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Banning homosexual propaganda. Belonging and visibility in contemporary Russian media

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Banning "Homosexual Propaganda": Belonging and Visibility in Contemporary Russian Media

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ABSTRACT:

This article investigates Russian mainstream media´s coverage of the 2013 legislation banning "propaganda for non-traditional sexuality". Inspired by theories on belonging, media and visibility, it reconstructs a dominant narrative representing non-heterosexuals as threatening the future survival of the nation, as imposing the sex-radical norms of a minority onto the majority, or as connected to an imperialistic West which aims to destroy Russia. This story, it is argued, functions as a hegemonic grammar regulating how non-heterosexuality is seen and heard in the public sphere. However, it is argued that sometimes the linearity and cohesiveness of the narrative breaks down, when things appear that do not fit this model of interpretation. The analysis illustrates how contestations of belonging in contemporary media are increasingly structured according to the logic of visibility: dominant actors attempt to regulate what can be seen and heard in the public sphere whereas oppositional actors attempt to establish their own visibility in the mediated space of appearance, putting forward alternative constructions of the nation and who belongs to it.

KEYWORDS:

homosexuality, Russia, media, belonging, visibility, LGBT

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Introduction

In June 2013 Russia criminalised "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relations" among minors.[2] Although it was not specified how to define non-traditional sexuality, the law clearly targets non-heterosexual relations: in the original draft the term was "propaganda for homosexuality" (*propaganda gomoseksualizma*), and the popular word in the press was gay propaganda (*gei-propaganda)*. The law indicates an intensification of a "battle of belonging" which has been going on in Russia during the preceding decade, a negotiation about the rights and place of non-heterosexuals in the nation. The attention around the yearly Pride marches in Moscow since 2006, each of which has been announced, banned and organized under tumultuous circumstances, has put homosexuality and LGBT rights – or rather how to ensure the absence of such rights – on the mainstream agenda. An unholy alliance between nationalists, communists, the Putinist party United Russia, parental organizations and the Orthodox church has established anti-gay rhetoric as the norm in the public sphere (Zdravomyslova 2013).

Historical accounts (see Banting 1998; Healey 2001; Kon 1998) demonstrate how the governing of sexuality in Russia has often played a symbolic role. The first sodomy ban was introduced by Peter the Great after Swedish model as a way to discipline the military, was removed by the Bolsheviks in 1917 as part of their efforts to get rid of antiquated bourgeois morality, then re-introduced by Stalin in 1934 due to the fear that hidden homosexual networks would turn into Western espionage cells, and again removed in 1993 to enable Russia to enter the Council of Europe. As we see, the regulation of sexual deviance has had a peculiar relation to modernization and Westernization: both progressive and repressive laws have been represented as markers of Russia´s relation to Western modernity. Importantly, the increased public visibility of homosexuality in the mid-2000s coincided with a stronger anti-Western narrative, which would turn out to have sinister consequences for LGBT rights.

In many ways, the banning of homosexual propaganda in 2013 is a media spectacle (Kellner 2003)*,* in the sense that it cannot be fully understood apart from its appearance in the media. On the obvious level, the law targets media content and is a reaction against queer visibility. More importantly, I argue that the media discussion itself, involving the scapegoating and stigmatization of homosexuals, plays a pivotal

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[2] On 11 June 2013, the lower house of the Duma adopted the law with 436 votes for, none against and one abstaining. Later during the same month, the upper house passed the legislation and president Putin signed it into law.

role in the current anti-LGBT campaign, probably more tangible than any economic consequences of introduced fines. (Needless to say, however, media stigmatization will have real, lived consequences in the everyday lives of Russian non-heterosexuals). Thus, it is interesting to examine this battle of belonging as manifested in the media, ask what this contestation tells us about the contemporary Russian media environment, and whether it can deepen our understanding about media and belonging more generally.

Aim and method

The aim of this article is to examine how the gay-propaganda initiative and LGBT issues more generally were represented in Russian mainstream media during the time the bill was handled by the Russian Duma. In addition to an empirical contribution, the article adds to a theoretical discussion on how the media function as a space where belonging is negotiated, by exploring the role of visibility and the analytical usefulness of this notion. Moreover, the study has a political ambition. By investigating the internal logics and un-logics of the dominant narrative, and how it achieved hegemony, I want to contribute to an understanding of how it can be dismantled. For this purpose, I end by identifying some moments of disruption where the linearity of the narrative potentially breaks down, opening up for other storylines.

The method of the study is a qualitative text-analysis of Russian mainstream newspaper and television news coverage of the homosexual propaganda bill between 25 January 2013 (when the first draft was approved by the Duma´s lower house) and 11 June the same year (when the law was finally passed by the same body). An intensive and a more extensive media study were carried out simultaneously. In the intensive study, the newspapers *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (KP, Russia´s most read newspaper, with a populist and sensationalist bent) and *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (RG, one of the most circulated newspapers, officially tied to the government) were scanned in detail. So was the daily TV news bulletin *Vremya* on the state-controlled *Channel One* (C1). For practical reasons, I used the official websites of these media to gather the material. Together, 129 articles and news-clips were selected during this intensive study. To achieve a fuller picture of how the issue was treated in mainstream media during this period, a more

extensive analysis covering a wider spectrum of media was carried out simultaneously.[3] As the aim is not comparative but rather to find common traits in mainstream media reporting on LGBT issues, I view the difference between sources and genres – the material covers so called "yellow press" as well as more serious media, and both straightforward news material and opinion articles – as a strength. Though the tone and wording vary between different articulators and sources, some themes turned out to be constantly recurring throughout the material.

Employing narrative analysis (Patterson & Monroe 1998) I reconstruct a dominant narrative in the examined material. I examine how things are ascribed meaning by being organized in a story. According to Somers and Gibson (1994:28), narratives are created by *emplotment*: events are turned into episodes by ordering them temporally, spatially and causally in a plot. I reconstruct three tropes, functioning as narrative building-blocks rendering coherence to the dominant story by being repeated over and over again. The tropes have no clear-cut boundaries but in many ways overlap. Although I will talk of a dominant anti-gay narrative in the singular, it is important to note that this story is full of tensions and contradictions, which becomes significant in the last part of the analysis.

Belonging, media and visibility

The politics of belonging

The notion of *politics of belonging* is used by several authors (Anthias 2006; Yuval-Davis 2011) to frame studies of identity, boundaries and social categorization in a globalized world. It emphasizes the political in boundary-making, that the construction of communities is an inherently conflict-ridden process intimately related to the distribution of power in society. According to Nira Yuval-Davis:

> (t)he politics of belonging involves not only constructions of boundaries but also inclusion or exclusion of particular people, social categories and groupings within these boundaries by those who have the power to do this (2011:18).

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[3] The extensive media analysis was helped by the media monitoring of LBGT issues in Russian media, which is published daily on the LGBT website *gayrussia.eu.*

Narratives of belonging, argues Floya Anthias, naturalize socially produced power-laden relations and convert them into taken-for-granted and fixed communities, glossing over fissures and contradictions within them (2006:21). But not only hegemonic powers are engaged in the politics of belonging. The notion also involves how dominant stories of who is and who is not part of the political community are contested and resisted by other political actors (Yuval-Davis 2011:20).

Belonging cannot be reduced to formal citizenship or linguistic or racial affinity, but involves an affective dimension which has to do both with self-identification and others' recognition: "to belong is to be accepted as part of a community, to feel safe within it and to have a stake in the future of such a community of membership" (Anthias 2006). Importantly, belonging is related to social categories such as ethnicity, sexuality and gender. The categories are intersectionally related which means that they are not discrete but co-construct and transform each other (Yuval-Davis 2011:3ff). As national and cultural belongings are constructed with help of norms of gender and sexuality, even persons who seem to ethnically fit into a national community might be out-defined if they do not conform to those norms (Parker et al 1992).

The space where difference appears

After Benedict Anderson´s explorations of how boundary-making rests on imagination (1983), it is not very controversial or innovative to stress the media's role in providing the space where communities can be imagined. But how can we understand the relation between media and belonging in the contemporary world, when media have become ubiquitous and more intrusive than before? Roger Silverstone (2007) argues that in the 21st century, media are increasingly integrated into the fabric of everyday life and make up an important part of our lifeworld. He believes the media function as what Hannah Arendt calls a *space of appearance,* "both in the sense of where *the world appears*, and in the sense of *appearance as such* constituting that world" (Ibid:27). For the majority of the world, events such as political elections, scandals, terrorist attacks and even wars are experienced primarily through their media appearance. This does not mean that media appearance has replaced the reality of experience with a fictive world. On the contrary, the mediated world is not separate from the world of experience but tightly intertwined with it (Ibid:5). Importantly, it is often through the media that we encounter the stranger, and her appearance in the media is the only link that we will ever have. In Silverstone´s words: "the media provide the

frameworks (or frameworlds) for the appearance of the other and define the moral space within which the other appears to us" (Ibid:7). For generations, argues Silverstone, human beings could deny or disguise the plurality of the world, whereas today, when globalized media are constant followers in our everyday, exposing us to possible lives, difference can no longer be avoided or forgotten: "the stranger's otherness is constantly in our face" (2007:13).

The power of visibility

As the media, on an everyday basis and with a wider reach and speed than ever, bring distant faces and voices into our homes and let us hear the stories of people we have never met and will never meet, one can say that the world has become more visible than ever. John Thompson (2005) writes that the media have created a *new visibility*, a de-territorialized presence and publicness which mean for example that rulers are more visible in the everyday lives of ordinary people than before. In today´s digitalized and globalized media environment, the quest for visibility, the endeavour to be seen and heard in particular ways in the mediated space of appearance has become increasingly important (Orgad 2012; Brighenti 2007). Likewise, to manage the visibility of others has become a priority for political elites. In her more recent writings, Judith Butler (2004; 2010) explores the relation between visibility and power. In the mediated space of appearance, she argues, power is to be able to control appearance: to regulate what people hear and see in the public sphere, but also the ways in which they hear and see it. Thus, dominant actors can orchestrate what is counted as reality and who are counted as subjects (2004:xviii-xx). This involves the regulation of content, i.e. which images and narratives can appear at all, but also the control of perspective: which interpretive frameworks are made available and which positions are offered to the reader or viewer (2010:65). By establishing what Butler calls "hegemonic grammars" for seeing and hearing, influential actors can set the norm for legitimate interpretation (2004:13, 108). Public spheres are, argues Butler, constituted not only by what appears but also by what is excluded, which images do not appear and what stories are not told. Delimiting the space of appearance is to restrict lived reality, the extent of what is perceived to exist (Butler 2010:66). However, she argues, control of appearance is never fully achieved. As the public sphere is built upon exclusions, there is always something outside or beyond it (2010:9). At certain moments the boundaries of the public sphere break down, when something appears of which the hegemonic grammar cannot make sense: Butler´s example is the 2004 Abu Ghraib photos.

Due to the enormous speed and reproducibility of today's electronic media, when such disturbing images or stories appear they usually do not just disappear but start "living" their own lives.

In my view, visibility is key to understanding the dynamics of politics of belonging today. Elite-driven projects of belonging are dependent on managing visibility, to manifest and spread their own narratives as much as possible, as well as to restrict the appearance of undesired images and stories. But the new visibility also has created possibilities for political contenders to interfere and challenge dominant narratives of belonging. Obviously, the relation between visibility and belonging is far from straightforward. One´s appearance in the media does not secure one´s inclusion into the community. On the contrary, when a marginalized group becomes visible it can make them exposed and turn them into objects of hatred and scapegoating (Casper & Moore 2009:79). It is important – not least for Western politicians and activists who go to other countries to participate in street demonstrations and then return to the relative safety of their home countries – to remember that the lived effects of visibility can be devastating for locals. However, though one must discuss which strategies of visibility should be used, and who should take part in them, I find it difficult to see how any recognition or inclusion could come about without visibility. In order to take part in the politics of belonging and be counted as a viable subject, visibility in the space of appearance has to be established.

Managing visibility in Russian media

Since Vladimir Putin was installed as president in 2000 the Russian government has consistently strived to curb visibility in the public sphere. Putin's ambition to create what he called a "single information space" (*edinnoye informatsionnoye prostranstvo*) to unite the country (Simons 2010:24) has been quite successful: we have since the turn of the century seen a streamlining of Russian mainstream media. All national TV channels are now directly or indirectly state-controlled, and the major newspapers mainly reflect the views of the regime (Oates 2007).[4] However, this controlled mainstream public sphere coexists with an alternative media space which – though certainly not unaffected by state pressures – is still a site

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[4] This development has accelerated during Putin´s third term, as illustrated by the 2014 closing of federal new agency RIA Novosti, replaced by a new network called Russia Today, headed by journalist Dmitrii Kiselev, famous for his anti-gay and nationalist rhetoric.

of diversity and heterogeneity. This latter space is to a large extent digital, but also includes paper publications and some radio stations. The first sphere restricts what can be seen and heard in public, while the latter challenges the limits of this regulation and makes sure there are always other realities, stories and images available beyond the mainstream.

The notion of visibility is useful for understanding how politics of belonging is practiced in this dualistic media environment. By spectacular and attention-seeking strategies, often combining physical manifestations in public spaces with the tactical use of digital media, alternative actors and narratives sometimes manage to penetrate the mainstream media and establish themselves in the public space of appearance. The Pussy Riot case and the Moscow Pride events both show how previously marginal actors and topics can suddenly be thrown into public sight, even in a censored media environment. However, the Russian regime seems to be realising the dynamics of contemporary media, that once visibility has been established, we cannot simply pretend it is not there. Although censorship no doubt is still exercised, it is now often accompanied or replaced by softer means aiming at maximising the regime´s visibility, competing for attention in the media and reinforcing certain frames of interpretation, rather than hiding or denying undesired images and narratives. We will now turn to how homosexuality and the efforts to curb it are made sense of in Russian mainstream media.

A hegemonic grammar for seeing and hearing non-heterosexuality

The end of a nation

The first trope of the mainstream story pictures homosexuals as a threat to the survival of the nation, as the very antithesis of a prosperous Russian future, which excludes them from the imagined community. President Putin has repeatedly connected the issue of sexual minorities to the demographic situation in Russia. When asked about the homopropaganda law during a press conference in the Netherlands, the president made this link, as reported by *KP*:

> The president, not giving in to political correctness, did not avoid answering but spoke candidly.

- (…) In both Europe and Russia we are struggling with a demographic problem. Of course, this could be solved by people coming from abroad, but I would prefer that the birth-rate in Russia grew primarily on account of the titular nations: Russians, Tatars, Chechens, Jews and so forth (Smirnov 2013).

Here, homosexuality is narrated as sterility; it becomes a symbol of the nation's inability to reproduce itself. This narrative strategy makes it possible to make the conclusion that delimiting freedom of speech for sexual minorities is not an issue of infringing on their rights, but about ensuring the survival of the nation. As demonstrated in feminist research (Yuval-Davis 2011; Mosse 1997), the bodies of women and men are often inscribed into national projects, given symbolic status as "border-guards" or special responsibilities to reproduce (in the case of women) or defend (in the case of men) the nation. Scholars of biopolitics have explored how sexualized and gendered bodies are mobilized in the governing of life itself, making the regulation of women´s and men´s bodies an issue of life or death (Lemke 2011). Nations thus rest upon a heterosexual matrix according to which the future of the nation is carried in the wombs of women, impregnated by strong and fertile men. In such projects of belonging, lesbians, gays and transgender people are given no place.

Relatedly, homosexuality is represented in mainstream media as endangering the most concrete embodiment of the nation's future: Russia's children. A common argument used by politicians and experts in mainstream media is that information about the "homosexual lifestyle" might be harmful for children and increase the risk of them turning gay. It is noteworthy that those who want to restrict LGBT rights not seldom express a "social constructivist" view on homosexuality, whereas criticism against the law proposal is normally articulated from an essentialist "born-this-way" position.

Very often no distinction is made between homosexuality and paedophilia.[5] A *C1* news clip from April 2013 illustrates how this association can be created. Footage from the earlier mentioned press-conference in the Netherlands during which Putin had to answer questions about LGBT rights in Russia, was directly succeeded by the following exploration of Dutch sexual tolerance, illustrated by images of children on Dutch streets:

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[5] The St Petersburg law of 2012, which inspired the national law, covered "propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexualism and transgenderism, and pedophilia to minors" (Human Rights Watch 2012).

Speaker voice: In the Netherlands, society is different. A few days ago, an actual organization for paedophiles defended its right to existence in court. Its leader Martijn Uittenbogaard, describing himself as a victim, tells about the hardships of being a paedophile today, having to withhold one's instincts. (…) A wonder of Dutch tolerance. A few years ago, Martijn founded a paedophile party, which even entered parliament and promoted not only the legalization of sex with twelve year-olds, but also the selling of narcotics to children (Blagoi 2013).

This framework for hearing and seeing non-heterosexuality – as associated with paedophilia – makes criticizing the homopropaganda law or advocating LGBT rights in the public sphere risky, as one might be perceived as justifying child abuse.

The "vulnerable mentality argument" and the "paedophilia argument" come together in the discussion of the risk of Western same-sex couples adopting Russian children. This issue received a lot of media attention during spring 2013, and top politicians including the president voiced their concerns. In a *KP* article we can read that this issue has become urgent due to the legalization of gay marriage in many European countries, creating a "real danger of Russian orphans being brought from the orphanage directly into the arms of perverts (*izvrashchentsam*)." The same article refers to research done by an American sociologist, allegedly proving that children brought up by same-sex parents are more prone to suicide, infidelity and venereal diseases (Kuzina 2013). Another *KP* article warns about child trade and states that same-sex marriage "is the next step to turning children into a commodity" (Aslamova 2013).

Sometimes, non-heterosexuals are represented as concrete threats to Russian national security. In an news article entitled "Political experts predict a gay-revolution in Russia", *Izvestiya* reported about a new report about the intensified activities of Russian LGBT activists sponsored from abroad:

It is fully possible that we will see a kind of 'sexual gay-revolution', accompanied by the collapse of an already weakening societal morality. In that case Russia risks to fall into a new artificially created period of chaos comparable to the chaos of the 1990s (Podosenov 2013).

This is not an idea unique to the Russian context: feminist security studies have analysed the gendered and sexualized underpinnings of discourses of "security" and "danger", and how arguments of national security can be used to control undesired gender and sexual behaviours (Tickner 1992; Hansen 2000).

The majority strikes back

A second trope in the dominant anti-homosexual narrative is the representation of homosexuals as a small but very influential minority that enforces its values and lifestyle upon the majority, and that the homopropaganda law is about defending the rights of this majority. An underlying assumption is that the majority should set the norms for appropriate behaviour in a community: belonging thus becomes conditioned upon the majority´s will to tolerate difference (see Bhabha 1990:208). When the European Court of Human Rights deemed Russia´s banning of "gay parades" illegal, Valerii Zorkin, chairman of the Constitutional court of the Russian Federation interpreted the decision as: "…an obvious bias for defending the rights of sexual minorities, which in practice means to declare the norms of these minorities as necessary for the heterosexual majority" (Baev 2013a).

Reminiscent of classical anti-Semitic rhetoric, homosexuals are – implicitly or explicitly – described in the mainstream media as constituting a world-spanning elite wielding a power vastly non-proportional to their number. In a *KP* interview Vitalii Milonov, representative in the St Petersburg legislative assembly and famous supporter of banning gay-propaganda, claimed that "…the so called free press is concentrated in the hands of sodomites" (Vorsobin 2013). The newspaper *Trud* published an article focusing on the economic interests behind homosexual propaganda:

> …there is a powerful industry working behind the homosexual subculture: clothes, accessories, show-business… This industry constantly needs new markets, and our country is precisely such a potential market. It is not a coincidence that since the middle of the last decade, by hook or by crook the issue of 'gay-parades' has been rubbed in onto our minds (Frolov 2013).

The quote illustrates anxiety over increased visibility of homosexuality in the media, an otherness constantly in our face (Silverstone 2007:13). The rhetoric is an attempt to control that visibility, by establishing a model of interpretation that links homosexuals with a global capitalist elite. This framework for hearing and seeing makes it possible to present the gay-propaganda law, an initiative

embraced by all established parties, the president, a unanimous parliament, the mainstream media, celebrities such as Alla Pugacheva and Dima Bilan, as a people's revolt against a politically correct establishment, or in the words of above-mentioned politician Milonov: a "dictatorship of liberal values" (*gayrussia.ru* 2013a). This is a peculiar story-telling strategy which I believe is crucial for understanding how this anti-gay narrative became dominant in the Russian public sphere. That an entire society should crack down on a minority which already lacks all significant rights could be a story difficult to sell to the public: therefore this minority has to be presented as an global elite encroaching upon the freedom of ordinary people. LGBT rights are narrated as an undemocratic violation of popular sovereignty. Parallels can be drawn to 1980s Anglo-American conservatism and its rhetoric about "silent" or "moral" majorities, striking back against an imagined liberal and politically correct elite.

During the period when the law proposal was handled in the Duma, mainstream media devoted considerable attention to LGBT issues internationally, for example the French same-sex marriage law introduced in May 2013. The protests against the law and especially their popular character was repeatedly stressed, describing them as a mass-movement, a grass-root reaction towards the policies of the Hollande government. In one news clip, the narrator voice itself articulated the supposed feelings of the protesters:

> Doesn´t the French government have more urgent problems than to destroy these traditional values, are the participants of the action wondering. Isn´t for example the unemployment a more pressing problem right now? (Emelyanov 2013).

In an article entitled "The French Spring", *KP* made the comparison to the last years' uprisings against dictators in the Arab world (Shamir 2013). In its international coverage of LGBT issues, mainstream media tells the story of a trend sweeping over the world, with sexual minorities everywhere pushing through radical reforms profoundly altering gender relationship and the lives of children. However, the narrative goes, a grass-root countermovement of ordinary people starting to fight back can be detected all over the world. One *C1* news clip reports about protests against LGBT rights in Ukraine, Brazil, New Zealand and Georgia, and ends by some horror stories, showing what is at stake in this global battle for traditional values:

12 years ago homosexuals where allowed mass-scale adoption of children in Holland. And the generation with two dads or two moms has still not grown up. Research is contradictory. However, traditions are destroyed faster than children grow up. In Scandinavia bathrooms for "the middle sex" have started to appear, and in Holland there is an official societal organization for paedophiles (Kibalchich 2013).

Media stories of France and other countries, though often not mentioning Russia, create a "mirroring effect" (Dhoest *et al* 2013). Implicitly, by contrast to other countries, Russia emerges as a beacon of traditional values, a country where the battle against political correctness can still be won. Political scientist Pavel Danilin, well-known ideologue behind the Putinist party United Russia, has elaborated the idea of Russia as a centre of a transnational conservative movement:

> … the experiments of political correctness regarding sexual minorities, going on all over the world, provoke disgust and contempt. Russia could of course attain a high-profile position in relation to such progressive legislations, and become a landmark for many intellectuals who enjoy seeing the decadence in Western Europe (…) Thus, Russia could clearly and unambiguously delineate its position and become a moral leader (Baev 2013b).

Refusing Western modernity

The reappearance of non-heterosexuality in the Russian public sphere in the mid-2000s coincided with an intensified discussion about Russia's civilizational identity, resuscitating the old dispute of whether Russia is Western or not (see Neumann 1996). The issue of LGBT rights has – from having been neglected and ignored – landed in the midst of this struggle. Very often, the curbing of LGBT rights is now narrated as a civilizational choice: as a symbolic action showing that Russia will not emulate Western modernity. An article in *Moskovskii Komsomolets* entitled "We are not Europe? Thank God!" expresses this idea:

> There is a war going on between Russia and the West. About the human being and what he should be like (…). The West is legalizing homosexual marriage. Russia prohibits even propaganda for homosexuality. The ban is really about the West and its gay laws (Shevchenko 2013).

Sexually progressive laws in Western countries are thus understood not as the outcome of local activists' struggle to overcome historical discrimination but as an intrinsic Western value in an on-going clash of civilizations[6]. A national tradition is invented and homosexuality is narrated as new and foreign to Russia.

Before investigating this trope further, something needs to be said about an ambivalence characterizing narratives about Russia's civilizational belonging. Russian identity constructions have often incorporated both Orientalist (Oye 2010) and Occidentalist (Buruma & Margalit 2004) ideas, based on the historical experience of being as well a colonizer of the East (Caucasus, Central Asia, the Far East) and subject to Western domination (military, economic and cultural). According to Kerstin Olofsson (2008) Russia can be placed "both at the imperial and the subaltern pole". As Dostoevsky famously put it: "in Europe we are the Tatars, while in Asia we are the Europeans" (cited in Shkandrij 2002:16). Russia has historically been imagined in such a field of tension between a symbolic "East" and "West". This postcolonial paradox is crucial for understanding current narratives on homosexuality, as hinted by Healey:

> The tripartite 'geography of perversion' with its comparatively innocent Russia interpolated between a 'civilized' Europe and a decidedly 'primitive' or 'backward' 'East', permitted and permits Russians to imagine their nation as universally, naturally, and purely heterosexual (Healey, 2001:251f).

To spatialize sexuality, i.e. to place certain sexual behaviours in certain geographical locations is not unique to Russia (Brown 2000). Scholars of Orientalism have shown how the "East" and its people have often been given sexual connotations in European discourse, sometimes idealizing and sometimes demonizing (Aldrich 2003; Hall 1997). Sexual motifs where also common in 19th century Russian Orientalism, for example in stories of exotic black-eyed Caucasian mountain-princesses. Common for such narratives is that they all served to define and delineate normal sexuality at home. This is also, I argue, the function of the "sexual Occidentalism" evident in today´s Russian media rhetoric on homosexuality, in which deviant sexuality is ascribed onto a decadent and corrupt West.

There are strong anti-colonial and Occidentalist undertones in the dominant narrative on homosexual propaganda. LGBT rights are narrated as part of a Western neo-imperial project of imposing its norms

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[6] Interestingly, the idea that LGBT rights are intrinsic to Western modernity, commonly expressed in Russian media, mirrors and is reaffirmed by "homonationalist" rhetoric employed by activists and politicians in Western Europe and the US (cf. Puar 2007).

and values onto the rest of the world. *KP* wrote that "Western homosexually oriented elites are increasing their pressure on Russia", intentionally sowing conflicts in Russian society to prevent Russia from growing stronger (Potapov 2013). Another target for rhetoric about Western imperialism is popular culture. In an interview in *Novye Izvestiya* Dima Bilan, one of Russia's most successful pop-stars, criticized foreign artists for their support for Russian sexual minorities (Mazhaev 2013), and a member of the Federation Council recently expressed his worries about gay-propaganda being spread to Russia through Western computer games (Baev 2013c).

LGBT rights in Europe are represented as proof of its decadence and moral collapse, a symbol for European modernity gone awry. In a *RG* interview with a Russian expat woman living in Norway, we are told that the children's tale Cinderella has been declared "intolerant" by the Norwegian state and replaced with a book about a prince falling in love with a king. The interviewed woman also tells us about Norwegian parents raping their two-year old baby, and about "naturals" (*naturaly*) being a group threatened by extinction in Norway (Elkov 2013). A *RG* article named "Sunset in Europe" says that:

> …today Europeans are bowing not to God, not even to money, but to comfort, fashion and pleasure (…) In reality, the new "ideology fulfilling the role of religion" in the West is political correctness (…) I don´t even have to mention tolerance of homosexuality and demands to legalize same-sex marriages (…) Also, contemporary secular Europe - pension-ready, "out of testosterone" – is not only losing its political and economical dominance, but is clearly losing energy in science and culture. (…) Eurocentrism is coming to an end in every aspect (Radzikhovskii 2013).

The comparison of Europe to an old impotent man once again illustrates how gender, sexuality and nation intersect in constructions of belonging. A weak economy and LGBT rights are here narrated as two indicators of an emasculated Europe.

Explicit connections to the Eurocrisis are sometimes made. In an recent interview Vladimir Chizhov, Russian EU ambassador, said that:

We are a bit surprised and worried about some recent tendencies: against the background of the financial-economic crisis, when Europe cannot protect itself from problems, we see a targeted shift of focus to the very specific issue of the rights of the LGBT community (*RIA Novosti* 2013).

Though prone to nostalgia in its imagination of the Russian homeland, the mainstream narrative about homosexuality is not an anti-modern story. It is not against modern technology but embraces reason and science, not least by citing research about the "risk" of same-sex parents. Rather than rejecting modern progress, it envisages *another* modernity, an alternative to the one offered by Western civilization. As the Western path to modernity is being conflated with sexual liberation, to opt out of the former means to discard also the latter. The European modern project is narrated as being at a dead-end, and the viable route forward is the one offered by Russia. An interesting parallel was made in a radio interview with Vladimir Milov, leader of the oppositional party Democratic Choice, who compared same-sex marriages to nuclear energy, once considered the peak of modernity but now being closed down (*gayrussia.ru* 2013b). The rhetoric of Russia offering another modernity feeds on century-old narratives of Russia's messianic role as the "third Rome", an idea newly revived in Putin´s creed that Russia must follow a distinct cultural and political path (Pain and Verkhovskii 2012). However, the idea that there are non-Western forms of modernity is not unique to Russia, but a tendency that can be observed in many places in today´s globalizing and postcolonial world. Arjun Appadurai has famously claimed that modernity is at large; that the Enlightenment metanarrative of homogenous modernization is increasingly challenged by localized, subversive modernities (1996:18).

So far, the narrative has positioned Russia as subaltern, as being a victim of colonial-like domination from the West. This interpretative framework opens up for a specific way of seeing and hearing local LGBT activists: as fifth columnists sponsored or sent out by the imperial centre. However, due to the earlier mentioned ambivalence in Russian identity-making, Russia is at other times positioned as the empire. Feeding on Orientalist clichés about "Eastern" people as uncivilized, intolerant and violent, the fact that many Muslims live in Russia is taken as an argument for not allowing LGBT rights in Russia. Being asked by the gay-propaganda law on a press-conference transmitted by *C1*, Putin stressed the importance of taking into account regional specificities in Russia:

"I find it hard to imagine that same-sex marriage would be allowed in Chechnya. Can you imagine it? It would result in casualties! You have to understand in which society we are living (Blagoi 2013)

This is not the only time Russia's allegedly homophobic East is being used as a reason to curb LGBT rights in the country. Valerii Zorkin used the example of an imagined gay parade in Makhachkala (capital of the republic Dagestan in North Caucasus) to point out the absurdness of allowing such manifestations in Russia (*gayrussia.ru* 2013c). One politician pointed out Muslims specifically: "…don´t forget that Islam is strong here. Therefore such things are not acceptable" (*gayrussia.ru* 2013d).

Openings and closures

The LGBT-hostile narrative outlined above is not unchallenged in the Russian mediascape. For those who turn to the uncensored media sphere, there are a multitude of critical perspectives. At times, such alternative stories also manage to penetrate the controlled mainstream, not least due to the visibility-enhancing strategies employed by LGBT activists. However, the critical accounts which can be found in mainstream media tend to share some of the basic presuppositions of the narrative they criticize. Very often European institutions or values are being invoked: the banning of Pride parades in Moscow is for example being criticized by activists as a crime against the European Convention of Human Rights. Condemnations by Western politicians, NGOs and institutions about Russia´s treatment of sexual minorities are in no way silenced or ignored in the material I have examined, but covered extensively. However, by retaining the conflation between LGBT rights and the West, such narratives do not really challenge the dominant narrative but fit quite neatly into it. The hegemonic anti-colonial grammar regulates how such criticism should be heard: as yet another attempt by the West to dominate Russia.

Recalling Butler´s words about the impossibility of controlling visibility, as there will always be something which exceeds the hegemonic grammar, I have identified some cracks or moments of disruption in the dominant narrative, particular sites where its linearity potentially breaks down, opening up for other storylines. A first moment of disruption can be identified in the earlier mentioned West/East ambivalence. It could be argued that the coupling of Western modernity and LGBT rights can potentially work to the benefit of Russian non-heterosexuals. Putin's claim that LGBT rights would be unthinkable

in Russia´s Muslim regions opens up for the possibility that, if Russians for some reason would want to reorient themselves closer to the West and disassociate themselves from the East, strengthened LGBT rights could become a symbol for such a civilizational choice. A series of articles appearing in *KP* during Spring 2013 reporting about brutal repression of LGBT people in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, contrasting the situation in Africa to same-sex laws in Europe but not mentioning Russia at all (Pyatnitskaya 2013a; 2013b), pointed at this disruptive potential. The articles, intentionally or not, opened up for the interpretation that the LGBT issue has put Russia at a civilizational crossroads, and that the introduction of the gay-propaganda law would put Russia in the same category as some notorious dictatorships in Africa, an idea that probably would appear unpleasant to most Russians. In my view, even if the conflation between LGBT rights and Western modernity opens up for a possible revaluation of the former if the latter for some reason would appear more attractive to Russians, the connection is nonetheless unfortunate. Not only does it rest on the stereotypization of "Eastern" cultures as essentially LGBT-hostile, which can lead to scapegoating Muslims and others, but it also makes Russian non-heterosexuals into a kind of hostages in civilizational politics.

A second potential moment of disruption, which leaves the East/West dichotomy behind, is the highlighting of non-heterosexual existence in Russia´s history, an argument used by several critics of the gay-propaganda bill. For example, *KP* reported about a visit to St Petersburg by British actor Stephen Fry, during which he expressed that he could not understand how the same city that produced world famous composer Tchaikovsky – widely recognized as homosexual – could introduce such a discriminatory law (Voloshin 2013). Such rhetoric contests the dominant coding of the Russian imagined community as heterosexual and the view that homosexuality is something new and foreign. However, I believe it also comes with a risk, as it might play into nationalist nostalgia viewing traditions as good in themselves, and things coming from the outside as intrinsically evil.

A possible third moment of disruption was hinted at in mainstream media's reporting about homophobic killings. *KP*, in an article entitled "Boy with non-traditional orientation brutally killed in Volgograd" (Arakelyan 2013), reported about the murder of 23-year old Vladislav Tornovoi, killed by some men suspecting him to be a homosexual. The article recounts horrible details about the murder, such as how the killers mutilated the body of their victim. The murder provoked much outrage, and many, even in

mainstream media, made a connection between the murder and the anti-LGBT rhetoric currently used by Russian politicians. An article published by the federal news agency *RIA Novosti* argued that:

> The tragedy in Volgograd is, in my view, convincing evidence that the Russian political debates on the theme of same-sex love are leaving the area of common sense (…) The tragedy in Volgograd should be a warning sign to our politicians. The attempts to bring Madonna to justice for "homosexual propaganda" might be amusing. But what happened in this provincial town on the shores of Volga evokes totally other emotions (Rostovskii 2013).

The tragic murder and the ensuing debate was a disturbing moment: something appeared which did not fit into the simple model provided by the masternarrative. Though the interpretations of the murder differed, the hegemonic grammar of "gays threatening the nation" could not easily make sense of the event. At such times, if only for a short time, the limits of what can be seen, heard and said in the public space break down and can possibly be redefined.

Concluding remarks

The Russian gay-propaganda initiative and anti-homosexual campaign in 2013 constituted a project of belonging, an attempt to delineate the Russian nation as heterosexual, which positions non-heterosexuals as not belonging, not fully included in this imagined community. Using mainstream media material, I have reconstructed a dominant narrative, subdivided into three tropes which each in its own way serves to exclude and stigmatize non-heterosexuals. LGBT rights, according to this emplotment 1) threaten the future survival of the nation, 2) impose the minority´s sex-radical norms onto the majority, and 3) are a symptom of the failure of Western modernity, to which Russia can offer an alternative.

The main theoretical argument of this paper is that the project of banning gay-propaganda in today´s Russia, and the efforts to challenge it, show how contemporary contestations of belonging are increasingly organized according to the logic of visibility. For elites and contenders, the struggle to be seen and heard in particular ways, and to control the visibility of others, is intertwined with negotiations of the nation and who should belong to it. The visibility dynamic structures this particular case in several

ways. First, during the last decade we have witnessed an increased queer visibility in the Russian mainstream media, created by visibility-enhancing strategies played out in the intersection of alternative media, physical street actions and mainstream media. Unlike some years ago, homosexuality is now visible in the mainstream space of appearance. This visibility, combined with the ubiquity and intrusiveness of today´s media, means that the average citizen and media-consumer is exposed to difference and to other possible lives, in a way not seen before. In a country where many non-heterosexuals are forced to hide their sexuality to families and colleagues, the media appearance of the homosexual might be the only conscious encounter most Russians have with her or him. Second, the project to ban gay-propaganda is a reaction towards the new queer visibility. It is an attempt to manage appearance, to control how people see and hear non-heterosexuality: as dangers to the nation, as infringing upon the majority´s freedom, or as Trojan horses sent out by the West. This hegemonic grammar makes it possible, even logical, to perceive anti-gay legislation not as an attack on human rights but as a necessary measure to protect the homeland from enemies. Third, the anti-LGBT project is not only about silencing and hiding but also a spectacle in itself (as shown by attention-seeking acts such as the indictment of Madonna in 2012). It aims at maximising visibility, spreading a certain narrative and to display a specific imagined community to the Russians and to the world: the story of a Russia that stands up against Europe and America, offering an alternative modern project and a moral leadership for those dissatisfied with the West. Fourth, at times the linearity and cohesiveness of the masternarrative breaks down, when things appear that do not fit the hegemonic model of interpretation (such as a brutal murder of a kid based on anti-homosexual motives). Recalling the political ambition of this article, I argue that at such moments of disruption, possibilities are opened up for other forms of seeing and hearing difference, and for re-imagining the community in other, more inclusive ways.

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