Sexuality & Culture (2015) 19:275–296
DOI 10.1007/s12119-014-9268-8

ORIGINAL PAPER

Political Awareness and Self-Blame in the Explanatory Narratives of LGBT People Amid the Anti-LGBT Campaign in Russia

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Published online: 30 December 2014
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Abstract How do homo- and bisexual people explain the launch of a homophobia campaign that violates their basic human rights? Which narratives do they use to adjust to the hostile environment? On the basis of 77 in-depth problem-centered interviews with LGBT in Russia we explore the explanations they use to talk about their experience of a homophobia campaign. Respondents demonstrate their awareness of the political reasoning behind the campaign and explain it as a tool for electoral mobilization, the repression of pro-Western oriented opposition and as a part of biopolitical technologies adopted by the government to increase its control over people's bodies and minds. Contrary to intuitive expectations, this political awareness does not protect the informants from self-blame, social escapism and moral suffering.

Keywords LGBT · Homophobia · Anti-gay campaign in Russia · Narrative analysis · Protests in Russia

Introduction

Like any publicly expressed prejudice, homophobia is a complex cultural and psychological phenomenon rooted simultaneously in cultural values and public

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attitudes. While both are subject to change, the latter are more flexible compared to rigid collective cultural values and are easily manipulated by pro-harassment discourse or public mood shifts. Homophobia may be inherent to the traditional values of pre-modern and modern societies (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Inglehart and Norris 2009), but the exacerbation and intensification of its political component is usually connected with political reasoning, construction of the enemy and biopolitical technologies (Foucault 1995; Blasius 2001; Bernstein and Schaffner 2005).

While exhaustive research has been done to explore the impact of public state homophobia campaigns on the attitudes towards LGBT, few studies clarified whether LGBT people are aware of the political reasons behind such campaigns (Bosia and Weiss 2013). How do they explain the launch of a homophobia campaign that violates their basic human rights? Which narratives do they use to adjust to the hostile environment? On the basis of 77 in-depth problem-centered interviews with LGBT in Russia we fill this particular gap in the multidisciplinary literature on LGBT rights in authoritarian regimes.

Recent Russian history demonstrates how the coupling of politics and sexual stereotypes in hate campaigns is used by an authoritarian government to consolidate an electoral majority (Jongh 1992; Murphy 1992; Rothbauer and McKechnie 2000; Lipkin 2001). In post-Soviet Russia, homosexuality and other forms of non-heterosexuality officially ceased to be a crime (since 1996) or a medical problem (since 1999). However, from May 2006 to June 2013 anti-gay laws, aimed at "prohibition of non-traditional sexual relations among minors" (hereafter—"anti-gay law"), were adopted in ten out of eighty five Russian regions. In 2012–2013, these laws resulted in widespread homophobic propaganda which was largely supported by public opinion (Plotko 2013). While parliamentary leaders and their supporters justified the launch of the anti-gay campaign with their support for traditional sexual relations, motherhood and public morality, their public speeches mostly harassed LGBT people, reproducing the typical linkage between authoritarian values and homosexuality discrimination in Russia (Gessen 1994; Rotkirch 2000; Lahusen and Solomon 2008; Kondakov 2013). Thus, this paper complements recent studies on the politics enacted by authoritarian political regimes towards LGBT people [China, Iran, Zimbabwe, Indonesia and others (Blackwood 2007; Aggleton et al. 2012; Korycki and Nasirzadeh 2013)] and contributes to studies on the political consequences of LGBT rights violations (The Global Politics 2009; Not Such an International Human Rights Norm? 2014).

While using the political regime framework as the principal lens to explain unanticipated and sometimes hysterical attention directed by authoritarian governments to those who challenge an officially defined norm, we also refer to modernization theory and complimentary cultural shift theory to address the specificity of the Russian case (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Inglehart and Welzel 2009; Gerhards 2010). The "unfinished project" of Russian modernity, expressed in the combination of post-modern values of some advanced social groups with traditional values of other groups, led to a unique representation of the campaign in our respondents' discourse. Most of them are aware of the political reasoning of the anti-LGBT campaign, use well-articulated explanatory narratives, and address the

campaign with a certain skepticism. At the same time, they blame themselves for "not being normal".

Following recent studies on LGBT reactions to discriminatory laws, we initially assumed that the reactions of LGBT people to the campaign would vary from protest and an active struggle for rights to a decrease in sexual activity and an increase in feelings of shame and self-restraint (Cramer 2002; Carter 2004; Wehbi 2004; Burleson 2005; Eisenbach 2006; Brown 2006; Ochs and Rowley 2009). Our study indirectly confirms the wide variety of reactions through the analysis of the language of our respondents, but we did not implement a behaviorist design to observe the actual practices of respondents. The report on the campaign's effects on their social and sexual lives imply that personal awareness of the genuine reasons behind a hate campaign does not protect a person from depression, self-blame and the trauma of victimization.

The study is based on problem-centered interviews. We collected data in 2012–2013 using the snowball sampling method. The analysis is conducted on the basis of 77 in-depth interviews with homo-, bi-, and transsexuals up to 50 years of age from more than ten out of eighty five Russian regions.

First, we start with our theoretical framework and adopt the scholarships of anti-LGBT campaigns to the Russian case. Then we describe the recent homophobia campaign in Russia and explain the linkage between the declared state demographic and social policies and public homophobia. We follow by identifying narratives, using the functional narrative approach, in order to show how LGBT people in Russia address their understanding of the anti-gay campaign. Finally, we summarize the results in Table 1 and address the broader social question on how LGBT individuals' personal awareness of the political context of a campaign affects their well-being and self-esteem.

Theoretical Framework

The term "homophobia" was originally borrowed from social psychology; it is generally attributed to unchanneled aggression, unconscious homosexual desires or willingness to gain an in-group approval (Chandler and Munday 2011). Since 1970s the term has been heavily criticized for its irrelevance (Ritter and Terndrup 2002; Ritter 2011) and was then supplanted by the term heterosexism ("Cultural ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma by denying and denigrating any non-heterosexual forms of behavior, identity, relationship, or community" Herek 2004, p. 16). While the latter is defined as an ideology close to racism and chauvinism, homophobia is a sort of sexual prejudice, fear or hate of non-heterosexual orientations, which falls under the umbrella of xenophobia—the irrational aversion and rejection of something strange and incomprehensible. Since we study the respondents' reaction to a public hate campaign consistent with a broader shift of public opinion towards traditional heterosexual attitudes, it *would* be more theoretically correct to address the campaign as heterosexist rather than homophobic. However, our respondents perceived the campaign as homophobic and the campaign had been identified as homophobic in social media. Thus, we hereafter use the term "homophobia,"

Table 1 Narrative analysis results

	"Self-blaming"	"It's not about sex"	"Revenge through provocation"
Narrative assumptions	I must support the campaign, because: It is supported by the majority It concerns family values I blame myself for being the other/alien in society	I do not support the campaign, because it is aimed at repression of opposition; LGBT—a mean, not a goal	I am abused by homophobia and I am going to defend my right to be other Very explicit narrative of "provocative response to campaign"
Narrative structure	(1) the campaign is initiated by political reasoning; (2) my homosexuality is a threat to the society's stability/morality/family values; (3) my inability to get used to the social norms is exclusively my fault because the majority of Russians do not traditionally tolerate homosexuality	(1) this campaign is a political tool and has nothing to do with health care or demographic concerns; (2) the real goal of the campaign is an enemy image exploitation/repression of pro-Western opposition/split of the protest movement; (3) the campaign does not appeal to my sexual identity and I perceive it as a citizen rather than a gay/a lesbian/…	(1) the campaign is not limited to LGBT harassment, its final target is pro-Western opposition; (2) still, the discriminatory rhetorics and public attacks on LGBT are unacceptable and offensive; (3) LGBT must actively resist to the campaign and protest/convince their inner circle/make a coming-out/provoke the society with sexually explicit behavior
Sexual identity	Respondent accepts her/his sexual orientation, but blames her/himself for being other	Respondent perceives the campaign through the lens of her/his political identity rather than sexual orientation	Respondent opposes the campaign, being abused as LGBT person
Functions of narratives	Tension reduction	Resolution of dilemmas	Solving problems
Connection with Hirschman's strategies	Loyalty	Exit	Voice

referring to public discourse rather than micro-level social aggression, to make the terminology consistent with collected evidence.

State-provoked (i.e., political) homophobia is a complex phenomenon usually described with a combination of structural (particular type of culture, religion, economic situation) and agential factors. As recent studies suggest, structural factors might be more important, since the rhetoric and practices of state homophobia have striking similarities within different cultures and regimes (Bosia 2013). The political reasoning behind the Russian homophobia campaign was explicitly investigated in recent studies and classic research (Johnson 2011; Martinez 2012; Pecherskaya 2013; Polsdofer 2014; Wilkinson 2014). With certain limitations, Russian political anti-gay campaigns are similar to Soviet anti-homosexual discourse. The framing

and discourse of similar campaigns in other post-Soviet countries—picturing homophobia as a threat to cultural identity and the political integrity of a nation—proves the importance of political factors alongside psychological values (Graff 2010).

Michel Foucault's legacy inspired scholars to analyze the social policy of the state in terms of biopolitical technologies, utilized to control the bodies and minds of the "human mass" in order to consolidate power through sexual control (Foucault 1988, 1990a, b). Disciplinary and biopolitical powers intend to deindividualize and to separate the body from the personality (Foucault 1975, 1995). Although the biopolitics framework explains the actions of the contemporary Russian government (Kondakov 2013) and allows us to interpret the logic of sexual discrimination through the lens of state demographic concerns, it does not exhaustively explain the linkage between public hate campaigns and political consolidation of the electorate. Thus, we marry the biopolitics literature with political science research on symbolic politics (Brysk 1995; Smyth and Soboleva 2014).

The origins of the "homosexuality prohibition" campaign and homophobia in Russia in general could be examined through the lens of four theoretical traditions (Kourany 1987; Rothbauer and McKechnie 2000; Kaplan 2004). The first group of explanations emphasizes the traditionalism and revanchism trends in Russian society (Wilkinson 2014, p. 367). One part of the argumentation appeals to the high level of intolerance inherent to Russian society (Hadler 2012; Magun and Rudnev 2012); another—to the "Soviet syndrome" in Russian politics and the "Soviet trauma" in Russian sexology. From this point of view, homophobia is interpreted as an integral part of GULAG subculture, where anal penetration was used as a method of dominance demonstration (see Baer 2009, pp. 37–38) and thus received certain negative connotations in mass culture.

The second group of arguments puts at the cornerstone of the argument the idea of electorate consolidation and the formation of a political coalition through the symbolic politics of authoritarian governments (Smyth and Soboleva 2014). Through this lens the recent public homophobia campaign becomes a part of the broader political struggle for a new conservative majority based on the exploitation of the image of the enemy (Holzhacker 2012).

The third group is partly connected with the biopolitical argument, linking redistribution practices of governments and strict control over the population with the consolidation of the electorate with the ruling elite (bureaucrats and technocrats). Overall, the discussion considers the Russian case as a typical one for biopolitical technologies usage. The authoritarian government creates new patterns of norms and deviance through birth and abortion control, health and death (i.e., smoking and euthanasia) regulation. In line with this logic, gay sex is forbidden as it is for pleasure rather than reproduction and thus serves as a "dangerous sign of individualism" (Pilkington 1996, p. 102). The case of Lithuania 2010 is analyzed in (Davydova 2012).

The fourth theoretical tradition connects the launch of the homophobia campaign with the revival of religious consciousness and the neo-conservative turn (Kon 1995, 1997, 2003, 2010; Tuller 1996; Pilkington 1996, 2002; Zhuk 1998; Essig

1999; Gal and Kligman 2000; Klein 2000, 2002; Lipkin 2001; Rotkirch 2004; Baer 2009). These processes, in their turn, are linked with the empowerment of a conservative lobby which publicly associates itself with Christian values. Social surveys show that 38 % of Russians do not intend to discuss sexuality with their children (VCIOM 2009) and 62 % are not ready to raise any sexual issues with their children until they are 18–24 (Marriages and divorces 2009). Russian homophobic discourse is highly normative since it disciplines the society by separating norms and deviance (Foucault 1990a). The pattern of "permitted" sexual behavior in Russia is strictly conservative and does not leave any opportunity for alternative behavior (Gessen 1994; Temkina 2008). In sum, the homophobic discourse is a reaction to the challenges the idea of homosexuality poses to social norms and traditional and orthodox family values.

Given the abovementioned argumentation, the homophobia campaign in Russia could be attributed to (1) post-Soviet trauma, (2) electoral purposes, (3), biopolitical technologies aimed at controlling minds through the implementation of body control and (4) neo-conservative values of the ruling elite. In our research we compare these arguments with vivid real-life explanations provided by our respondents. As demonstrated in the further sections of the paper, most interviewees are aware of these argumentations and express their solidarity with them.

The 2012–2013 Anti-LGBT Campaign

Since the start of the federal level anti-gay campaign,[1] the public discourse component has been more prominent than the actual implementation of the law. Some experts attribute this to the vagueness of the language with which the law is formulated (i.e., no concrete definition of "homosexual propaganda" has been explicitly presented by the campaign's initiators). We provide a brief summary of the campaign's consequences to provide readers with better contextual understanding.

The Geneva Conference Report (as of July 2014) on the situation of LGBT people in Russia mentioned 12 cases of violations, 8 cases of hate speech and manifestations of intolerance, 13 cases of infringement of the right to freedom of assembly and association, 15 cases of legislation prohibiting so-called "homosexual propaganda," its implementation and attempts, and 17 cases of problems in legal recognition of transgender persons' gender identities (Kirichenko and Kozlovskaya 2014). Among the unreported cases is the widespread bullying of LGBT people. This includes queer teenagers being videotaped and publicly shamed (in person and online). Some online groups, inspired by the anti-LGBT campaign and focused on this form of bullying, are still active in Russian social networks.

Other groups take their harassment of LGBT groups beyond the online sphere. For instance, the Muslim non-governmental organization "Dejstviye" ("Action") is engaged in the harassment of homosexuals and LGBT-friendly people. The

[1] The Federal Law of 29.06.2013 № 135-FZ adds to the Administrative Code the Article on "Promotion of non-traditional sexual relations among juveniles." Remarkable, that in the law propaganda or promotion is defined as "the formation of unconventional sexual settings, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations among juvenile".

organization focuses on searching for and shaming homosexual teachers in schools and colleges. Orthodox activists have also actively supported the campaign, although the official position of the Russian Orthodox Christian Church was limited to mere solidarity with campaign priorities and values.

Among our 77 interviewees, three respondents were physically attacked on the basis of their sexual orientation. While the possibilities of generalizing from this qualitative sample are limited, one of our respondents noted, “people feel that aggression against the LGBT community has been sanctioned [by the government]”.

While a few incidents of physical harassment of gay people were finally identified as direct consequences of the campaign (Table 2), we would like to also emphasize the importance of the moral harassment record. Though it is difficult to create an empirical model for this type of persecution, we have been able to detect it through in-depth interviews with our respondents. As studies of Gay Pride in Serbia in 2009 (Johnson 2012) and Lithuania in 2010 (Davydova 2012) suggest, the moral consequences of such campaigns are also extremely important and significant for LGBT people. A brief analysis of the campaign demonstrates the prevalence of political components in anti-LGBT discourse. The most significant case of LGBT hate speech is connected with the local anti-LGBT campaign at St. Petersburg. The author of the bill, “United Russia” deputy Vitaly Milonov, expressed his position in statements like: “Gay Pride… is a type of mental disorder,” “The comparison of the union between man and woman with a sinful animalistic act…” (Tserkov 2012), “Do you know that 80 % of pedophiles are homosexual? I’m telling you from experience!” (Voskresnyj vecher c Vladimirom Solov’yovym 2013, 29:57). Judging by many similar statements, Milonov considers non-heterosexual people mentally ill, sinful and abnormal. Moreover, identifying normality with Orthodox Christian values, the deputy is discriminating against other religions and atheism where homosexuality is considered a norm.

Another noteworthy case is presented by the discourse of Elena Mizulina, Chairman of the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs. Mizulina explains the shaming of the LGBT community by highlighting the demographic priorities of the Russian nation: “Regarding same-sex couples… How can they have kids? They cannot reproduce themselves. So, they need orphans. They are interested in orphanhood. Keen in the existence of orphanages. It is impossible to refute this thesis”. (Mizulina 2013) Other politicians proclaimed their solidarity with Mizulina’s argument: “Tolerance? Go to hell! Faggots should be torn apart, and the shreds should be thrown to the wind!” [Governor of Tambov Region in 2008 (Vorsobin 2008)], “A normal family is a man and a woman, everything else is unconventional, it’s wrong!”, “Someone showed me a queer once, I still remember it” [deputies of the State Duma in 2013 (Rossii seksa 2013)].

President Putin also expressed his positive attitude toward the law and the campaign during his international trip to Finland in June 2013: “As for prohibiting homosexual propaganda, this is not about imposing any kind of sanctions against homosexuality … This is about protecting children from this type of information … we will be imposing restrictions in our nation, as the State Duma deputies have decided. We ask you not to interfere in our regulations” (News conference 2013).

Table 2 The campaign events and their consequences

Date	Event	Consequences/Results
Mar. 2012–2013	Three Moscow gays were killed and one was injured by three robbers from the North Caucasus	In February of 2014 murderers were sentenced to 25, 24 and 9 years in prison
Apr. 2012	LGBT activist was arrested for the single picket against this law	In May the court found him guilty. The sentence was the first official law implementation
Jan. 2013	21-year-old Moscow gay was murdered	In April 2014 both murderers were imprisoned for 17 and 16 years
June 2013	According to the Federal law, LGBT activist was arrested in Kazan for the single picket against this law	In December the court found him guilty
Nov. 2013	The pogrom in office of LGBT organization "La sky" in St. Petersburg	An activist had severe eye injuries. The court refused to qualify the crime as homophobic
Nov. 2013	During the "preventive work" in Bryansk the Commission on Juvenile found a lesbian student guilty for her "non-traditional" sexual orientation and her public propaganda of "social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relations"	In January 2014 the charges were dropped by the local prosecutors and member of State Duma
Dec. 2013	Famous actor and orthodox activist Ivan Okhlobystin on his concert in Novosibirsk proposed to burn gays in furnaces	In March 2014 the court refused to qualify the crime as homophobic
Dec. 2013	Murder of gay in Kemerovo	The court agreed to qualify the crime as homophobic
Jan. 2014	In Nizhny Novgorod region 51-year-old man killed the guest of his own birthday. The murderer suspected the guest to be gay	N/A
Jan. 2014	Deputy of the St. Petersburg Assembly Vitaly Milonov initiated proceedings against Lena Klimova, organizer of the community "Children-404—Not Found", where LGBT teens could receive the peer support and share their stories	In February the Court of Nizhny Tagil dismissed the case. Milonov promised to continue his fight with the site
Feb. 2014	Orthodox activists picketed against the LGBT Olympic games	N/A
Mar. 2014	In Irkutsk on St. Patrick's Day boys in kilts were attacked	N/A
Mar. 2012–2013	Three Moscow gays were killed and one was injured by three robbers from the North Caucasus	In February of 2014 murderers were sentenced to 25, 24 and 9 years in prison

As the examples imply, the discourse on sexuality is replaced by discourse on reproduction, and the discussion on demographic problems is replaced by speculation about national security (Baer 2009). The discursive part of the

homophobia campaign was incomparably more important to its initiators than its actual implementation (e.g., Persson 2014). The campaign itself was planned as an information signal to the West, as a part of new Russian propaganda about the return to traditional values. In the next section we show that LGBT people understood the message of the campaign but reacted to it in a variety of ways.

Empirical Analysis

The principal purpose of our interviews was to find out (1) whether LGBT people understand the political reasoning behind the campaign; (2) if they do not, what explanatory narratives do they construct to explain its launch?; (3) if they do, does this awareness help them to resist the moral pressure caused by the campaign? The interview guide thus included questions about their attitude towards campaign, their explanation of the campaign and their subjective perception of change in their own behavior (whether they noted any changes, to include whether they explain these changes by government actions), and how they behave and feel while the campaign is ongoing.

Our interview guide was designed in the problem-centered interview format, since we were interested in both the biographical data of our respondents and their insider opinions on the homophobia campaign (Scheibelhofer 2008). The main advantage of this interview collection method is the ability to conduct a narrative interview (which was extremely important in terms of our research goal) simultaneously with structured discussion on the particular issue. The problem-centered interview method imposes certain limitations on the research design. Particularly, the interviewees are expected to have extensive knowledge about the problem (Witzel and Reiter 2012, p. 5). In the case of our respondents this assumption is satisfied, because our interviewees possess explicit information on the problem and are able to discuss their biographical data, which is relevant and meaningful to the analysis.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face by the authors. They last from 1 to 3 h (with a median of 2.3 h). Since the interviews were conducted under conditions of anonymity, we specify only sexual orientation, age and the general place of residence of the respondents. These characteristics were significant on order to correctly interpret the interviewees' response to the campaign.

Research Design and Data Collection

The first part of the unstructured guide included a broad discussion about the individual's sexual experience, personal understanding of intimacy and publicity, their coming-out decision, integration in LGBT-networks, personal attitudes toward Russian stereotypes and norms. The reported biographical details were not dramatically different from the basic cultural norms inherent to the Russian society (Mackay 2001; Temkina 2008). The second part of the interview was more structured and included specific questions on the campaign. In the majority of interviews, more time was devoted to personal reactions to the homophobia

Table 3 Biographic Data

	All respondents	Homosexual respondents	Bisexual respondents
Number of interviews	77	49	28
Sex (as answered)	43—female	29—female	14—female
	33—male	19—male	14—male
	1—other (trans- and intersexuals)	1—other (trans- and intersexuals)	
Age, (years)	25.97 (5.95)	26.17 (6.86)	25.66 (4.62)
First sexual experience, years, numbers	25—spontaneous homosexual	21—spontaneous homosexual	7—spontaneous heterosexual
	24—planned homosexual	19—planned homosexual	10—planned heterosexual
Age of first homosexual experience, years[a]	17.32 (3.75)	17.01 (3.76)	17.77 (3.83)
Age of LGBT orientation awareness, years[a]	16 (5.12)	14.41 (4.85)	18.04 (4.56)

[a] The first number is an average; the second in parentheses is the standard deviation

campaign than to the biographical background discussion. All interviewees were aware of the campaign's details.

We collected 77 interviews with LGBT people in various Russian regions using snowball sampling after the campaign had started at the national level (from the introduction of legislative initiative by the Legislative Assembly of Novosibirsk region to the State Duma in March 2012 till June 2013). Their biographic data is presented in Table 3. First, we found, through the thematic networks (forums, social media, LGBT clubs), a number of homosexual people (seeds) within several regions characterized by different economic development and cultural specifics.[2] We asked these people for the contact information of their LGBT friends who would be interested in the study. Then these further interviewees provided us with the contacts of other acquaintances. Because of the use of a multiple snowball sample, the LGBT network of our sample was not dense and well-organized, and each respondent had approximately 1–3 LGBT acquaintances.

Despite our intention to recruit the interviewees from culturally, economically and politically different regions, we had to exclude conservative, predominantly Muslim regions of the North Caucasus. The potential interviewees from those regions refused to give anonymous interviews, being concerned about their personal privacy and safety. As a result, our sample is slightly more liberal than expected because we excluded the representatives of regions with strong culturally based

[2] The interview seeds were originally settled in large cities such as St. Petersburg and Moscow and small towns in the South (Krasnodar), the Far East (Primorsky Region), the Povolzhye (Kirov Region, Udmurtia Republic, Samara Region), the Ural Mountains (Khanty-Mansiysk Region) and the Central part of Russia (Moscow Region). The responses of our regional interviewees significantly differ from the residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg. The former expressed a relatively deeper concern about sexual freedom and reported the discrimination more frequently, and expressed their concern for the safety of their LGBT partners.

homophobia. The majority of interviewees has never been subjected to forced homosexuality treatment (by psychotherapist, sexologist, psychiatrist), and about two-thirds have never faced physical violence in public places. These figures might have been lower if we could have conducted research in the most conservative regions of Russia.

Since political awareness can be connected with LGBT activism, we specifically asked our respondents whether they regularly participate in any political and civil events in order to fight for LGBT rights. In our sample the ratio of association members to non-activists was approximately 1:6. With few exceptions, the responses of activists were not essentially different from non-activists.

While we interviewed some bisexual and transsexual people, most our interviewees were homosexual (see Table 3). We balanced the selection of interviewees this way because the government has focused the campaign directly on "homosexual behavior".

Most of our interviewees come from single-parent families and have no regular contact with their parents. The majority had their first sexual experience at 17–18. The age of awareness of their sexual orientation varies from 14 (for homosexuals) to 18 (for bisexuals). Our interviewees remembered that their first homosexual arousal in their teens scared themselves, their parents and classmates. Even without a government campaign against homosexuality, some of them tried to persuade themselves to be "normal" and choose the "traditional" orientation, drawing support from psychologists or autosuggestion. Their first sexual experience partially clarified their doubts, but many of the interviewees have spent years trying to understand why they are not attracted to the opposite sex. It is important to note that the government campaign against homosexuality causes serious psychological damage to this particular social group, marginalizing 14-year-olds struggling with sexual awareness.

Most of the interviewees follow the principle "don't ask—don't tell". Their choice not to make a coming-out is dictated by the desire to protect themselves from possible attacks by conservative and homophobic people. Our interviewees described their life-stories about successfully coping with a potentially dangerous situation related to close physical contact (e.g., at a hostel, army service, long lasted expeditions) as situations where they tried to behave "like normal people". Their desire to avoid public aggression is combined with the desire to protect their friends and loved ones from the "difficult knowledge":

> I was afraid to tell my grandmother [that I have a girlfriend] because she is a very religious person who regularly attends the church. But she accepted it easily. Love, she said, was the main Christian virtue. (Lesbian, 25, large city)

> People, they all react differently. When I saw that there was a person who would take it as an offense [my orientation]… I decided to make everything into a joke. (Gay, 19, small town)

> [When I participate in an expedition], I live with men at the same camp and I behave a little bit differently. I take control of myself, of the intonation of my

> voice because I absolutely do not want them to be aware of my orientation. But the difference in my behavior between this community and the group of my close friends is actually minimal. (Gay, 25, large city)

Explanatory Narratives

We analyze the interviews following the guidelines for narrative analysis. We treat narratives as social constructs that are produced by LGBT respondents in the specific context of hostile homophobic discourse. The most important research outcome is a clarification of “the interpretive devices through which people represent themselves and their worlds to themselves and to others” (Lawler 2002, p. 242) and explanation of their own view on the campaign. This approach is focused on the role of these narratives in our respondents’ lives. The advantages of narrative analysis for this particular research purpose are obvious: through asking the interviewees to talk about their life experiences during the campaign, we encourage them to structure their personal world, rationalize their role in the campaign, and reconstruct their identities.

To focus the analysis on events and their role in respondents’ world rather than structure of the narrative, we rely on the principles of functional narrative analysis (e.g., Bruner 1990). Following Bruner’s recommendations, we analyze the perception of the campaign as a gap between the ordinary and the exceptional. Unlike in classical narrative analysis, we switch the focus from informants’ stories to the events embedded in these stories, although the subjectively defined context of events and structural analysis of the narrative remain relevant to the analysis. While analyzing the evidence, we also were sensitive to the discourse used by the respondents; however, as the conceptual boundaries of narrative and discourse analysis are often blurred (Riessman 2005, 2008), we do not provide an exhaustive discourse analysis in this paper.

As a result, we were able to reconstruct three typical narratives which are discussed in the next chapter. It is worth noting that the narratives are not mutually exclusive. Some respondents expressed their story about the campaign in a form of a hybridic, combined narrative. However, most of the interviewees have used a narrative which can be quite unambiguously attributed to one of the ideal types.

Narratives

The structure of the first narrative implies that the informant accepts her or his homo- or bisexuality but considers it as a deviation from the norm and thus engages in self-blame. The explanation of the campaign includes three consistent points: (1) the campaign is initiated by political reasoning; (2) my homosexuality is a threat to the society’s stability/morality/family values; (3) my inability to get used to the social norms is exclusively my fault because the majority of Russians do not traditionally tolerate homosexuality. The second and third parts of this narrative actually reproduce the political propaganda. This narrative is pervaded among those members of the LGBT community who have spent most of their lives in a conservative rigid environment. These respondents are victims of typical

homophobic stereotypes. They are not open in their families; even if they are, the parents usually abandon their "non-traditional" children. This group may be conditionally labeled as *Self-blaming*. Even if the informant in the narrative suffers from exclusion from the in-group, she or he considers it normal,

> I am a believer. And this law ruined my relationship with the church, so to speak. They hammered the idea that it is sin–sin–sin, that I can no longer go to church. As in the past people were excommunicated from the church, I am feeling kind of outside society. And here it is the same. To me it was important, and here it is as if I was kicked out. (Lesbian, 23, large city)

In the narrative our respondents express their solidarity with the position of the majority and recognize the pervading cultural norms as dominant over individual's own values. The arguments presented by the interviewees were highly submissive and built around the following thesis in different but recurring forms:

> If we have a democracy, we have to obey the majority rule. And if the majority is for conservative values, then why should I resist? (Gay, 26, large city)

> People in Russia are very conservative, and it is clear why they treat gays like this, it's okay. (Gay, 25, large city)

> If we officially accept gay marriages and children [adopted by LGBT], what would become of these children? How are they going to understand all this? (Bisexual man, 26, large city)

Even before the campaign started, these respondents had learned to think and behave in a socially acceptable, in their view, way. Thus their explanation of campaign was logically flawed: on the one hand, they admitted the discriminatory nature of the campaign; on the other, they agreed with its declared goals and priorities, switching to self-blame for the inability "to be normal". Among the reported reasons of conformism, the respondents mentioned the fear for their partner and the conviction that homophobia is a democratic convention of the majority.

The second narrative, which was spread among the majority of respondents, could be labeled as "It's not about sex". Its general structure includes the following arguments: (1) this campaign is a political tool and has nothing to do with health care or demographic concerns; (2) the real goal of the campaign is the exploitation of the image of the enemy/repression of pro-Western opposition/split of the protest movement; (3) the campaign does not appeal to my sexual identity and I perceive it as a citizen rather than a gay/a lesbian.

Most of the respondents who preferred the second narrative were around 30 years old and had a constant partner. Having a relatively stable and well-established life, these interviewees were tackling their property and family issues within the gaps of the existing legal framework. Within this narrative the campaign was pictured as an extraordinary yet not exceptional event. This explanatory narrative was extremely pervasive (and we would suggest conducting quantitative research to see whether it could be considered as the prevailing one). The informants reported that before and during the campaign they were planning their personal lives, trying to minimize

their economic, political and social dependence on the state. They limit their communication to tolerant people and gay-friendly companies, carefully select job markets and neighborhoods and practice a specific form of social escapism.

The idea of "invisibility" is a noteworthy part of the narrative. Our homosexual respondents try to be "invisible" (see Baer 2009; Tuller 1996 for the detailed discussion of "invisibility" in LGBT discourse) for the government which tries to interfere in their lives. Discussing the real purpose of the campaign, respondents have named their "invisibility" as a reliable protection from state aggression. Moreover, as interviewees suggest, since the authorities expect a reaction of LGBT's to the law, the only politically effective response strategy is the absence of reaction and further distance from state officials.

The abovementioned argument was repeatedly expressed by interviewees in identical phrases:

> All these idiotic laws are passed for some reason. And all these people who begin to react hysterically simply "execute the party program" [meet the expectations of the authorities]. They [LGBT] are frightened. I cannot say that I do not see the touch of authoritarianism in all this. But there is no need to respond. (Lesbian, 30, large city)

> The authorities expect a reaction. And to provide them with this desirable response means to behave in the expected way. (Gay, 35, large city)

> To be honest, my behavior in general has not changed. I still live as I want to, I behave accordingly with my internal assumptions, moral, fundamental values… I'm not going to be forced by society. (Gay, 20, small town)

When they were asked about the essence of their "independence" from the state, respondents talked about (1) their economic independence and (2) their political independence (most of them identified their political position as critical and oppositional). The resolution of legal issues related to household matters (property issues, health care, etc.) is usually managed without government assistance.

> If necessary, we can always arrange everything [buying the apartment together etc.]. Notarized, legally. No problem, it can be done. (Lesbian, 30, large city)

> Is there a kind of marriage contract in Russia, but without marriage? In general, it is very simple thing to do: a special agreement is made, it's just you do not write "husband" or "wife," but define specifically the share in the apartment, your legal responsibilities and so on… All this hype about the [impossibility of] adoption of children: gays and lesbians have adopted children and they will adopt them after the campaign. Another thing is how it can be now organized considering the specific issue of removal of children… I do not plan to have a child in the nearest future. However if I decide to, I will do the adoption carefully to exclude any chance that state bodies will take my child away [because I am gay]. (Gay, 27, small town)

> Even when we [me and my wife] give birth to a child… everything can be solved. In some situations we will pretend [that we are sisters or friends]. In

> some situations we will hide [from the state]. All this can be solved. (Lesbian, 31, large city)

No one, however, mentioned any independence from social pressure and heterosexist stereotypes. Thus, apparent “independence” is a protective illusion constructed by respondents to adapt to a highly stressful life under discriminatory pressure. Their careful selection of close friends could be interpreted as a strong social escapism. The respondents showed a form of logical dissonance: they emphasized that the campaign was merely political and was not aimed at sexual discrimination of the LGBT community (being focused on opposition in general), and at the same time they tried to explain to us how their independence and invisibility from state secure their private lives. If the campaign indeed was “not about sex,” why did they feel the necessity to be secure? Even if they perceive homophobia as social phenomenon, and attribute it to the national culture and the observed homophobic behavior to the general level of aggressiveness, they still remain victims of this phenomenon.

Their escapism also results in passive political behavior: being critical toward the ruling power, the respondents do not see any available opportunities to improve the situation. Rejecting the actual social pressure they constantly live under, the interviewees are not able to find ways to struggle for their rights.

> I do not require any social rights and guarantees. I do not see the need…. It would be desirable if basic rights were preserved. Because I can see that they are taken away. (Gay, 27, small town)

> I do not care about the situation. Since last year, I have lived with my girlfriend. With my real love. We tried to figure out some problems. When we did not find the answers [i.e., ways to solve the problems], we started considering the “exit” option [emigration], but then we solved everything. (Bisexual woman, 21, large city)

The third explanatory narrative (“Revenge through provocation”) is structurally different from the others. While the first narrative is organized as a passive acceptance of government-provoked discrimination as consistent with the will of majority, the third one is based on the active and conscious resistance to pressure and harassment. While the second one implies indifference to the government hate speeches as they are irrelevant to LGBT real-life experience, the third insist that even if the heterosexist discourse is used in order to split the opposition rather than to repress LGBT people, they still need to react. This narrative is also very flexible: starting with the idea of political context of the campaign, it develops a broad variety of conclusions and implied actions. Some interviewees even called for “revolutionary actions” and the “urgent need for political protest”. Thus, the structure of the narrative could be summarized as: (1) the campaign is not limited to LGBT harassment, as its final target is the pro-Western opposition; (2) still, the discriminatory rhetoric and public attacks on LGBT are unacceptable and offensive; (3) LGBT must actively resist to the campaign and protest/convince their close friends/make a coming-out/provoke the society with sexually explicit behavior.

The protest options are interpreted differently; some imply as political protest forms of provocative and fearless personal behavior, to include “holding hands” (apparently, the most important sign of bravery for our respondents):

> I go with my girlfriend, holding her hand, and we see a crowd of roughnecks. She’s scared, but I do not let her drop my hand: it is they who must get out of my way! (Lesbian, 25, large city)

> Right now I just do not have a guy but when I will, I will go with him holding hands! Everywhere! I will kiss him, when and where I want! (Gay, 24, small town)

> With respect to my peers I became more intolerant. I used to close my eyes, filter out all sorts of jokes about homosexuals. In general, I could remain silent. And now I cannot – now I want to them understand clearly that [these jokes are] unacceptable. (Gay, 24, large city)

Still, this narrative also has certain logical flaws. The most remarkable one is connected with the ambiguous role of sexual identity. On the one hand, the narrative implies the acceptance of the identity and even the determination to make it public. On the other hand, the “revenge” or “provocation” desire was framed in terms of political protest rather than gender or sexual justice demands. The interviewees identified themselves with political opposition instead of LGBT community. Moreover, some of them were skeptical about LGBT activists, labelling them as “inadequate fanatics who distract the society from real problems of LGBT community”. This attitude to, in fact, their own public lawyers and representatives could be explained in several ways.

First, LGBT activists prefer inadequate methods of struggle:

> I do not see any sense in this aggressive manifestation of yourself, fighting for special rights. It is necessary to fight for universal rights, not special ones. And not by protest. (Bisexual woman, 22, large city)

> To go out and shout that “I have sex with a man” – it’s just nonsense. These people earn political points. (Gay, 19, small town)

> We need to change the frontmen of the LGBT movement… we cannot just shout that we are queers: give us our rights immediately! It provokes nothing but pity. (Gay, 31, small town)

Second, these informants claim that LGBT activists fence themselves off from society. Many interviewees proposed that the LGBT fight for universal human and civil rights rather than protect only the special needs of LGBT (which again marks a gap between political position and sexual identity):

> I was always amazed by that position of double standards! We should perhaps finally decide – do we want to be like everybody or do we want to be something special? (Gay, 24, large city)

> You do not need to segregate yourself by demonstrating only your requests, your selfishness. We must say that we care about civil rights in general. (Bisexual woman, 25, large city)

> What kind of hypocrisy – to fight for the rights of a minority, when all the civil rights in the country are in principle violated? (Gay, 24, large city)

> Why to fight?… Such an approach is wrong. It seems to separate us from the people. No need to do this in principle. Everyone needs the same law, the question is what should be on the agenda. (Gay, 19, small town)

Other interviewees also suggested "to create LGBT sport-sections," "centers for utilities, cleaning the streets," "helping old people," "conducting human rights work," "fighting against discrimination" (aggregated ideas from several regions), to establish "links between the fight against homophobia and the fight for freedom and democracy in Russia… An alliance of LGBT and illegal migrants". (Gay, 28, large city)

Thus, the third narrative explains the campaign as a political attack on LGBT activists and mobilizes them to strike back. However, when explaining the campaign through the narrative of revenge and provocation, some respondents switch from the initial idea of a struggle for LGBT rights to a general, broader idea of human rights violations in Russia and their personal responsibility as a minority to fight for the rule of law and respect for *all* minorities.

The narrative is uniformly presented in different social, age and gender groups of our sample. The most important common feature of the informants who used it is probably their political activism and awareness. They regard the LGBT protests as an integral part of broader protest movement in Russia, and the most adequate response to pressure is neither to self-blame nor to search for compromisable ways of living under pressure but rather to formulate political demands and to present sexuality as a political argument.

Discussion

Being a qualitative study, our paper has certain limitations. The main ones are that the paper focuses on individual experience under the anti-gay campaign rather than exploring the community in general or testing the reasons that explain the preference of one narrative type over another.

The three *ideal type* narratives are different in structure yet common in their principal assumption: the campaign was not targeted at the LGBT community and did not contribute to demographic and health care politics; its main political purpose was to discredit the pro-Western part of Russian society, to split the opposition electoral consolidation through the exploitation of the image of the enemy. Differences in the actions prescribed by the narratives could be interpreted as inherent to the structure of narrative (according to Bruner 1990). The "Self-blame" narrative corresponds to the function of "tension reduction" (the campaign did not have any real harassment intentions, it was just the majority's will); the "It's not about sex" narrative adopts the "resolution of dilemmas" function (there is no dilemma between minorities and civil rights—the campaign was aimed at the latter so LGBT should not overreact); and the "Revenge through provocation" narrative

implies the "problem-solving" function (the price of collective protest actions is lower than threats from discrimination).

Another way to interpret the typical narratives is their remarkable similarity to the exit, voice and loyalty theory of Albert Hirschman.[3] Future research could benefit from testing whether the preference for a particular narrative is consistent with a corresponding type of behavior (i.e., whether those who explain the campaign with the self-blame narrative are determined to adopt a loyalty strategy). Such a behavior-centered research design may clarify which factors hindered the active social protest of the most radical of the LGBT community and explain the failure to organize coordinated collective action.

The intriguing logical fallacies in the narratives deserve further investigation. As we have mentioned, most informants are aware of the political reasoning of the anti-LGBT campaign and use well-articulated explanatory narratives. They provide reasonable argumentation and address the campaign with a certain skepticism. At the same time, however, most of them blame themselves for "not being normal" or suffer from social pressure and escapism. We could suggest that this form of cognitive dissonance could be named among the most serious moral violations caused by the campaign. The first and second narrative can be seen as *mechanisms of dehumanization*: our respondents deny their own rights for a comfortable life and perceive the common ignorance of their problems as the normal social status quo:

> I do not think that people anywhere, in any small town, are really concerned with this problem. (Gay, 28, large city)

> If it turns out to divert attention, it will only be for a short while. Once the discussion vanishes, society returns to the status quo. (Gay, 21, large city)

Further research is needed to clarify whether the explanatory narratives used by LGBT are consistent with their behavioral practices. Originally we were determined to locate behavior change alongside with discursive reactions, but a more direct observation of intimate practices of our respondents was ethically complicated. Because no large-scale studies of LGBT in Russia had been conducted after the campaign started, we did not have any data about the possible types of LGBT reactions. Therefore, the methodological framework of our research was chosen to satisfy the requirements of constructivist paradigm: if we cannot observe someone's behavior, we may try to find out their explanation for some event.

Conclusion

The paper explores how LGBT people in Russia explain the launch of the recent homophobia campaign. The broad social problem we raise with this paper is the awareness of the LGBT community of the political reasoning which lies behind the

[3] According to his popular typology (Hirschman 1970), the change in any organization policy results in three general reactions: to exit the organization, to claim the reform or to accept it without complaints. The typology was proved to be complete and applicable to the political science needs (Hirschman 1978), being adjusted to typical political reactions.

anti-gay campaign and the individual consequences of this awareness. Scholarly literature emphasizes the importance of homophobia campaigns in nation-building, the electoral situation, a nationalistic agenda and other political issues. In this paper we show that LGBT people are also aware of these arguments but nonetheless do not escape victim-blaming and self-harassment while talking about their understanding of the Russian homophobia campaign.

On the basis of 77 problem-oriented interviews we identified three typical narratives. In all of them informants demonstrate their awareness of the political reasoning behind the campaign and explain it as a tool for electoral mobilization, the repression of pro-Western oriented opposition and as a part of biopolitical technologies adopted by the government to increase its control over people's bodies and minds. However, contrary to intuitive expectations, this political awareness does not protect informants from self-blame, social escapism and moral suffering.

Acknowledgments We are grateful to Christopher Swader, Elena Zdravomyslova, Alexander Kondakov, Leonid Polischuk, participants of the international workshop "Love and Sex after Communism" at Uppsala University, and three anonymous reviewers for detailed analysis and valuable advice. We are also thankful to Gleb Musikhin and Masha Udensiva-Brenner for their valuable comments, to Dmitrii Tolkachev for his excellent research assistance and Varvara Ganshina and Ilya Lomakin for their help with data analysis. All mistakes are our own. We are eternally grateful to our informants for their personal courage and agreement to participate in our research.

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