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Homophobia as Geopolitics: 'Traditional Values' and the Negotiation of Russia's Place in the World

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In early spring 2017, a state-initiated campaign of homophobic violence was unleashed in Chechnya, a war-torn and authoritarian republic on the southern border of the Russian Federation. According to several media reports, the wave of persecution started when the local police arrested a man suspected of using narcotics in late February. After finding information in his telephone suggesting he was engaging in sexual relationships with other men, the police started rounding up and detaining large numbers of men suspected of being homosexual. Although at the time of writing this chapter some details are still unclear, several Russian news sources and LGBT organizations as well as international HR groups have published concurrent witness reports painting a very gruesome picture (Ekho Moskvy 2017; Kost'uchenko 2017; Milashina 2017a, b; Milashina and Gordinenko 2017). According to these stories, during the weeks following

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the first arrest, more than a hundred men from different sectors of Chechen society were arrested and brought to secret prisons (targets including a wide range of people, e.g. a well-known television personality and religious leaders close to the government). The existence of such prisons (where suspected extremists, Salafists and drug addicts are unlawfully detained) is already well-documented, as is the common use of torture by the Chechen authorities, led by President Ramzan Kadyrov with implicit approval from the Federal Russian government. Suspected homosexual men who had been brought to these detentions centers reported experiencing both physical violence and emotional torture. While some were released, several were confirmed to have been killed—among them a 16-year-old boy. In some cases, the authorities transferred these men to male family members with instructions to kill them, a process called "prophylactic work". Witness stories, photos and videos gave clear indications that high-ranking Chechen officials, among them the Speaker of the Parliament and the Leader of the Chechen Interior Ministry, were directly involved in the campaign. At the same time, President Kadyrov's spokesperson called the reports an "absolute lie" and denied even the existence of homosexuals in Chechnya: "you cannot detain and oppress what does not exist".

For those in the West watching these scenes of homophobic violence unfold, the reports from Chechnya may have been seen as yet another confirmation of Russia as an essentially and categorically homophobic place. However, Chechnya is a distinct geographical space and must be distinguished from other parts of the Russian Federation. For many Russian observers these events were interpreted as evidence of the Chechen Muslim-majority Republic's archaic, tribal and intrinsically homophobic character. Already in 2013, when asked by journalists about Russia's "homosexual propaganda" law,[1] President Vladimir Putin used the specter of Chechen homophobia as one of the reasons for why the law was necessary, claiming that if same-sex marriage were to be allowed in Chechnya, "it would result in casualties" (Blagoi 2013). For some, the 2017 events in Chechnya appeared to confirm Putin's warning. Whether interpreted as indicative of a "homophobic Russia" or a "homophobic

[1] The Russian Propaganda Law was unanimously approved in the State Duma in 2013 and seeks to "protect children from information advocating for a denial of traditional family values" and makes the distribution of "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships" to minors a criminal offense.

(Muslim) Chechnya", for many it was tempting to interpret the anti-gay wave as a problem of the Other's culture, narrated in terms of religious, civilizational and cultural difference, intolerant popular attitudes and persistence of "traditional values".

While not denying the significance of religion, culture or attitudes, this chapter departs slightly from these discourses to argue that such explanations may obscure the politics of homophobia. As Wendy Brown (2006: 15ff.) argues, the culturalization of intolerance, that is, to understand prejudice as essential to and inherent within specific cultural and religious groups, is a depoliticizing discourse which glosses over the historical, social and economic context as well as the power relations within which, for example, homophobic politics emerges. In the case of Chechnya, reports suggest that the anti-gay campaign unleashed in 2017 cannot be reduced to cultural explanations. While anti-gay and patriarchal attitudes are no doubt widespread and institutionalized in Chechen society (the practice of "honor killings", for example, is well-documented), what happened was not a spontaneous eruption of popular homophobia. In fact, the campaign was initiated and coordinated by Chechen authorities, with direct involvement of leading state officials. These violent attacks on gay men follow a pre-existing pattern that was reinforced in the 2010s, where the Putin-supported Kadyrov government harasses, tortures and murders perceived enemies of Chechnya with impunity (Amnesty 2016). Crucially for the aims of this chapter, the anti-gay campaign in Chechnya must also be seen in the political context of publicly sanctioned homophobia across the Russian Federation and a climate of aggressive search for internal enemies.

In the twenty-first century sexual rights and the politics of sexual citizenship are increasingly framed as a question with global repercussions, entangled in contestations over geopolitics, influence and security, and often at the heart of discourses of "tradition" and "modernity" (Altman and Symons 2016). This is particularly true for LGBT politics, and in the rhetoric of states and non-state actors in many parts of the world, gay rights have emerged as a form of symbolic border guard (Yuval-Davis 1997) marking civilizations and their boundaries, though in multiple and contradictory ways. In certain political discourses in Western Europe and North America, LGBT inclusion is represented as a marker of national, European or Western advancement and superiority vis-à-vis

"intolerant" and "backward" Others, a tendency which Jasbir Puar has labeled "homonationalism" (2007). Simultaneously, projects of "state homophobia" in some countries in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe are motivated by discourses depicting homosexuality as a Western import and local LGBT activists as proxies of US or European imperialism (Weiss and Bosia 2013). In both modalities of this discourse, sexual politics is situated according to a polarized, essentialist and historically inaccurate dichotomy of a "gay-friendly West" confronting a "traditional non-West".

With this conversation as a theoretical backdrop, this chapter explores the transnational and geopolitical dimensions of contemporary state-supported homophobia in Russia. Whereas previous research on the increasingly repressive policies and rhetoric on gays and lesbians in Russia in the 2010s has stressed how homophobia constitutes part of a biopolitical project of ensuring the nation's survival (Stella and Nartova 2016), or the role of sexual Otherness in producing a narrative of national belonging (Persson 2015), little attention has been devoted to global political dimensions of the current anti-gay wave in Russia (however, see Moss 2017). Drawing on a media analysis of the Russian framing of the 2013 ban on "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships", this chapter analyzes how dominant narratives of homosexuality in Russia are articulated in relation to domestic perceptions of Russia's role in global politics. Arguing that political homophobia in Russia must be understood within the larger project of negotiating Russia's geopolitical identity, I make two specific arguments: firstly, that Russia's recent (re)turn to "traditional values" is a boundary-making move, delineating Russia from the West and seeking to restore Russia's place in world politics by positioning the country as a leader in a transnational conservative alliance. This effort must be seen against the background of the ways in which sexual politics have emerged as a symbolic battlefield in an imagined clash of civilizations and competing conceptions of modernity. Secondly, at the heart of this geopolitical project is a contradiction which stems from Russia's historically ambivalent relation to Western modernity. Dominant Russian narratives on homosexuality are undercut by overlapping and contradictory schemas of cultural differentiation, where Russia on the one hand is positioned as a counterhegemonic force opposing Western-

imposed gay rights and, on the other hand, as a force of order and civilization in relation to "Muslim homophobia" within Russia's borders.

The empirical material presented in this chapter provides an analysis of Russian media reporting on the ban on "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relations" and LGBT issues more widely. Data was collected from 25 January to 11 June 2013 (corresponding to the time the law was under consideration of the Duma and the moments when public discussion was most intense). News items, op-eds and columns were collected from two Kremlin-close newspapers: the official government publication *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda.* Clips from the news program *Vrem'a* on state-aligned *Channel One* were also collected and analyzed. In addition, a more extensive but less structured analysis of the reporting on these issues was carried out and looked at discourses in the wider mainstream media. Deploying a form of narrative analysis (Patterson and Monroe 1998), I sought to identify and analyze the process of emplotment, that is, how disparate events and phenomena (such as "homosexuality" and "the West") were selected and organized into storylines and thereby rendered meaningful. Importantly, this process involves the linking of the temporal to the spatial, for example, the construction of certain places as "modern" and others as "backward". The specific quotes and examples included in the chapter were chosen because they illustrate larger patterns in the media reporting which were relevant to the analytical concerns of the text (i.e. because they implicitly or explicitly tied the issue of sexual politics to Russia's global and geopolitical standing).

Russian Sexuality Politics in Historical Perspective

In all societies, efforts to regulate sexuality and categorize certain forms of sexual behavior as deviant and others as normal have been crucial, setting standards and norms for how a proper citizen should act, and thereby seeking to govern and secure the well-being and prosperity of the population as a whole (Foucault 1990). The delineation between "respectable"

and "dangerous" sexualities has historically been closely tied to processes of nation building,[2] as the border between "good" and "bad" sexuality has also symbolically marked the border between domestic and foreign (Mosse 1985). This suggests that in addition to the biopolitical function of regulating sexuality identified by Foucault, such discourses also perform a certain geopolitical function.

Historically in Russia, the regulation of sexual deviance has been closely related to perceptions of Europe and to ideas of modernity and progress. Historians of sexuality have shown how both liberalizing and repressive measures have been entangled in negotiating Russia's relation to Western modernity. The first sodomy ban was introduced by Peter the Great in 1706 as part of his military code, which was based on the Swedish model, expressing an attempt to discipline the Russian army in accordance to European standards (Kon 1998). The sodomy ban was removed by the Bolsheviks in 1917 as part of their efforts to get rid of what they considered to be antiquated bourgeois morality. In 1934, however, the ban was re-introduced by Stalin based on fears that "hidden homosexual networks" would turn into Western espionage cells (Healey 2001). In post-war Soviet society, homosexuality was a taboo and rarely talked about in public discourse (Banting et al. 1998). The sodomy ban was removed in 1993 to enable Russia to enter the Council of Europe, which again demonstrates the intertwinement of governing sexuality and Russia's geopolitical orientation.

The recent upsurge of anti-LGBT politics in Russia is related to both domestic and global dynamics. Since the mid-2000s, there has been an intense discussion about the rights and place of homosexuals in the national community, as public visibility of queers and LGBT issues has increased dramatically in Russian mass media, social media and popular culture. A factor which contributed to this new visibility were the Pride marches organized yearly in Moscow, starting in 2006, each of which were officially banned by the authorities but still took place, albeit under tumultuous circumstances which were widely reported in domestic and international media. These marches, often with a significant share of Western

[2] C.f. Nick Skilton's chapter on nation building in this collection for an interesting perspective on similar issues in the Australian context.

activists among the participants, have also been controversial in Moscow's local LGBT community, with some arguing that the Western model of visibility-enhancing identity politics is not necessarily the best way of improving the situation for queers in Russia (cf. Stella 2015). In the 2010s, there were massive reactions to LGBT visibility from the state and various societal actors, ranging from the Putinist party United Russia, parental organizations, nationalists, communists (whose emphasis on Soviet nostalgia and great power revanchism make them very unlike leftist parties in many other countries) and the Orthodox Church, the influence of which has grown significantly under Putin. The 2013 law on "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships among children" was introduced along with a hysterically aggressive homophobic campaign of stigmatization and scapegoating in state-aligned media. The wider political context was an increasingly authoritarian and repressive society, which included an atmosphere of aggressive anti-Westernism, official searches for internal enemies and a general move toward promoting "traditional values"—all tendencies which are not new but have been reinforced after the re-election of Putin in 2012 (Edenborg 2017).

The anti-gay atmosphere in Russia should be seen against an international trend of state homophobia (Weiss and Bosia 2013) in the 2010s, which can be observed in countries as diverse as India, Egypt, Hungary, Indonesia and Uganda. In these contexts, homophobic discourses merge with anti-Western (or anti-European) rhetoric and are deployed in projects of national belonging and state legitimization. The securitization and policing of queers is interwoven in counterhegemonic, anti-imperialist politics and inform efforts to entrench unique national identities in communities seen as menaced by globalization and Westernization (Amar 2013; Altman and Symons 2016). In many cases, local religious associations as well as globalized religious movements play important roles in legitimizing homophobic politics. Importantly, instances where political and religious leaders use anti-Western discourses to justify persecution of LGBT people seem to be on the rise at the same time as some movements in the West are using pro-gay rhetoric to justify anti-Muslim politics (Puar 2007). This attests to the growing significance of sexual politics as a powerful political signifier in global struggles over influence, belonging and modernity. The next section will explore in more detail the role of

homophobia in current efforts to position Russia in global politics as a leader in "traditional values".

The Geopolitics of "Traditional Values"

> 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)

The above quote from the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* encapsulates a narrative that was repeatedly articulated in Russian mainstream discourses. The curbing of gay liberation in Russia had, according to this storyline, a larger symbolic meaning, indicating the civilizational choice that Russia would not (and should not) become like the West. Underlying this narrative was a geopolitical imaginary of an innocent Russia cherishing "traditional values", confronting a degenerate West characterized by sexual immorality and dissolution of gender norms (Riabov and Riabova 2014). According to Michael J. Shapiro (1997), communities create "violent cartographies" which delineate geographical space by imagining the homeland as innocent and good, and the spaces of Others as disordered, threatening and thus legitimate objects of violence. Such landscapes of danger, he argues, help to naturalize and depoliticize relations of domination and violence, by representing them as necessary for ensuring safety at home. The figure of enemies imperiling the community, and the mobilization of emotions of fear and hatred toward them, is central to narratives of collective identity and belonging.

Sara Ahmed's theory of the cultural politics of emotions (2014) provides a helpful point of reference for understanding the work of emotions in producing and reinforcing such imaginaries. Ahmed does not view emotions as residing within or originating from pre-defined individuals or collectives. Rather than asking what emotions are, she investigates what they do. According to her, the circulation of emotions produces the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that make it possible to distinguish between inside and outside. For example, the experience of pain

when an object touches or penetrates the skin allows us to experience the boundedness of the body itself: "it is through this violation that I feel the border in the first place" (Ahmed 2014: 27). When applied not to the individual but collective body, this suggests that the experience of a border violation, while it demonstrates the penetrability of the community, simultaneously reproduces the community and reminds us of its existence (Kuntsman 2009). Violent cartographies, that is, ideas of an innocent home being threatened by outside violation, depend on the invocation of fear and disgust of Others, and of love and care for the homeland. Thus, the circulation of emotions imbues spaces with particular affective dispositions, constructing certain places as object of love, and others as objects of fear or hate. Ahmed's theory allows us to take into account how geopolitical imaginaries may be produced not by explicit statements but in more implicit ways. She suggests that emotions work by the creation of "sticky associations". Through repetition and proximities in speech, different discursive figures stick together so that when people hear the one they will think of the other. Certain words can evoke historical narratives and past associations so that explicit allegations become unnecessary, as Ahmed puts it: "the undeclared history sticks" (2014: 47). These links are often not articulated by substantial arguments or coherent narratives; they do not need to "make sense" because they work on an emotional rather than cognitive level. In some cases, even when a connection is explicitly denied, sticky associations may still be reproduced.

Much Russian media reporting on LGBT issues relied on precisely such sticky associations. The figure of the homosexual was put in proximity to various negatively connoted figures, implicitly suggesting a link between them and making homosexuality appear as dangerous and worthy of contempt. The visual imagery, that is, the sequencing or combination of certain images, and the interrelation between texts and images, was often crucial in the production of stickiness. One example was a news clip on *Channel One* (Blagoi 2013), first showing Putin at a press conference in the Netherlands answering questions from Western journalists about LGBT issues in Russia, and was then immediately followed by a clip about the founding of a pedophile party in the Netherlands, the reporter sarcastically remarking that this was "a wonder of Dutch

tolerance". The clip was illustrated by images of bearded men with children in their laps. The final clip returned to the press conference, with Putin saying: "I find it difficult to believe that any court in Moscow would allow an organization that propagandizes pedophilia to continue working. In Holland it is possible, there is such an organization". In this clip, it was not explicitly stated that LGBT people are pedophiles, or have anything to do with pedophiles, but the association was established nonetheless, by placing the two 'deviant' figures close to each other.

A similar stickiness was produced by Russian media reporting on Ukraine during the 2013–14 Maidan protests and the following war, where links between homosexuals and various suspicious political figures were made. Under the headline "Gay fuel on the Maidan bonfire: Ukraine is invited to Europe by nationalists, anti-Semites, neo-Nazis and homosexuals", *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (2013) wrote about the German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle visiting Ukraine in support of the Maidan protesters. In the article, it was repeatedly emphasized that the minister was accompanied by his husband. No open allegations were made about homosexual activists cooperating with Ukrainian neo-Nazis, but by mentioning the figures together, a link was suggested. A possible effect of such representations was a transfer of emotion, that the hatred and disgust associated with Nazism among the Russian public, fueled by the collective trauma of the Second World War (which affected nearly every Russian family), would somehow stick to the figure of the homosexual.

Moreover, the reporting about homosexuals involved in the Maidan revolution could function as a confirmation of the fear that also in Russia, domestic LGBT activists sponsored from abroad might come to undermine political stability. The Kremlin-friendly newspaper *Izvestiya*, citing a report by Russian political scientists, warned about the prospect of a "sexual gay-revolution, accompanied by the collapse of an already weakening societal morality" that would throw Russia back to the "chaos of the 1990s" (Podosenov 2013). Thus, in the geopolitical imaginary of the dominant narrative, lesbians and gays were ambivalently located on what Didier Bigo (2001) calls the "Möbius ribbon" of internal and external security. Symbolically placed both outside and inside the community, homosexuals were narrated as ominous reminders of an unsafe external world. Given this framing, it is not surprising that international criticism

of the LGBT rights situation was interpreted through a geopolitical lens in Russian media. Russia's ambassador to the EU said that criticism of the propaganda law from EU leaders was a way to distract attention from the economic crisis in Europe (RIA Novosti 2013). Western criticism against Russia's LGBT politics before the Sochi Olympics was interpreted as an aggressive attack on Russia's sovereignty (Grishin 2013).

As mentioned previously, global contestations of sexual politics often revolve around temporal notions such as "tradition" and "modernity". According to Homi Bhabha (1994: 140), the practice of imagining communities necessitates the enforcement of one hegemonic temporality, a narrative of a shared past and common future, superseding possible competing and contradictory histories. People imagined as Others are then associated with other temporalities and represented as existing in another time. Not surprisingly, political efforts to define what constitutes normal sexual practices "here" and "there" reproduce and rely on certain notions of time and history. Today, in the rhetoric of many Western politicians and activists, LGBT rights (as well as gender equality) are represented as intrinsically bound up with modernity, as a measure of the advancement of a society (Puar 2007). States not respecting LGBT rights are claimed to be "on the wrong side of history", a phrase expressing a unidirectional and deterministic view on the relation between sexual liberation and time. The dominant Russian anti-gay narrative challenged the idea of a uniform modernity following the Western example. European modernity was represented as derailed: a telling parallel was made in a radio interview with a Russian politician who compared same-sex marriages to nuclear energy, once considered the peak of modernity but now being closed down (gayRussia.com 2013a). The idea that Russia, for historical, cultural and religious reasons, should not imitate the Western model of modernity but must follow a "special path" constitutes, according to Pain and Verkhovskii (2012), the closest that post-Soviet Russia comes to a state ideology.

However, the search for an alternative modernity is far from unique to Russia. In today's world, there is an intensified struggle over the content and ownership of modernity. Calhoun (2007: 170) argues that we should talk of modernities in plural, and Appadurai (1996) has famously claimed that modernity is "at large". Contestations around modernity are more

than a question of competing cultural preferences about how to lead the "good life"; they are at the heart of global power politics. The claim to represent modernity is a powerful political resource, which has historically justified control and violence against colonized populations as well as domestic minority groups. In the words of Judith Butler: "…power relies on a certain taken-for-granted notion of historical progress to legitimate itself as the ultimately modern achievement" (2008: 21). Similarly, the repeated invocation of "traditional values" in contemporary Russian discourse should be seen in this light. Craig Calhoun (2007) points out that tradition is a political project, something that is continually reproduced, rather than a fixed, pre-determined cultural reality. Tradition is not only about the past but is both backward- and forward-looking and should not be understood as existing in opposition to modernity, but rather as a way to negotiate modernity. Russia's narrative of an alternative modernity and the turn toward "traditional values" is thus a political struggle over identity and modernity, which makes sense only in the context of globalization and contentious global geopolitics.

In the Russian media reporting about the ban on "homosexual propaganda", the issue of lesbian and gay rights was repeatedly linked to the question of Russia's influence and standing in the world. To understand this framing, one must take into account the increased global polarization and heated international debates around LGBT rights that have emerged in the twenty-first century (Altman and Symons 2016). The material on which this study is based indicates that in Russian public discourse, the LGBT issue has become intertwined in the negotiation of what should be Russia's geopolitical role in a post-Cold War world order. In a speech to the Federal Assembly in December 2013, Putin lamented what he described as the erasure of moral norms and national traditions in many countries, instigated "from above" against the will of the people. Fortunately, however, he had observed that more and more people in the world were supporting Russia's position in defending "traditional values" regarding family, religion and a "genuine human life" (Channel One 2013). More explicitly, Pavel Danilin, well-known political scientist ideologically close to the Kremlin, articulated a similar idea:

> … 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 2013)

The idea of Russia as an international beacon of "traditional values" echoes of older missionary narratives of Russia's role in the world, such as the pre-revolutionary idea of Moscow as a "Third Rome" embodying true Christianity after the fall of the Roman and Byzantine empires, as well as the Soviet rhetoric of liberating workers across the world (Duncan 2002). The above suggests that the Russian state's turn to "traditional values" does not merely represent a defensive and inward-looking reaction to globalization and perceived threats to established norms of gender and sexuality. On the contrary, this move constitutes an element of an activist and revisionist foreign policy, a soft power initiative that sends a message about Russia's importance in world affairs, as a purported leader in a transnational conservative axis.

An Ambivalent Mapping

Though the dominant discourse appears to produce a clear-cut and binary geography of a "gay-friendly" West versus a Russia defending "traditional values", at closer scrutiny, this mapping was neither rigid nor monolithic. Historically, narratives of Russia's geopolitical identity have been characterized by ambivalence, contradiction and dramatic shifts. The Russian self has been imagined in relation to two significant Others—Europe and Asia—providing a tripartite scheme for identification and dis-identification. Dostoevsky described this experience: "in Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, while in Asia we shall be masters. In Europe we were the Tatars, while in Asia we are the Europeans" (Shkandrij 2001: 16). Madina Tlostanova characterizes Russia as a Janus-faced "subaltern empire" which feels itself a colony in the presence of the West. On the one hand, Russia is the center of an empire and imagined as a provider of

law and modernity. On the other hand, there is a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the West, a form of implicit acceptance of the "epistemic bondage" of global coloniality, which posits the Western trajectory as a universal model of development.

> The subaltern empire, even when claiming a global spiritual and transcendental superiority, has always been looking for approval/envy and love/hatred from the west, never questioning the main frame of western modernity, only changing the superfluous details. (2012)

Russia's cultural subjection to global coloniality is, according to Tlostanova (2012), expressed by a historical vacillation between excessive mimicry of the West and nativist rejection of all things considered Western.

The dominant discourse on the 2013 ban on "homosexual propaganda" was characterized precisely by this awkward relation to the West. On the one hand, by framing the ban in counterhegemonic terms, as a defense against perceived Western incursions on Russia's sovereignty in the form of promoting universal gay recognition and same-sex marriage across the world, Russian politicians legitimated the ban using the West as a constant point of reference, a measure and standard. These motivations for introducing the ban were meaningful only in relation to the figure of the West; in consequence, that figure functioned as a constitutive Other, necessary to the idea of Russian "traditional sexuality", and to Russian identity more broadly.

On the other hand, when Putin defended the ban in 2013, his reference to homophobia in Chechnya (where he claimed that same-sex marriage would "result in casualties" if introduced in this region) deployed another logic within the complex scheme of overlapping self-Other relations which informs rhetoric on gay rights in Russia. This was not the only example where Russian officials justified the 2013 ban by claiming that increased LGBT visibility would provoke violence among Russia's Muslim citizens. The chairman of the Constitutional Court of Russia, Valery Zorkin, used the hypothetical example of an imagined gay parade in Dagestan, a Muslim-majority republic neighboring Chechnya, suggesting that the violent reactions such a march would provoke indicated

the impossibility of allowing LGBT recognition in Russia (gayRussia.com 2013b). An official from the republic of Udmurtia said, on the topic of gay rights: "...don't forget that Islam is strong here. Therefore, such things are not acceptable" (gayRussia.ru 2013c). In contrast to the arguments supporting the ban that invoke anti-Western sentiments, this second form of reasoning does not position Russia as the injured "subaltern" assailed by the West but rather as an "empire" with a responsibility to uphold law and order and accommodate a multi-confessional population by respecting their religious and cultural demands, in this case preventing presumably anti-gay and violence-prone Muslims from being provoked by homosexuals.

According to historian Dan Healey, the tripartite geographical imaginary of Russia situated in-between Europe and Asia enabled Russians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to imagine their nation as sexually pure and innocent, by contrasting it to the depraved sexual habits of "civilized" Europe on the one hand and to the uninhibited sexuality of a "primitive" Orient (embodied by Muslim-dominated regions in the Caucasus and Central Asia) on the other (Healey 2001: 251f). The Russian media discourse in 2013, in comparison, produced a sexual geography where Russia was awkwardly positioned between a "gay-friendly" West aggressively promoting sexual liberation, and an "anti-gay" Muslim Other, perceived as aggressively intolerant and hostile to cultural change. Curiously, the idea of the need to restrict gay rights out of respect for Russia's Muslims both mirrors and reverses the Western homonationalist narrative that Islam endangers the freedom and security of gays (Puar 2007). In both cases, the repression of one minority population is justified (by representatives of the majority) by the need to protect and respect another minority population. Thus, the sliding in dominant Russian discourse between the idea that gay rights contradict Russian "traditional values" and the idea that they are a security threat as they risk provoking Russia's Muslims, indicates that the LGBT question is entangled in multiple contradictory logics of cultural differentiation, and the dominant discourse less fixed and coherent than it may appear.

The reports of an anti-gay persecution wave in Chechnya in early 2017 appeared to confirm the fears expressed by Putin and others about homophobia among Russia's Muslims. Especially so since, according to

the first reports, the events had, apparently, been provoked by applications filed by a Russian LGBT organization to organize Pride marches in several cities in the North Caucasus, although it was soon revealed that the anti-gay campaign had been initiated several weeks before those applications were made (Milashina and Gordinenko 2017). The contradiction at the heart of sexuality discourse in Russia made possible an externalization of homophobia, allowing Russian officials to disavow anti-gay violence and position Russia as a force of order and civilization vis-à-vis "backwards" Chechnya. Crucially, such a disavowal conceals the political context in which the purges in Chechnya occurred. It overlooks that the events fit well into the pattern of how the Putin-supported Kadyrov regime represses groups perceived as threatening with silent approval from the Kremlin, as well as the general climate of searching for internal enemies in contemporary Russia, bolstered by projects such as the ban on "homosexual propaganda".

Conclusion: Beyond the "Gay Divide"

This chapter has examined how political regulations of "normal" and "deviant" sexualities are enmeshed in state projects of geopolitical boundary-making. It complements a literature that has hitherto often regarded homophobia from a more biopolitical perspective, that is, as tied to efforts to govern a national population and its future reproduction. Drawing on Russian media material about the 2013 law on "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships", and discussing the findings in light of the 2017 anti-gay campaign in Chechnya, I have made two claims. Firstly, that Russia's rejection of LGBT rights is a vital dimension of its efforts to profile Russia as a global leader of "traditional values", in the context of increased international polarization around sexuality politics. Secondly, that this project is characterized by an internal split produced by overlapping contradictory self-Other relations, positioning Russia as simultaneously a counterhegemonic actor resisting the West's enforcement of gay rights, *and* as a source of order and modernity in relation to Russia's own, purportedly homophobic, Muslim population.

Thus, despite the staunch and categorical anti-gay rhetoric of its political leaders, narratives on sexual rights in Russia are contradictory, unstable and subject to change. This has implications for global sexual politics, where the conflicts are often articulated in binary and civilizational terms by both proponents and opponents of LGBT rights, as Russian rhetoric on a gay war between Russia and the West is mirrored by Western accounts such as *The Economist*'s (2014) identification of a "gay divide" between countries that are "friendly to gays" and "parts of the world where it is not safe to be homosexual". The latter kind of model not just overlooks gray zones and internal stratifications of sexual politics but provides an unhelpful ground for global solidarity. As Joan Scott (2007: 19) argues, a worldview organized in simple oppositional terms is one we inhabit at our risk, because dichotomies blind us to complexities but also create their own realities, leaving no room for change or self-reflection. While providing assistance to local activists on the terms that they request is essential, international polarization and highly pitched condemnation campaigns may prompt further entrenched positions around sexual rights, closing avenues for dialogue and keeping queers as hostages in global power politics (Altman and Symons 2016: 157). As an alternative to viewing homophobia as indicative of cultural backwardness, we should, as suggested by Puar and Rai (2002), "disrupt the neat folding of queerness into narratives of modernity, patriotism and nationalism". Although popular attitudes to sexual diversity undoubtedly vary in different parts of the world, the recent upsurge of political homophobia in Russia (and most likely elsewhere) cannot be explained and addressed as simply a result of "lingering traditional attitudes" but as a decidedly *contemporary* negotiation of identity, security and political influence in a contested and unequal global order. If we regard fault lines of sexual politics not as primarily existing between, but *within* and *across* cultures, nation-states and regions, we will more likely be able to perceive similarities as well as differences between various local patterns of domination and resistance, which forms a firmer and more relevant starting point for political analysis and global solidarity.

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