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**Politics of Pride: Ethnosexual Conflict of Nationalisms
in post-Soviet Russia**

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Introduction

At about 6:30 pm at the Library of Foreign Literature, Mr. Merlin Holland, a heterosexual man who is the grandson of Oscar Wilde, began giving a lecture on the effect of Oscar Wilde's imprisonment on his wife and children. After about 10 minutes, the lecture was disrupted by 15 to 20 neo-fascist Russian nationalists, who stood up and chanted "homosexual propaganda", and "Russia, Russia, Russia". I heard one woman say: "ETO NASHA STRANA!" ("This is our country!"). One of the nationalists released a gas as they left the lecture theatre. The gas caused people still in the theatre to choke and cough. The lecture had to be moved to another room. (Wintermute 2006)

This example of an anti-pride protest in Russia, accompanied with numerous images of riots and street violence between gay pride participants, right-wing nationalists (often identified as fascists), religious and family activists as well as the police have brought both sexuality and 'non-conventional lifestyles' into post-Soviet public discourse. Instead of representing 'overall' homophobia in Russian society or heteronormative nature of the contemporary Russian state only, such sexuality related actions function as elements in post-Soviet national and, to some extent, territorial bordering. In an interesting way, they reflect a general increase in intolerance and ethno-cultural insecurity and demonstrate the outlook of contemporary post-Soviet political culture.

The paper scrutinizes ethnosexual processes in contemporary Russia through the above-described conflict. It discusses Joane Nagel's (2003) conception of ethnosexual zones by looking at the pride related protests and the sexualized conflict of public space (i.e., lecture halls and streets) in more detail. These concern sexuality but a deeper look at discourses on 'the politics of

pride' illustrates the way in which the prevailing dispute on pride and (homo)sexuality is not only about sexuality but also about wider matters of social change and national identity (Essig 1999; Baer 2005, 2009): Whereas religious protesters and 'patriotic' nationalists and religious activists, as well as diverse groups of skinheads, defend public morality, national/moral purity and 'traditional Russian values', radical gay campaigners demand constitutional rights, overall tolerance and *de facto* equality (for all) as well as equality based on radical socialist values or liberal democracy. In this sense, the pride-related conflict in Moscow and the apparent homophobia are much wider matters of politics and national identity where the boundaries between 'real' Russianness and 'the unacceptable other' are defined and defended.

In Russia, the exclusive and violent character of 'the politics of pride' demonstrates the biased character of both sexuality and politics. Apart from contemporary political ideologies and insecurities, it illustrates the role of political spectacles and media as sites of ethnosexual politics (see Nagel 2000: 111). These can be interpreted in the way that certain (internally diverse) groups of activists use publicity and violence both for challenging the values of 'the internal other' and claiming for social and political change. It is these ethnosexual campaigns of otherness that this paper scrutinizes in more detail. The violent clashes between gay and anti-gay activists in Moscow, between nationalists and democrats, reflect the very different perceptions on sexuality and, interestingly, illustrate one of the ideological disputes in contemporary Russian society. As "homosexuality has, in fact, entered the discursive mainstream, appearing with increasing frequency in television commercials, articles in press, rock music, and popular fiction" (Baer 2005, 193), the pride conflict and the relative failure of gay and lesbian activism give the analysis of Russian ethnosexuality an exciting and up-to-date context.

Towards an Ethnosexual Conflict

The history of the Russian gay pride conflict begins in the mid of 2000s when a group of activists in Moscow organized an event where homosexuality was not only to be discussed in closed seminars but also celebrated in public. The event was planned to take place in the centre of Moscow, and it was to follow messages and traditions created during the few previous decades mainly in the West. Homosexuality – and I would say pride as well – was, thus, strongly criticized as ‘colonizing’ non-Western cultures with particular (Western) notions of sexuality (Essig 1999: 174). Questioning the traditional notions of private bodies and body politics through (public) gay visibility, and demanding for sexual freedom and political pluralism, did not lead to the expected outcome (Baer 2005: 204): Pride has not been able to increase social tolerance or political protection in a Russian context. It has, however, become a yearly spectacle that brings some (contested) images of ‘feathered transvestites’ (as expressed by anti-gay protesters) into the limelight for a few days.

The Mayor of Moscow Yury Lushkov’s decision to ban pride as ‘satanic’ – or officially, as a public threat – has mobilized sexuality to the streets and lecture halls through numerous grassroots movements. In all, the conflict does not involve only gay activists but also numerous human rights and political activists, religious and nationalist activists as well as state and local officials such as the police. In addition to that, the conflict has been internationalized through international activists, non-governmental organizations and media. The conflict, yet, uncovers most interesting perspectives to the intersectional character of contemporary Russian sexuality, nationalism and politics.

Theoretically, the idea of ethnosexual conflict departs from an assumption that gender and sexuality – as well as the construction of masculinities and femininities – are central elements of nationalism and national constructions, as well as ethno-territorial bordering (Walby

1996; Yuval-Davis 1997; Mayer 2000; Nagel 2000, 2003). Apart from overall national markers such as language, culture, common national and territorial imagination, etc., sexualized images and discourses on nationalism participate in creating stereotypes and ideals of what is, or which groups are, (sexually) desirable and undesirable, and what is considered 'normal' in terms of sexuality. In other words, sex functions as a normative framework in ethnic narratives and national stereotypes where some groups, i.e., non-Russians or 'abnormal' sexualities, are regarded with either intuitive disgust or, in contrast, as somehow exotic creatures in cultural industry. Nations use sexuality and sexual imaginations for ethnic/sexual bordering.

On the one hand, nation is often portrayed as a hetero-male project (Mayer 2000: 6). As symbols of nations or bearers of masculine honour, bodies and sexuality of women become prime national interest nationalists. In this, nationalist imagery relates "'healthy' heterosexual sexual interest [to] the rural image of national purity constructed in the politics of national identity" (Mostov 2000: 96) and ties certain heterosexual masculinity both to heroism and to patriotism. According to Mostov (2000: 96–98, see also Nagel 2005; Beaudoin 2006: 227), men are represented as masculine 'guardians' and 'heroes' and their girlfriends as healthy 'outdoor girls', not 'feminists' or 'androgynous city girls'. Here, women embody the homeland through motherhood. They are symbols of national virtue and purity and, thus, remain vulnerable to contamination and threats to the established social order.

As bearers of masculine honour, bodies and sexuality (of men and women) become a prime national interest of nationalists. Overall, this does not converse with the ideas of heterogeneity and tolerance but, rather, create images of 'traitors' that 'bad women' or other 'deviants' of 'the normal'. Joane Nagel (2003: 147) continues this argumentation with her idea of national symbolic and moral boundaries where "national symbolic boundaries, like all moral boundaries, are sites for the creation and enforcement of the rules of citizenship, the surveillance,

apprehension, and punishments of national deviants or ‘traitors’, and the formation of revised or new definitions of loyalty to the nation.”

In relation to the above, I argue that Russian identity politics reflects the ways in which the Russian nation should be defined in terms of external enemies, i.e., the West, ut also how that relates to post-Soviet changes in, and threats to, masculinity. That is, about Russian national identity and about common moral codes of what is considered acceptable (and unacceptable) within the framework of the contemporary Russian nation. As the below analysis indicates, the matter of what is ‘correct’ and ‘improper’, and what idealized ‘model citizens’ should and should not do, mobilized the opposing coalitions of activists – as well as the police – to action. Overall, Russian society is widely indifferent and divided, and the history of this split may be traced back to the ideological and political disputes between liberals and conservatives of the previous century.

Before discussing the socio-political demands of gay activists in more detail, I will first examine the main concepts and ‘the nationalist pride’ of anti-pride activists. For this I studied a whole range of secondary literature that I combined with newspaper articles, blog posts and the internet pages of various organizations. I paid a particular attention to the argumentation and the different forms of representations from photos to demonstration banners and from stickers to slogans, making the analysis more concrete.

Nationalist Pride of Anti-Pride Activism

At 12 a press conference appealed for everyone who had gathered not to carry out a gay march, but instead at 14.30 quietly place flowers on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Alexander Gardens (by the wall of the Kremlin).

By 1pm Alexander Gardens and Manezhka were surrounded by rows of police and riot police. Inside the gardens it was only the lone guards of honour who could be seen. Even newly-weds who had come to place flowers by the Eternal Flame were not allowed in, even though there could be no doubts about their sexual orientation. (Belikov 2006)

The above quotation from a report on 2006 pride (Belikov 2006) illustrates well the pride-related setting during the last few years. It is clear that the state (police and prosecuting authority) and anti-pride activist cooperate in performing their territorial power. The anti-pride movement consists mainly of aggressive protesters from religious organizations, right-wing nationalists, skinheads and, as illustrated above, the police.

If we look at the discursive messages of the pride-related imagery of the anti-pride activism in general, we can notice that the movement is based on an image of patriotism and, therefore, the actions against pride, and homosexuality in general, are widely supported by the wider public. That materializes into heroic action that aims at ‘saving’ the country from ‘gay threats’ (Belikov 2006) that the post-Soviet transition leads to, including the loosened public morale, propaganda of immorality, reproduction and demography and, surprisingly, equality. These are the arguments that will now be studied in more detail.

The *public morality* discourse not only refers to the spread of ‘abnormality’ and general immorality but to the whole range of immaterial changes and conceptual threats in a post-Soviet society. That reflects the sudden changes in value system where many socially significant elements of Soviet values such as communality that was suddenly replaced by an ideologies of individualism and market economy (see Urponen 2002). These ‘new’ ideologies gave individuals more freedom in their personal lives and, also, created confusion and insecurities among some. A banner held by an old lady in an anti-pride demonstration – “PRESIDENT!

STOP THE SODOMITES, SPREADERS OF AIDS IN RUSSIA” – calling the president for assistance in controlling ‘immorality’ and morality related illnesses. For her, gay pride represents an act of provocation where participants represent and play out sodomy and illness that are clear threats to the state. If this lady’s AIDS argument is evaluated with statistical data, it is clear that the illness argument is part of the wider misunderstanding or conscious knowledge production: with about one million infected by HIV/AIDS, ‘AIDS’ is a serious matter in Russia but, in contrast to the West, the vast majority (85%) of the infections have been detected among drug users and only 1-2% among homosexuals. (UNAIDS 2008, Federal Scientific and Methodological Centre for the Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS 2010)

However, Metropolitan Kirill (Grew 2008), the head of the Moscow Patriarchate department for external relations takes the above morality argument even further. He relates the Orthodox Christian standpoint to pride with an idea of absolute morality. According to him, morality is either absolute or it does not exist at all. Therefore, events such as gay parades represent an “intrusive display of depravity”. They are actions of immorality and, therefore, “not considering homosexuality as sin would lead to a variety of other sexual perversions” such as paedophilia, kleptomania or polygamy. The Metropolitan speculates further and asks how Russia and Russian society would look like in the future if homosexuality and ‘other perversions’ were normalized. In other words, Metropolitan is concerned about homosexuality as the moral entry to ‘all forms of other perversions’ and as a representation of wider cultural depravity.

In a relatively non-religious secular society, Alexander Verkhovsky (2003) argues, the rise of this ‘politicization of moralism’ may also have bearing in radical-nationalist movement. According to him, morality has become an integral part of fundamentalist activity. In 2007 the moralist sodomy discourse was brought to the streets by a pro-Kremlin religious movement Georgievtsy that was co-chaired by the State Duma staff member Stepan Medvedko (Kozhevnikova 2008a). In the beginning it was a small Orthodox Christian youth club with no

xenophobic actions but transformed to a violent ‘patrol’ on the streets of Moscow in order to ‘purge’ the area from homosexuals. In her analysis of the activists, Galina Kozhevnikova is also convinced that the same group was involved in the fighting between the right-wing radicals and young Caucasus natives in Slavyanskaya Square on June 22. Initially, the groups were

inspired by the authorities' obvious encouragement of homophobic violence after the failed gay pride march in May, the movement announced that they would “purge” Ilyinsky Square in Moscow by ousting gay men from the square. This self-appointed “patrol” was immediately joined by the ultra-right (in particular, members of the Slav Union) whose assistance was welcomed. Even though their conduct was obviously illegal, the police failed to respond to the homophobes in any way. It was obvious from the start that the “patrol” would not observe the declared non-violence, but would engage in numerous provocations instead. (Kozhevnikova 2008a).

As the idea of anti-homosexual ‘patrols’ aiming to ‘purge’ Ilyinsky Square, the slogan “Russia without pederasts”¹ on a banner of another older lady, also a religious activist, illustrates well that territorial character of (sexuality-based) exclusion where the territory of the Russian Federation – in contrast to non-Russia, abroad – is defined as a territory free of homosexuality. That contrasts to the West that, in many discussions, refers to the source of moral deprivation both in post-Soviet Russia but in wider sense as well. This identity-related ‘othering’ dates back to the Soviet-era confrontation with the West on the one hand and rapid westernization in Russian society on the other hand.

Brian Baer (2005: 195; 2009: 6) studies the image of the West in Russian sexuality discourse in more detail. He concludes that “association of homosexuality with the West is

¹ “Rossia bez pederastov”

something evident at both ends of the political spectrum and across generations.” He refers to cultural conservatives who describe “the Western-style homosexuality, or what Dennis Altman has referred to as ‘the global gay’ has become a convenient symbol of Western cultural imperialism, involving the encroachment of Western values (overt sexuality, non-reproductive sex, and consumerism) and Western political concepts (tolerance, diversity, and civil rights).” Similarly, Dan Healey (2010, 210) connects this to the context of cultural globalization and identifies another set of national or state threats that conservative-nationalists, and in this case right-wing nationalists and religious activists, should fear: “hypersexualized marketplace and its new conduit, the Internet.” In this respect, it is rather a question of cultural change and, especially, to the transformation of ‘traditional Russian values’ into a new globalized context that matters: youth lives in an increasingly globalized world where fashion and other impacts for everyday organization of life – as well as in language – come from abroad.

Chairwoman of Duma’s Committee on Women, Family and Youth Issues Ekaterina Lahova explains her support for Yury Lushkov’s ban on pride as follows: “It was not ‘safe for the state to propagate homosexuality’ and the action by the Moscow authorities in banning a gay parade was a perfectly correct decision“ (Shoffman 2006). In her argument the official representative of youth and family issues backed up her morality argument with the *immoral lifestyle* and *propaganda of immorality*. Here, (homo)sexuality is viewed as a matter of lifestyle and fashion, something that people choose according to current trends or fashion. Accordingly, sexuality is not only a personal choice but also a subject to propaganda and marketing, something that can be influenced through publicity, public campaigns and performances such as the pride. In this context, pride is not a celebration of diversity but, rather, a recruitment campaign making all – and especially youth – possible subjects of homosexuality and sexual perversions. This is not only a ‘threat’ to the Russian nation in moral terms but also in terms of *demographic development* that is widely identified as one of the great risks for Russian future

development. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the population of the Russian Federation has decreased from 147 million in 1989 to about 141.9 million in 2010 (Federal State Statistics Service 2010).

Russia's *demographic problems* are not secret, but it is interesting how the demography is in this discursive context related to sexuality and to *national security*. As in many other countries, the demographic argument follows the reproduction component of nationalism theory where sex and sexuality have received a clear functional role of reproduction: the aim is to produce new citizens – future mothers and warriors of the nation – and, thus, continue the nation into the future. Even though it is clear that majority of sexual acts are not aimed for reproduction, the 'deviant' becomes a target for nationalists who take the role to save the Russian nation from the humiliating state of crisis.

Finally, the last major arguments in the anti-pride/anti-gay movements are related, surprisingly, with *equality*. That refers to an idea where majority has, or should have, a power to determine the outlines of social development, despite national or international commitments: "Who is going to protect my rights if I don't want those people dance on street in their swimming trunks!?" (Shoffman 2006). That question of 'my rights' or rights of majorities is a commonly asked question within ethnicity or anti-gay discourse. This relates to a particular conception of democracy and political culture where equality or the constitutional rights of minorities are neither comprehended nor fully appreciated. The majority considers itself as the self-evident 'owner of the state' that does not (need to) consider matters of minorities if the 'public good' is to be defended. As one transsexual professor at a conference once described her life in 'the tyranny of sexuality', one may well argue that this conception of equality would mean that all minorities in Russia would end up in 'tyranny of majority'.

Political Resistance of the Russian Gay Activism

Like the above-described anti-pride activism, Russian gay activism is related to wide social developments in contemporary Russia as much as to sexuality. In addition to diverse sexuality and equality arguments, gay campaigners – also consisting of diverse gay and human rights activists as well as feminist and anti-Fascist groups – are closely linked to groups promoting democracy, constitutional rights (freedom of speech and assembly in particular), liberal or socialist values and open non-violent form of nationalism. Unlike anti-Pride activism, much of the gay activism is not related to pride, or even sexuality, but with some other social or political concerns. Apart from equality, many actions have been organized to criticize contemporary Russian society of corruption, extremism, violent right-wing/fascist activism and, interestingly, a politically active Orthodox Church.

Due to the politicized character of pride, many less radical gay movements take distance to Nikolai Alekseyev's pride movement and rather concentrate on promoting diversity and tolerance through everyday contexts and surroundings. According to them, Russia is 'not ready' for 'Western-style pride' that may – due to its controversial character – become counterproductive in short perspective (LGBT Rights 2009; Healey 2010: 212). Unlike anti-pride, the critique here is not directed to its Western origin but, simply, to the fact that 'too radical' and unclear demands that may have a counter-productive effect in a society (Kochetkov 2010).

As its motto "Through openness to equality!"² and the expressed values well demonstrate, the St. Petersburg based gay organization Coming Out (Coming Out 2010), for example, reacts to both the demands and atmospheres of the surrounding society. Even if its

² "Cherez otkrytost' k ravnopraviu!"

operational activity is mainly directed towards the LGBT community in St. Petersburg, the overall objectives do take a stand for violence, legality, human rights (for all), provocative political culture and extremism as well as civic activism and tolerant civil society:

We believe that **human rights have the highest value** and that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, sex, race, ethnicity and any other characteristic deserves respect.

Our work is based on **the principles of nonviolence, respect for privacy, non-provocation, lawfulness and non-extremism**. We are convinced that civil society can and should work constructively with the government to help it fulfil its obligations

We work with **open-mindedness, listening and appreciating the opinion** of each member of the organization. We emphasize teamwork, mutual respect, and transparency of decision-making.

We seek to understand the **needs of the LGBT community** in order to provide appropriate services.

We are open to **constructive dialogue** with anyone who does not share our position.

We believe that we can succeed in **creating a tolerant society only by joining our efforts** with other people and organizations who share our visions and principles.
(Coming Out, 2010)

The intersection of sexual, human and constitutional rights, promotion of active civil society and the demands for equality, democracy, ‘normal’ (non-corrupt) society free of ‘Fascist’ violence can well be identified in the programmes of several networks of local organizations (LGBT Rights 2008b; Coming Out 2010; Russian LGBT Network 2010). Even though the pro-pride groups are rather diverse, many of the actions do challenge the above-described hegemonic ‘traditional’ Russianness that is represented and acted out by Orthodox Church, right wing nationalists and the state.

Being well networked, one of the main demands of the pride movement – supported by feminist, anti-Fascist and oppositional subcultures including Socialist Action, Russian Section of

the Committee for Worker's International, activists of the (liberal) United Democratic Movement 'Solidarity' – is the demand of *equality* (IKD 2010). Apart from rainbow flags and rainbow-coloured posters as well as balloons, banners such as "EQUALITY NOW"³ (LGBT Rights 2008b), "LGBT are not for carnival, we need equal rights"⁴ (*ibid.*) and "GAYS FOR EQUAL RIGHTS WITHOUT COMPROMIZES!"⁵ (*ibid.*; see also Yassin 2010) are common. Here, the equality demand stretches from equality of sexual minorities to women's rights and to rights of workers, (all) minorities and from discrimination to the overall violation of human rights. The aim is to get the authorities to recognize the prevailing inequalities in contemporary Russian society. Closely related to the democracy demand (see below) and the wide spectrum of (state) critical activists, the demand reaches from sexuality to politics, socio-economic realities and, significantly, political conditions where citizens need to concern about corruption, despotism or politically motivated violence. This non-pride related activity goes well beyond the sexual equality and constitutional rights demands of the pride movement.

The second major demand of the pride movement is *constitutional rights*. On the one hand this is directed personally to the former Mayor of Moscow Yury Lushkov and his yearly decision to ban/not to grant permission to the Pride Parade as "disgusting and horrible show". On the other hand, both the pride movement and human rights organizations take a stand that Lushkov's decision not to allow the parade is constitutionally illegal, be the reasons for the decision its 'satanic' or 'immoral' character or, as expressed officially, overall security of citizens. As Nikolai Alekseyev, the main organizer of Moscow pride argues:

We will apply officially for the pride and let Mayor Luzhkov and other Russian politicians continue to express their real character and barbarity. It will show to all the

³ "RAVENSTVO SEICHAS"

⁴ "LGBT ne do karnavala, nam nuzhny ravnye prava"

⁵ "GEI ZA RAVNYE PRAVA BEZ KOMPROMISSOV!"

world in the year of Russian presidency in G8 and Council of Europe who is supporting human rights and who is ready to step on them for the sake of their political dividends...We appeal to all foreign gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals and heterosexuals, whether activists or not, whether famous or not, whether young or old, to support us in our fight for our democratic rights and liberties guaranteed to us by the Russian Constitution and European Convention on human rights. (Shoffman 2006)

In the interview, Alekseyev refers to Mayor Luzhkov and other Russian politicians as barbaric. He makes a clear distinction between such barbaric politicians of Russia (whose acts are illegal) and the freedom represented by the Russian constitution, G8, Council of Europe and the European Convention of Human Rights. As a lawyer, Mr. Alekseyev participates actively in domestic and international debates on equality and human rights as well as in producing appeals both to Russian and international courts. On October 21, 2010, Mr. Alekseyev had reason to celebrate as the European Court for Human Rights released its ruling which stated that the ban of a peaceful (gay) demonstration in Moscow violated the right to the freedom of assembly. Human Right Watch (2010) remarks on the role of public authorities as follows: “Rather than banning demonstrations on the basis of their potential to threaten public order and cause riots, the authorities should be fulfilling their duty to ensure that police protect peaceful demonstrators when they are exercising their freedom of assembly.”

Whereas pride activists concentrate on constitutional matters, overall problems in Russian jurisdiction and the lack of democracy, the cynical text of a small anarchist Antifa group “FOR A FASCIST-HOOLIGAN STATE”⁶ (Bol-Shoy 2007) painted on black fabric brings the socio-political critique to another extreme. In a small demonstration, the banner is held by activists with rainbow flag, mouths taped in criticism of the freedom of speech and the lack of

⁶ “DLIA GOSUDARSTVA FASHIZM - KHULIGANSTVO”

political diversity. Hooliganism applies to the ever existing corruption and the system of state apparatus in general. Despite its radical socialist setting and rainbow reference to political plurality it, interestingly, has similar state critical elements with its liberal associates in opposition.

Lastly, the most active non-gay movement in ‘the politics of pride’ is the anti-Fascists movement. The groups refer neither to the Russian historical memory of the World War II during the Soviet nor to the post-Soviet Russian identity crisis but, rather, only to a sincere concern about the racist assaults and murders in contemporary Russia. The slogans “HOMOPHOBIA CAN BE TREATED”⁷ (LGBT Rights 2008b) from a Gender festival and “HOMOPHOBIA, XENOPHOBIA, NATIONALISM – THESE ARE DIZEASES OF A REGRESSIVE SOCIETY!”⁸ (LGBT Rights 2008a) from a Gay Demonstration against Fascism and Xenophobia illustrate well involvement anti-Fascist activists in gay politics as well as medicalized use of language inherited from their opponents. In contrast to progressive society, they refer to homophobia, xenophobia and nationalism as ‘curable diseases’ of a ‘regressive society’ of the past.

In relation to the anti-Fascist cooperation, the St. Petersburg based LGBT Organization Coming Out (Coming Out 2010; see also Russian LGBT Network 2010) cooperates with two organizations and networks – European LGBT organization ILGA and Ксенофобия.нет (Ksenofobia.net) network. The latter is an informal network of artists, intellectuals and other socially active individuals who want to pay an attention to the provocations of the contemporary right wing activists through demonstrations and cultural events such as photo exhibitions. (Kochetkov 2010). Apart from other LGBT groups, shops and bars, Coming Out also works in cooperation with international partners such as foreign consulates, human rights and financing organizations. The group was able to register its organization to the Foreign State Registering

⁷ “GOMOFOBIIA LECHITSIA”

⁸ “GOMOFOBIIA, KSENOFOBIIA, NATSIONALIZM – ETO BOLEZN’ REGRESSIVNOGO OBSHCHESTVA!”

Service in 2009, which, according to the 2006 Law on Non-Governmental Organizations, is neither easy nor self-evident.

The active cooperation between gay and anti-Fascist organizations is understandable as, as Kolesnikov (2002; see also Kozhevnikova 2008) notices, Fascism has become respectable and fashionable element of nationalist-patriotic society “with hidden supporters in the police, prosecutor’s offices, and courts.” With representation in political saloons and in media – outside explicitly Fascist movements – the radical activists not only keep the Russian ethnicity and sexuality discourse non-productive but also make any attempts for reform difficult. Due to this, some groups participating in the struggle against right-wing extremism and the politics of (homo)sexuality have been radicalized, and as strange as it feels, both gay and anti-Fascist groups have sections resembling (or aspiring to) semi-military anti-Fascist defence.

Public Space, Performance, and the Strategy of Power

Both gay and anti-pride movements use publicity and public space in their strategies of power. As both (homo)sexuality and pride are very controversial and provocative in nature, traditionally tight to private sphere the everyday life, it has not been difficult to get media coverage and visibility for the pride. As the following citation from a report on 2006 Pride illustrates, some elements of the conflict is about public space, about who has the power to use the city of Moscow and for what purposes.

The organizers made a point of stressing that these would be individuals “paying their respects to the soldiers who fought against Nazism, the most homophobic ideology”, therefore would not need permission from the authorities. Furthermore, the organizers

of the gay forum emphasized that entrance to Aleksandrovskiy Gardens is free for everyone...

Hardly! By 10am police and Special Police forces had been called to gather on Manezh Square. They also took up positions at other key points around the capital. And according to a representative of the Union of Orthodox Citizens, voluntary helpers for the police were also patrolling the streets, ready to phone 02 at any signs of 'gay' activity. (Belikov 2006)

According to the report, the religious anti-Pride activists – “voluntary helpers of the police” – had made a deal with the Police on reporting ‘possible gay activity’. The strategy, obviously, worked as police officers were at Manezh Square ready to block off the area and to make arrests. On the other hand, a Chicago-based activist Andy Thayer (2009) described that the initial goals of the 2009 Slavic Pride activists as “to cause maximum embarrassment to the government if they attempt to arrest us or allow the neo-fascists to attack.” This ‘maximum embarrassment’ functions internally as an anti-police performance and, externally, as an attempt to catch international publicity and pressure for Russian authorities. I would argue that the embarrassment policy was at least as successful as the anti-pride strategy of arrest, which materialized into short visits to a local jail but, simultaneously, created enormous media publicity internationally. And it is obvious that the main organizer of the pride movement, Nikolai Alekseyev, is particularly successful in getting his actions significant international media coverage.

As the main organizer of the pride movement, Nikolai Alekseyev is a common figure in Russian and international media. Due to his excellent communication skills and social networks, Mr. Alekseyev appears well in domestic debates and is able to attract highly ranked international

guests such as foreign parliamentarians and ambassadors, European Parliament members and musicians to pride-related seminars, providing both the pride movement and himself with a politically high status. Apart from international human right groups such as Amnesty International, these international actors are all harnessed to the ideological battle for sexual rights and, especially, human rights in Russia, which obviously intensifies the already-existing confrontation with the state.

Photographs from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Alexander Gardens (by the wall of the Kremlin) – taken at 2009 Slavic Pride – illustrate well the *performative* (Butler 1997; Nagel 2003: 51–55) character of the pride movement. The images not only demonstrate “the barbarous arrest of peaceful activists” and the “unconstitutional character” of the police action, as argued by Alekseyev. The images also show how he utilizes one of the most important symbols of Russian nationalism, a World War II memorial, to demonstrate his point. Mr. Alekseyev not only claims access to this symbolically significant national space but also assures full publicity as he is accompanied by his Belarusian friend dressed in drag. What is more, Alekseyev poses heroically for cameras during his arrest.

The violence and arrests of the pride movement are, undoubtedly, great material for the media. Whereas the domestic media seems to feast on – sometimes fake – sexualized images of ‘transsexuals’ or ‘perverts’, the international media draws an attention to human rights. Despite the biased character of his article, Denis Belikov’s (2006) description of the 2006 Pride illustrates well the role of media publicity as the strategy of power: “In the end everyone seemed happy. The police officers who had quelled the disturbances without any particular problems. The journalists who had snapped a load of dynamic shots. The gay contingent who had secured the sympathy and support of European politicians and the public. And young people who had shouted and caused trouble without being punished” (Belikov 2006).

Apart from the above ‘traditional’ public space, the Internet has become one of the new spaces for power struggle and social networking in ‘the politics of pride’ as well (Healey 2010, 210). For those who have a computer and an access to the Internet, this is an alternative space where ethnicity, nationalism and sexuality are discussed. It is a virtual space of competing news sites, blogs and entertainment sites, significant for the above-described pride-related activists and, especially, for participating in ‘alternative’ communities even outside large cities of Moscow or St Petersburg. In other words, much of the gay, human and constitutional rights, pride-related reports and photo reports of protests and arrests as well as nationalist-religious blaster take place in the Internet. Therefore, the Internet is not only an active meeting place for men (and women) all over Russia, creating new forms of supra-local identities and communities, but a space for strong and intentional pressure.

Overall, I can conclude that after the Soviet-era silence on homosexuality (Healey 2010) – and sexuality in general – much has happened: the contemporary Russian publicity is sexualized and pornographized (Borenstein 2008). Even though the general media departs from heteronormative settings, some of the critical media is active in the promotion of diversity and tolerance as well as in the fight against corruption, discrimination and extremist violence. On the other hand, domestic media space does bring homosexuality to people’s everyday awareness through debates, reality shows and TV-series (Bayev 2005, 193). This confirms that it increasingly accepted form of everyday life in private but also in non-politicized sections of the public sphere.

Conclusion

Publicity around the conflict related to Moscow Pride is a good example of the sensitive character of (homo)sexuality in post-Soviet Russia. In a transition context, a strong passion to

promote democracy and sexual rights on one the hand and to defend ‘public morality’ and national security on the other captures some interesting elements of post-socialist societies.

Despite bans and possible punishment, neither homosexuality nor that sharp public/private divide in the expression of homosexuality are something new in the Russian context (see Essig 1999; Healey 2001). Sexuality (and homosexuality) did exist in Tsarist or Revolutionary Russia and in the Soviet Union despite the official sexophobia. In contemporary Russia, the strong anti-pride movement is supported by the state but the new context of the late 1980s and 1990s as well as the Internet age of the 2000s have given both gay activists as well as (not politically active) gay individuals new possibilities for engagement.

It is obvious that “homosexuality does not fit easily into ideologies stressing traditional family life as corner-stone of ethnic community” (Nagel 2003: 26) but in post-socialist contexts a public event promoting diversity through ‘untraditional sexuality’ seems to be a major cause of concern. That contradicts with hegemonic ideas of national unity and challenges some of the prevailing social and political orders in those societies. Related to this, Brian Baer (2005, 204) reminds us that “located in the contested borders of the public and private spheres, homosexuality raises questions about private bodies and the body politic, as well as the possibilities and the dangers of sexual freedom and political pluralism.” Being strongly supported by other groups of activists such as human rights activists, anarchists and liberals/radical socialist activists, the sexuality related demands make also pride and radical gay activism politically-sensitive and more suspicious than they are.

In fact, the ‘saving the nation’ ideology form of ethnosexual threat is neither a Russian phenomenon nor anything new. Similar argumentation is being used by countless nationalist and religious movements around the world. In the post-Soviet context, pride-related politics is, yet, closely tight to the on-going changes and power struggles between different sections of society. It reflects different views of sexuality and illustrates well wider divides and alliances in post-

Soviet society. The demands for morality and solutions to demographic crisis as well as equality, human and constitutional rights, and democracy are part of internal othering where activists demarcate particular approaches to sexuality and state. They not only struggle over 'right kind of Russianness' but also campaign for a particular ideal state where 'the other' and its intentions are heavily stereotyped.

Whereas anti-gay and anti-pride activism is often viewed as elements of fascism and rightwing or religious activism, pride and human rights activists are often portrayed as traitors and disgusting freaks who do not really promote human rights or public interest of the state: "All of them were wearing their swim-suits and some of them had false plastic tits, others had pictures on their butts. Moreover, for some reason, they were wearing rollerblades. One cannot advertise repulsive stuff by saying that this is a human rights issue" (Shoffman 2006). However, apart from religious activists who find homosexuality a representation of sodomy, only very few Russians really have time to be concerned about people's sexualities, sexual preferences or partnerships, especially, if these are kept private.

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