Soviet” is anything but neutral umbrella term. There are very different countries of origin, and different experiences of queerness there. Yet, the common post-imperial and post-colonial experiences and critical use of this word not as an eternal “transition time”, but as a description of people with certain cultural and economic experience seems helpful for discussing diasporic context. Empirical data contains interviews with Ukrainian, Belarussian, Kazakhstani, Moldovian and mostly non-Russian participants from Russia. “Queer” is also rather a heuristic device in the non-Anglophone communities, where there are different self-identification. In this chapter queer is indicating non-heterosexual and non-cisgender experiences.

<sup>4</sup> Nearly 700000 people fled Ukraine since the beginning of the war to Germany. <https://mediendienst-integration.de/migration/flucht-asyl/ukrainische-fluechtlinge.html>. This recent migration and queer aspects of it could not have been considered in this chapter yet but will be certainly focus of future analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Charmaz K., *Constructing Grounded Theory (Introducing Qualitative Methods)*, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications, 2014; Bakhtin M., *Formy vremeni*, cit.;

This chapter is informed by the ideas of queer geotemporality, understanding that spaces are socially constructed, and communities are imagined, and the notion of the specific post-Soviet chronotope<sup>6</sup>.

Chronotope was a term coined by the Russian literary scholar Michael Bakhtin, meaning the specific entanglement of time and space relation in literature. Bakhtin borrows this term from relativity theory and uses it in literary analysis as a metaphor, which manifests the connection of space and time. The term, developed initially for literary analysis, travelled through multiple disciplines. Madina Tlostanova, a decolonial thinker, has repeatedly highlighted that the perception of the post-Soviet only as a time, but not as a space, is rather a western perspective. She connects the negation of space to the depoliticization and making dozens of millions of post-Soviet people, who continued to live in those spaces, invisible. For Tlostanova, «places are winning over the time in the contemporary post-Soviet chronotope unlike in Bakhtinian chronotope»<sup>7</sup>. She highlights the multiplicity of stories which shape such places, which are dynamic and changing, neither archaic, nor stable.

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Tlostanova M., *Postkontinentalnaia teoriia*, cit.; Tuck E., Yang K.W., *Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research*, in *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2014, 20, 6, 811-818; Anzaldúa G., *Borderlands/La Frontera*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 2012 (first published 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Halberstam J., *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York, New York University Press, 2005; Muñoz J.E., *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York, New York UP, 2009; Kulpa R., Mizielnińska J., *De-Centering Western Sexualities. Central and Eastern European Perspectives*, London, Taylor & Francis, 2011; Lefebvre H., *The Production of Space*, Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell, 1991; Anderson B., *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983; Tlostanova M., *Postkontinentalnaia teoriia*, cit.

<sup>7</sup> Tlostanova M., *Postkontinentalnaia teoriia*, cit.

Queer scholars such as Jack Halberstam and Jose Esteban Muñoz have elaborated the entanglements of time and space in specific relation to queer lives and bodies. For Muñoz queerness was «not yet there», connected to futurity. Charged constructions of queer time-spaces remain one of the central questions of recent queer decolonial studies, especially in the paradigm of homonationalism and sexual exceptionalism<sup>8</sup>, where different modes and schemes of time and space are colliding on/in the queer and racialized bodies.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the topic of queer post-Soviet time-spaces in Germany, there is still scarcity of scholarly literature, except for brief accounts by Borchardt and Mole. Both researchers focused Berlin and the practices of Russophone non-heteronormative migrants. For Mole, the organization *Quarteera* was this kind of “queer diaspora”, which offered an alternative home for Russian speaking queers in Berlin. His analysis of the self-organization has not focused the internal differences and conflicts in the organization, and rather highlighted the community-like supportive character of the organization and its solidarity actions with the post-Soviet queers in their countries of origin<sup>9</sup>. For Borchardt it were local short gatherings, limited by time, which united the Russophone non-heteronormative women in Berlin, and especially the social dancing<sup>10</sup>. This analysis builds on their findings and seeks

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<sup>8</sup> Puar J., *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Mole R., *Identity, Belonging and Solidarity among Russian-speaking Queer Migrants in Berlin*, in *Slavic Review*, Spring 2018, 77, 1, 77-98.

<sup>10</sup> Borchardt I., *Gleichzeitigkeit als Widerspenstigkeit? Das Beispiel post-sowjetischer gleichgeschlechtlich liebender Migrantinnen in Berlin*, in *Szenen von Widerspenstigkeit. Geschlecht zwischen Affirmation, Subversion und Verweigerung*, ed. Brüske A., Frankfurt am Main, Campus verlag, 2011, 263-280.



to broaden the collection of (imaginary) time-spaces, which were relevant for the queer post-Soviet diasporic individuals and groups.

### **Context: Between Gayropa, Sodom and a “parallel society”:**

The imaginations of a Gayropa, an especially sinful and perverse place, have gained popularity during the 2010-th years by the Russian state propaganda and proliferated by different post-Soviet actors<sup>11</sup>. In a similar way works Eurosodom, a neologism from archaic biblical sinner’s city is used by some conservatives to describe places, where LGBTIQ+ persons can live freely.

Migrants (not only self-identified queers) are often imagined by non-migrated conservative actors as “traitors of the homeland” and already crossing the (neo-) Orthodox/secular post-Soviet gender regimes. These imaginations completely negate globality of homo- and trans discrimination and create the homogeneous picture of Europe as an enemy and are in peculiar way entangled with racist imaginations of refugees in Western Europe. Queer migrants from post-Soviet countries are targets of such ascriptions.

At the same time, racialized and migratized individuals and communities are repeatedly facing exclusions from the German host society<sup>12</sup>, on multiple levels, discursively, culturally, interpersonally and institutionally. These exclusions are sometimes more subtle, sometimes more materially manifested as in the case of the refugee shelters, which are often located far away from the

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<sup>11</sup> Shoshanova S., *Fantasiën über Gayropa: Kunst und Politik*, in *Ost Journal*: <https://www.ost-journal.de/fantasiën-ueber-gayropa-kunst-und-politik/> (accessed: 18.05.2022).

<sup>12</sup> El-Tayeb F., *Anders Europäisch. Rassismus, Identität und Widerstand im vereinten Europa*, Münster, Unrast, 2015 (first published in 2011); El-Tayeb F., *Time Travelers*, cit.

cities. Yet another manifestation of the societal hierarchy between migrants and non-migrants is the existence term of a «*Parallelgesellschaft*»<sup>13</sup>, a parallel society, perpetually referred by far right, conservatives, but also «*Mehrheitsgesellschaft*» (societal majority) or middle class professionals such as sociologists, to mark migrants, who are staying among themselves, not willing to assimilate or integrate. Such constructions are often used in relation to certain districts<sup>14</sup> or streets, or even whole cities, where migrant(ized) communities prevail.

The political and cultural relations of the migrants with the (imaginary) West were addressed by Alexandra Novitskaya in her research on post-Soviet migrants in the USA<sup>15</sup>. The idealization of the West and imagination of it as a safe haven can be traced to the Cold War time, and in case of queer migrants is overlapping with the expectations of more accepting and tolerant society and are at strange interplay with the Western homonationalist tendencies, as my research shows.

Diasporic queers are dealing not only with the mainstream societies' perceptions, but also with the inner-LGBTIQ+ conflicting ascriptions. The feeling of being perceived too closeted, not

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<sup>13</sup> The term «*Parallellgesellschaft*» is widely used in public discourses as in e.g.: <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/30001/parallellgesellschaften/>. For more queer critique of imagination of parallel societies see: El-Tayeb F., *Time Travelers and Queer Heterotopias: Narratives from the Muslim Underground*, in *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 2013, 88, 3, 305-319.

<sup>14</sup> A more detailed analysis of the Berlin district Marzahn and the queer-migrant intervention of Marzahn Pride 2020 to be found in Panagiotidis J., *Unser Migrationsdiskurs fokussiert sich oft auf Probleme*, in *Zois*, 2021: <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/unser-migrationsdiskurs-fokussiert-sich-oft-auf-probleme> (accessed: 18.05.2022).

<sup>15</sup> Novitskaya A., *Russian-speaking LGBTQ Communities in the West*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe*, eds. Fabian K., Elise Johnson J., and Lazda M., London and New York, Routledge, 2022, 397-405.

open-minded enough, old-fashioned, and backward is familiar to the most non-Western queers while entering the allegedly diverse LGBTIQ+ party locations and community places. Exact knowledge of queer codes and expressions is often an entry ticket for solidarity and inclusion. But, surprisingly, some queer discourses in post-Soviet contexts might address the activist practices of diasporic queers as more backward than the actual queer activism and party culture in post-Soviet countries. There is a saying that «on Brighton Beach (New-York district where many post-Soviet migrants live) the time has stopped», and similar narrations are circulating about some certain migratized communities in Germany. These comparisons are also done by diasporic individuals, who construct queer diaspora as kind of “backward” themselves:

The activist community in Russia has survived those problems [sexism, transphobia] already in these years, 2014, 15, and this Russophone LGBT community in Germany, it is now dealing with these problems. And I feel sad because of it, because we are lagging behind here in Germany, and I observe it in many things... Russophone communities in post-Soviet countries are strong, are developing fast, are clever and well-educated, I admire them. In comparison to us in Germany it seems that we are not catching up, if speaking of LGBT activist community.  
 - Do you mean the Russophone activist LGBT community in Germany?  
 - Yes, with the German I haven't had any contact yet.

What can be observed here, is the narrative of diasporic queers as double invisible and double backward. The precisising question of the interviewer reveals that the German (white) LGBT community was not contacted and probably not approachable yet for the interlocutor. As always with such narratives, they are rather simplifying stories, generalizing very diverse and non-linear human experiences into labels of space and time.

The description of (queer) post-Soviet diaspora as frozen in time, or conserved geotemporality reveals the modern/colonial logic, which imposes linear progress narratives and creates back-

wardness and binary oppositions. Such interpretation would simplify a very complex heterogeneous field. But what can be said without doubt, is that the post-Soviet queer diasporic individuals and communities find themselves in the unstable and fragile time-space between these ascriptions. They must navigate and equilibrate multiple expectations and interpellations, and not by chance find themselves answering e.g. only the invocations of the Western mainstream LGBT communities and unlinking from their ethnic or cultural communities in ways which can be almost described as homonationalist<sup>16</sup>. This task of transnational juggling is not only a metaphor, but also a hard emotional, intersubjective and community work, often with very clear material manifestations. The question which arises here is, how do the queer diasporic actors perceive their situation themselves in terms of time-spaces?

### **Queer diasporic limbo: melancholia of limitless possibilities**

It is difficult to generalize queer diasporic post-Soviet time-space as a constant and concrete location, connected only to institutions, organizations, or communities in a continuous way. Queer diaspora is less stable and less visible or describable imaginary community<sup>17</sup>, than non-diasporic LGBTIQ+ or communities, united by common language or origin. The geotemporality of queer diaspora is often shrinking to the borders of one's own body, one's own memory and imagination, or even a feeling of disembodiment. Yet this condition produces various metaphors, which testify agen-

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<sup>16</sup> The need to negotiate between multiple expectations is also addressed by Novitskaya A., *ibid.* The statement that some activism of queer post-Soviet diasporic groups can resemble mainstream LGBT-politics, which are usually rather less aware of racism is rooted in my analysis of the interview and other field data.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson B., *Imagined Communities*, cit.

cy and creativity of queer migrants. This section traces the central chronotopoi of personal/individual narratives of queer post-Soviet migrants in Germany and connects them to the spatio-temporal understandings of queer diaspora.

A queer German Jewish writer of a Russian origin Sasha Marianna Salzmann articulates this sensibility notably as a «nostalgia for a time where we haven't lived»<sup>18</sup>, in their essay while speaking about contemporary (queer) Berlin<sup>19</sup>. Metaphors of spatio-temporal non-belonging can be traced as reoccurring leitmotifs in other texts by Salzmann, such as *Außer sich* (2017), as well as in other queer migrant texts, including Olga Grjasnowa's and Olga Zhuk's works, and in the compilation of essays of different authors, named *Wir haben was zu sagen* (2018)<sup>20</sup>.

Interlocutors of my interviews speak of isolation and loneliness as feelings, which accompany them in the diaspora, regardless, if they are rather privileged politically active artists in Berlin, or newcomers in a distant refugee camp in a rural area. The idea of lingering cultural shock and even kind of a social death was voiced by some, a complete cultural isolation due to the multiple othering.

An interview participant is sharing her feeling of relativity:

I don't know how much is it a result of that I'm living as a migrant and as a lesbian or it is just a result of coming of age. I haven't had coming of age in any other situation, I have only this life how I have it. But I have a feeling that everything is relative, that success in work doesn't matter... there is full relativity of everything, and that we don't have children and don't plan children... maybe there is some more standard life path when you have studied, worked, gave birth to children,

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<sup>18</sup> <http://sashamariannasalzmann.com/alles-nur-nicht-hier/>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://sashamariannasalzmann.com/alles-nur-nicht-hier/>.

<sup>20</sup> Grjasnowa O., *Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe*, München, dtv, 2014; Zhuk O., *Strogaiia devushka. Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Berlin*, Sankt-Peterburg, Izdatel'stvo Politekhnikheskogo Universiteta, 2013.

than already grandchildren. Here also is the factor of flat. [...] e.g. many of my fellow students they have mortgage, who lives in Moscow or somewhere else. I for example don't have mortgage and I also do not understand. [...] So there are these standard paths, standard chain elements, they are kind of missing, and also not planned, it is like nothing else is there it is like an end of a history... all this (working, achieving) seems strange for me. [...] but from the other side there is an impression that you are an outsider, that I watch this life from a side, and this is actually my own life. [...] I don't quite understand how families live in Germany, how do other people live, who are not migrants

The connection of being non-heterosexual person and a migrant at the same time is reflected in this quotation through the exclusion from the reproductive circle of giving birth to children and having grandchildren. Also, the (self-)exclusion from the normative life path, which is according to this person often related to wanting to buy a house or a flat with mortgage, is telling. This un-belonging to the normative algorithms of capitalist heteropatriarchy is told with a side note of melancholia, but also from a critical distance. «All this (working, achieving) seems strange for me», admits the interlocutor, who seems to question the very need of normative life paths.

Another lesbian migrant is sharing her life feeling in diaspora:

I'm in a limbo... If you imagine that you choose your life somewhere before you're born. And you sit so: «Who I'll be?» You have a million of thousands of chances and possibilities. You can become a writer; you can become a Cleopatra. And you sit and go through a catalogue «Who I can become». If you want, you can become an alcoholic, here you are. You choose. So now I'm in exact the same phase. I know that all roads are open before me. Here they all are. But I also have my brain, which starts to tell me: «no wait, not all roads anymore. You are 31, so not all are open. Then a small part of my brain is saying, no, not all roads, you also have to birth a child». And I start to think what would be easier, I already can and know a lot in this life... So, for now I'm hanging<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> 10 *Portärts*, interview published in *LesMigraS*, 2017.

This limbo, a space without mortgage, without being inscribed into normative reproduction circle, and socialization, which is connected to that, is at the same time marked by «a million of thousands of chances and possibilities». There is an ambiguity and simultaneity of loss and freedom in the self-narrations of queer diaspora.

Similarly, in the Austrian diasporic context, a queer musician and scholar from Russia describes this freedom in a following way:

Now it seems to me it is mostly fear of being excluded, being torn apart, feeling of bitterness, but also a freedom from it. It seems not quite real, but it doesn't mean that I'm not taking seriously everything that is happening. It comes to such an interesting gaze from inside and outside. This feeling of true freedom came only after I left Russia. The thing is not that I feel here more free because of the political situation; [...] lesbophobia has different manifestation here, not so rigid as in Russia, not so obvious, and it hurts me less. Rather, because I'm here completely nobody, nobody has any expectations toward me, I do not owe anything to anybody, I am completely... person. This doesn't bring me any sadness, rather the opposite – it gives me a feeling of freedom. And I have no perspectives. I do not want to study again, to work, don't want to inscribe myself in order to understand how it is all functioning here. I'm more interested in this alienated gaze, which I've always pursued, and felt truly, only when I've migrated<sup>22</sup>.

An analysis of the self-narratives of queer post-Soviet migrants reveals the prevalence of the semantic field of loneliness, isolation, and loss. A lingering sadness, multidirectional and heavy melancholia is piercing (post-)migrant self-narrations. It is a sadness of non-belonging, of exclusion, expulsion of the countries of origin, and impossibility to root in the new context to the full extent. It is also a grief of hiding a part of one's identity and perpetual uncertainty, where one can be safe, open, and accepted. Multiple

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.colta.ru/articles/she/25820-sasha-semenova-gruppa-krupa-politika-kvir-migratsiya>.

marginalization leads to the feeling of lack, failure, physical, psychological, and cultural displacement, and non-belonging. Moreover, this sensibility is also described by Tlostanova as a result of the specific «post-Soviet human condition»<sup>23</sup>. An overlapping of two post-colonial contexts, with two kinds of post-migrant situations are at work in the case of post-Soviet migrants in Germany.

The loss of linear spatial identification was rarely expressed in the interviews of post-Soviet queer migrants as a direct criticism of racism or anti-migrant resentment in the «new homeland» or unambiguous homesickness. On the contrary, narratives of «successful integration», «welcoming Germany» and «happiness to finally live in freedom» were remarkable in the self-narrations of the recent forced migrants, especially queer asylees. Such narratives often seem «out of place», as if it is something the interlocutors feel obliged to tell, rather a ritualistic part of the German integration discourse.

It becomes clear that the collective sensibility of loss is not only related to the direct (forced) migration experience, but also to broader power relations, such as global lesbophobia/queer- and trans discrimination or impossibility to engage in social reproduction out of intersectional reasons. Metaphors of loss and liminality, such as «limbo», «hanging in time», «nostalgia for a time, where we haven't lived» do not only indicate a poetic and eloquent reflection of multiple marginalizations, but also point at a specific standpoint, which enables one to look deeply in the societal problems. In Fatima El-Tayeb's words «these spaces of incompatibility also become "sites of potential"»<sup>24</sup>. These «border selves»<sup>25</sup> produce

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<sup>23</sup> Tlostanova M., *Postkontinentalnaia teoriia*, cit.

<sup>24</sup> El-Tayeb F., *Time Travellers*, cit.

<sup>25</sup> Anzaldúa G., *Borderlands*, cit.; Tlostanova M., *Of birds and trees: rethinking decoloniality through unsettlement as a pluriversal human condition*, in *ECHO*:



specific subjectivity, entitled with wisdom and epistemic privilege. Decolonial researchers such as Tuck and Yang warn from the focus of academic knowledge production on «pain narratives» on indigenous and racialized populations. Also, for the analysis of the queer post-Soviet diaspora it is crucial to go beyond the diagnosing the melancholia of loss and displacement and look what else is there besides the «pain narratives» of post-Soviet queer loss.

### **Rooting in liminalities. In search of homes and pasts**

In my previous publication *Working with LGBTIQ+ Russian speaking refugees in Berlin* I offered detailed description of support structures for post-Soviet queers in Berlin<sup>26</sup>. My focus was to list various organizations and groups, and to show the difference between self-organizations and further counseling services in handling diverse identities. The following section builds on this list, widens it and focuses on the metaphors and meanings of names of different queer-migrant post-Soviet groups, organizations, and meetings under the geotemporal aspect. All groups were active between 2011 and 2022 in Germany (mostly big cities such as Frankfurt, Hamburg and Berlin), and had different popularity and visibility. These findings will be connected to the interview and media data.

Quarteera<sup>27</sup> is a self-organization of Russophone LGBTIQ migrants in Germany, founded 2011. The name means an apartment in Russian and contains the word combination queer and art. The

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*Rivista Interdisciplinare di Comunicazione*, 2020, 2, 2, 16-27.

<sup>26</sup> Beketova M., *Working with Russian-speaking LGBTIQ refugees in Berlin*, in *Queering Paradigms VIII Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*, eds. Wiedlach K., Shoshanova S., and Godovannaia M., Oxford, Peter Lang Group, 2019, 291-316.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.quarteera.de>.

metaphors of a living space are extended to the inner-organizational naming. Quchnia, (a kitchen spelled with a “q”), is an internet forum for the members, Cherdak (attic) for the advisory board, and a living room are the usual wordings used by the members of the organization in written and oral communication. Members of the organization address themselves as «*kvartirant\_ki*» – tenants. Metaphor of a flat, a home can indicate the need of arriving and searching for a place, an Ersatz-home inside of the «new homeland». Also being a tenant, a lodger is something temporary.

A different, rather object-centered approach can be found in the row of names such as Pink tea<sup>28</sup>, *Golubaya svetchka*<sup>29</sup>, (a Blue candle) and *Kvirofon*, a fantasy name resembling mielofon, a fantasy device from late soviet childrens’/youth Sci-Fi movie *Gostya iz budushego*<sup>30</sup>. The colors pink and blue indicate rather old-fashioned euphemisms for lesbians and gays in Russian language, which are recently used rather seldom, and mostly by people outside of LGBTIQ+ communities.

Goluboy Wagon<sup>31</sup>, another, Frankfurt-centered organization, (a blue wagon) represents an alternative approach, addressing metaphor of movement. Goluboy Wagon is at the same time a song title (written by Uspenski) from a Soviet children’s cartoon, which was quite famous among Russophone migrants, who have grown up with the Soviet cartoons.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pink.tee.ber/>.

<sup>29</sup> <https://orgi.biz/org338750>.

<sup>30</sup> *Gostya iz budushego* (1985) [Visitor from the future] movie after Kir Bulychev’s novel *One Hunderd Years Ahead* (1978).

<sup>31</sup> <https://goluboy-wagon.org>.

A dancing party, organized by post-Soviet LGBTIQ+ in Berlin since many years is called Transsib<sup>32</sup>, as in the Trans-Siberian Magistral.

Wostoq Regenbogen<sup>33</sup> is a new Berlin organization, whose name combines East (*Vostok*) with a Rainbow and spells the East with an additional q, as in queer and with a w, as it would be written in German.

Two semantic groups could be distinguished: movement, traveling (wagon, railway, time travel, eastern rainbow) and home (flat, kitchen, tea, candle). Both metaphor groups have direct explanation in the ontological reality of queer migrants, who are moving to a new home or switching between cultures and languages in their transnational lived realities – physically, psychologically, and symbolically. Queerness as a fluid, flexible and unbounded concept of genders and sexualities can be connected to the metaphors of travelling and is rather contrasting to the semantic field of homing.

Remarkably, the use of a rainbow as a common symbol is decreasing in anti-racist queer diasporic organizations such as LeSmigraS<sup>34</sup> and Gladt<sup>35</sup> in Berlin or Maiz<sup>36</sup> in Austria. It seems that rainbow as a symbol remains unquestioned only in mainstream non-diasporic LGBTIQ+ contexts. In anti-racist contexts there is rather common to add Black and Brown stripes to the rainbow or to search for different symbols, whereby in post-Soviet diasporic queer groups a rainbow seems to be perceived as very emancipatory and is frequently used.

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.quarteera.de/blog/transsib-partyam142inberlin>.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/WQRegenbogen>.

<sup>34</sup> <https://lesmigras.de/del>.

<sup>35</sup> <https://gladt.de>.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.maiz.at/de>.

Repeated use of the old-fashioned “gay” colors such as pink and blue, and references to Soviet films can be seen as a coincidence. But these references to some “shared (post-)Soviet past” can also be interpreted as a specific quasi-nostalgic trajectory, consciously chosen by diasporic queers, who unconsciously re-invent the “shared past” as a common ground.

This gaze toward the post-Soviet (presumably) shared past is also present in the interview sequences and literary blog texts of diasporic queers. Some interlocutors highlight an aural experience connected to certain queer coded music:

It is a hidden cultural code, some post-Soviet heritage inside of me, certain behavioral patterns [...] Well and I think [I have] very much nostalgia. Also some nostalgia towards some... how do I put it? cultural heritage of my youth, which you do not encounter often here in Germany, do not hear it. I am somehow into the old music, let's say so, which is now for the Russians, for people living in the former USSR seems so moveton, but I am somehow attracted to it.

Similarly, as Borchardt has already captured about the Rusophone lesbian migrants in the 2010th in Berlin, who were connected by the social dancing and certain music, a queer migrant is writing about their experience of social dancing in queer diasporic Berlin:

The next track is *Ya soshla s uma* of t.A.T.u, and the crowd already tired from the previous song, with a scream of amazement runs back to the dancefloor to dance like for the last time. We are all from different countries, with different education, different identities, and different involvement in political activism, but the music is connecting us on the level, on which nothing from things mentioned above matter<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Nochka K., *20 let «200 po vstrechnoi»: o vazhnosti reprezentatsii i ee ogranicheniya*, in *Kvir' Sibir': (bez)opasnost' i zabota o sebe*: [https://www.academia.edu/44546783/Квир\\_Сибирь\\_без\\_опасность\\_и\\_забота\\_о\\_себе](https://www.academia.edu/44546783/Квир_Сибирь_без_опасность_и_забота_о_себе).

Queer post-Soviet diaspora seemed to produce time-places, such as the mentioned above dancing evening, where very different ethnic, racial and cultural post-Soviet experiences could coexist under the common denominator of specific non-western queerness. At least, some of the community discourses have narrated such celebration of post-Soviet mutual help, understanding of shared post-colonial and post-socialist past. The narration of queer post-Soviet diaspora as a meta- (Upper) space can be found as well in the literary texts and blogs such as Andrey Ditsels *Kentavr vs. Satir*<sup>38</sup> and his blog, where he describes Germany as a «heavenly Moscow», using quasi-religious imaginary for describing more tolerant, safe queer place, creating idealized utopic vision. In a similar vein, an anonymous activist described queer diaspora as «heavenly Kazakhstan» while comparing the diasporic freedoms and unwillingly constructing his homeland as «backward».

Other discourses have rather critically challenged such constructions, such as this interlocutor:

We in Berlin in emigration here, we live in a kind of meta-space, which doesn't exist anymore in the reality. [...] The Russians have a different attitude to all other [post-Soviet people], all other have different attitude toward Russians. In Ukraine, in Russia, in Belarus there are completely different discussions. In Armenia, in Georgia everything is already very different. An emancipation has happened in the former republics, and a decolonization in a way [...] I believe when we migrate here, we enter this Meta-Space, where we are detached from these processes of decolonization, and it doesn't happen here. [...] And from 2014 after the war, a new chapter has started, a new phase of development outside of soviet past. And among us [queer migrants] it has not happened, because we are not connected to this space now. We are connected to a completely new geographical space, and I think that's why we wear this whole soviet connecting narrative, partly because we all speak Russian, and this language allows us to connect to

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<sup>38</sup> Ditsel A., *Kentavr vs. Satir*, 2013: [https://royallib.com/read/dittsel\\_andrey/kentavr\\_vs\\_satir.html#0](https://royallib.com/read/dittsel_andrey/kentavr_vs_satir.html#0) (accessed: 18.05.2022).

each other, but it haunts us in these frames which were created in the USSR. [...] And we use the tools which were developed during the soviet time, and we don't create new tools. We communicate and relate to each other due to the old rules, and at the end it comes like we have USSR time, and it exists between us, while in our home countries the time has gone in a different direction.

According to this person, constructed commonalities tend to overlook ethnic and racial inequalities and had especially bitter aftertaste after 2014 violent annexation of Crimea and the creation of the separatist republics at the East of Ukraine.

### **Queer nostalgia**

Some post-Soviet non-heterosexual and non-cisgender actors in Germany between 2014 and 2022 have produced specific chronotopoi. Queer diasporic individuals from countries, which formerly belonged to USSR, were connected in Germany through migration experience and collective and individual diasporic practices, referring to a shared post-Soviet experience. In this chapter, these diasporic time-spaces were traced along specific metaphors, used in personal interview and blog narratives, and in naming practices of self-organizations. These chronotopoi produced different from the German LGBTIQ+ “mainstream” community spaces symbolism, where experiences of non-belonging due to language, anti-migrant resentments or racializations were described, and from the anti-racist QTBIPOC community spaces, where post-Soviet interlocutors were not intelligible as those, who experienced racisms. These post-Soviet diasporic queer chronotopoi were different from the queer life in the countries of origin, although there was no strict separation line.

Nostalgic gaze unites the outdated terms as *goluboy* and *rozovaya* (which are additionally unbearably gender-binary), in the fascination with the 90s and 2000s Russian pop- and rock- music, as

well as the direction toward the Soviet-connotated, almost infantilizing imagery such as the blue wagon or children's Sci-Fi.

What does the figure of nostalgia, missing the past, mean in the context of queer post-Soviet diaspora, where it is a common sense that neither the post-Soviet nor the Soviet time and space were accepting toward LGBTIQ? Does the queer post-Soviet nostalgia simply indicate migrant homesickness despite knowledge of homo- and trans discrimination, or is there some other meaning in this sentimentality?

It might be tempting to interpret the inclination toward overtly nostalgic forms of protest and community building as a one more hint of an internalized Soviet and Russian imperialism. Under such perspective many of the activist space-making practices might reveal themselves as paradoxically complicit with both knowledge regimes and power dynamics, oppressing them: racist and anti-migrant discrimination in the host country, and (post-)imperialism of their context of origin. To put it short, post-Soviet queers in diaspora might be unconsciously sharing a sentimentality toward the Soviet Union, and (despite their exclusion from the nation as queers) be carriers of an imperial mindset, which has found its continuation in the idea of *Russkiy mir* [the Russian world]. All the hidden and untranslatable connotations of the names were targeting speakers of Russian language and constructing post-Soviet queers as heritage carriers of the (post-)Soviet system of meanings and cultural belongings. Readability of Russian and understandability of Russian cultural codes of these names indicates that those groups and gatherings were rather not seeking international or transnational solidarities and common work with queer migrants from other contexts or were not questioning the dominance of Russian as lingua franca.

Leaving the reader with such interpretation will not do justice neither to the personal and collective agency of the multiply mar-

ginalized queer diasporic actors, nor to the idea that there are ways out of the pressure of multiple oppressions. If we read the activist imagination of queers, who migrated from countries, which have belonged to USSR, only as internalized imperialism and self-exoticization, it perpetuates the colonial/modern dualism of “progressive” and “backward”. A modern binary thinking, which is always seeking to divide into “progressive” and “backward”, makes it difficult to see ruptures and ambiguities. Such rupture is the construction of the post-Soviet 90s as not only time of painful transition, poverty, and crisis, but also liberalization and flourishing queer initiatives and arts in some post-Soviet contexts.

A post-Soviet queer migrant to Finland writes in a poem:

I would like to go back to the 90-s,  
 when I have worked in a company celling shaft bearing,  
 when people didn't know, where they are and what is happening to them,  
 did not give birth to children and didn't have plans,  
 and, it seems to me, didn't fear anything.

So, nostalgia towards the post-Soviet 90s has a different quality than the nostalgia towards late Soviet time, where the most interlocutors were children, and some not yet born.

Svetlana Boym differentiates between restorative and reflective nostalgia, the first as a conservating treasuring of the past, and the later – as an ironical distance<sup>39</sup> (Boym 2001). Rossen Djagalov in his critical analysis of discourses of postsocialist intelligentsia, points out that post-socialist nostalgia can even be an only available form of critique, an indication of dissatisfaction with the current social

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<sup>39</sup> Boym S., *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York Basic Books, 2001.



situation, and «deserves a more empathetic analysis»<sup>40</sup>. With this understanding, it can be argued to read the presumable “backward” turn of the activism’s post-Soviet diasporic queers as such «reflective nostalgia» and indicator that way too many things are not fine in here and now of queer post-Soviet migrants, but also that the ways to express intersectional criticism are limited.

## Conclusion

The idea of queer geotemporality allows to see queer-post-Soviet diaspora not as a hermetic “parallel society”, not as something lagging behind both, the West and the post-Soviet countries, but as a super-interesting liminal place, where *time runs non-linear*. This idea of knotted time was voiced by the Polish postsocialist researchers Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielinska. Kulpa and Mizielinska point out, in the «knotted» post-socialist time «everything is happening at the same time», unlike in the linear Western modern time. Queer post-Soviet diaspora contains in condensed form all power-relations from the countries of origin and is constantly challenged by the Western anti-migrant structures and discourses. Queer diaspora can be at the same time a touchstone of internalized imperialism and self-exoticization and «a site of potential». This queer diasporic geotemporality allows transnational solidarities and re-distributions of knowledge and resources, which became impossible in the countries of origin. It remains open, if this was a unique phenomenon, which will cease to exist after 2022, or if diasporic contexts will still offer possibilities to speak to each other and to dance in a decontextualized queerly nostalgic meta-space.

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<sup>40</sup> Djagalov R., *Antipopolizm postsotsialisticheskoi intelligentsia*, in *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 2011, 1: <https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2011/1/antipopolizm-postsotsialisticheskoi-intelligenczii.html> (accessed: 18.05.2022).

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