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Queer visibility and conservative political turn in Russia

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Summary

Abstract

Following the increased queer visibility in the public sphere, the norms concerning gender and sexuality have become increasingly restrictive in Russia. This essay explores the implications of adopting Western identity politics in non-democratic settings. Putin's Russia has shown strengthening authoritarianism and rejection of Western liberal values. The Kremlin's active promotion of 'traditional values' and depiction of LGBTQ+ rights as a 'threat' to society have facilitated significant growth of public homophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The paper discusses how these developments have negatively affected the LGBTQ+ community in Russia.

A seguito dell'aumentata visibilità queer nello spazio pubblico, le norme riguardanti il genere e la sessualità sono diventate sempre più restrittive in Russia. Questo saggio esplora le implicazioni dell'adozione della politica identitaria occidentale in contesti non democratici. La Russia di Putin ha mostrato un rafforzamento dell'autoritarismo e il rifiuto dei valori liberali occidentali. La promozione attiva del Cremlino dei "valori tradizionali" e la rappresentazione dei diritti LGBTQ+ come una "minaccia" alla società hanno facilitato una significativa crescita dell'omofobia pubblica e della discriminazione basata sull'orientamento sessuale e sull'identità di genere. Il contributo discute come questi sviluppi abbiano avuto un impatto negativo sulla comunità LGBTQ+ in Russia.

1. Introduction

In the last three decades, Russian society has experienced significant changes regarding national policies and geopolitics. The fall of the Soviet Union marked an era of liberalization, followed by the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993. The country's goal to adopt democratic ideas and transition

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toward a neoliberal economy facilitated the growing increase of LGBTQ+ visibility through media discussions, the appearance of queer-oriented infrastructure such as night clubs, and the work of LGBTQ+ activists. Queer Russians took advantage of the socio-political transformation happening in the country by setting up bars and clubs, founding groups and organizations, establishing transnational and international networks, and engaging in other various activities. However, many queer initiatives relied heavily on international donors, making them more responsive to Western ideas about sexuality, gender, and activism (e.g., visibility politics, 'coming out', and LGBTQ+ rights discourse)[1] (Buyantueva, 2022a). As such, Russian LGBTQ+ activists have gradually adopted Western identity politics, becoming more visible through public events such as Pride.

The paper highlights that the expectations and demands of Western identity politics might not travel easily to non-Western settings[2]. Attempting to follow them may negatively affect queer lives in non-Western non-democratic environments such as Russia. Queer visibility is often treated as part of the promotion of Western liberalism, becoming one of the central points of anti-gender pushback across the globe (Shirinian, 2020; Rao, 2020). In a number of non-Western countries, including Russia, anti-gender agenda has been adopted as part of nationalist strategies to assert conservatism and challenge Western liberal ideas (Edenborg, 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Consequently, the geopolitical tensions surrounding the questions of sexuality and gender have facilitated political homophobia and denial of LGBTQ+ rights.

Putin's Russia is one of the leading forces, promoting patriarchy and 'traditional values' on the national and international levels (Wilkinson, 2014). Since Vladimir Putin's reelection in 2012, the Russian state has displayed growing authoritarianism, conservatism, and anti-Westernism, which manifests in the policies in favor of the 'traditional family' and the promotion of heteronormative gender and sexuality. Notably, conservative ideology is treated by the Kremlin as an important developmental component related to internal and external security and sovereignty of the nation (Lewis, 2020). As such, LGBTQ+ rights have become not only an issue of civil rights but an important geopolitical standpoint. The Kremlin portrays LGBTQ+ rights as the Western imposition incompatible with 'Russian traditional values.' Because of that, the LGBTQ+ community experienced increasing repression, becoming a convenient target for the state. Putin's Russia has adopted a range of policies to curb queer visibility and limit LGBTQ+ rights (e.g., the 2013 law banning propaganda of nontraditional sexual behavior, the 2020 amendments to the Constitution to obstruct the possibility of same-sex unions). As a result, queer Russians are in a tough position when public visibility becomes dangerous, invoking censorship, discrimination, and even violence. Drawing on desk research of data from legal documents, media articles, and academic records, this article outlines the situation with LGBTQ+ rights over the last three decades and discusses the issues and dilemmas faced by the LGBTQ+ community in the light of political and economic tenuousness caused by strengthening conservative authoritarianism in Russia.

1 For the purposes of this article, I use the terms 'queer', 'nonheteronormative, and 'LGBTQ+' interchangeably to be inclusive of multiple identities and desires that do not conform to dominant heteronormative standards on gender and sexuality. More on the subject of gender and sexual identities in Russia can be found in the works of Laurie Essig (1999), Baer (2015), and Alexander Kondakov (2020).

2 There is a growing criticism of the West/East divide that frames the West as progressive and 'others' the East, emphasizing queerphobia as the Eastern issue (Kulpa and Mizielińska, 2011; Kulpa, 2014; Puar, 2007). Such a binary approach might exasperate regional nationalist tendencies and lead to the rebound of conservatism and anti-genderism (Gladskova and Morell, 2018).

2. LGBTQ+ rights in Russia: a brief overview

In Russia, LGBTQ+ rights have faced different dynamics throughout the post-Soviet period. The 1990s signified the country's intention to adopt Western democratic values, reflected in the decriminalization of same-sex relations between men, which was considered a criminal offense in the Soviet Union (since 1934). The turn of the 21st century showed increasing socio-political weariness of the West and liberal democratic values, questioning the advances regarding gender norms and LGBTQ+ rights achieved in Western liberal democracies. Thus, the dynamics of Russia's national and foreign political strategies and regard of the West determined the regime's political treatment of LGBTQ+ rights.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to substantial socio-political changes, moving away from prosecution of queers and facilitating the blossoming of the LGBTQ+ community. Homosexual relations (consensual sexual intercourses between men) were decriminalized in 1993 and depathologized in 1999[3]. Since then, however, there were not a lot of legislative advances regarding LGBTQ+ rights. Even though the 1993 Russian Constitution declares equality and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, social status, national, language, or religious origin, it does not explicitly mention sexual orientations and gender identities as protected groups. Until the mid-1990s, heterosexual and same-sex experiences were treated differently in the Russian Criminal Code, which affirmed stricter punishments for crimes committed during same-sex encounters. In 1997, these differences were removed from the Code.

Since the mid-2000s, Putin's Russia has started demonstrating growing authoritarian tendencies, characterized with growing restrictions of political freedoms, anti-Western sentiments, and a search for a unifying ideology. Such ideology was found in patriarchal conservatism and 'traditional values,' which will be discussed in more detail later in the paper. These developments were accompanied by an attempt to curb queer visibility that had significantly increased in the 1990s-2000s. To do so, the state introduced policy changes on regional and federal levels, prohibiting 'propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations.'

The first ban was adopted in Ryazan' region in 2006, with some other regions following the suit in the early 2010s. The federal law banning 'propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations' to children (the 'anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda law') was adopted in 2013[4]. The law was amended in 2022 banning any positive or neutral depictions of nonheteronormativity to anyone regardless of age. The law equates queerness to pedophilia and prohibits its propaganda in the public sphere (i.e., online and offline media, literature, art, films, and on the streets). According to the 2022 amendments, such propaganda involves public actions and/or distribution of information on 'nontraditional sexual relations and preferences or change of gender'. Thus, any mention of queerness, or even openly queer behavior, may constitute an 'LGBTQ+ propaganda.' In the eyes of the law, explicitly queerphobic information,

3 In the Soviet period, consensual sexual intercourse between men was considered a criminal offense (since 1934) and female same-sex inclinations were viewed as a psychiatric disorder (Stella, 2015).

4 The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR, 2017) found the law discriminatory, violating the European Convention of Human Rights and facilitating queerphobia. The ECHR also found Russia violating the rights of LGBTQ+ people by banning queer public events (ECHR, 2018) and refusing to register LGBTQ+ organizations (ECHR, 2019). In the last decade, however, Russia has adopted an isolationist approach to international law. Since 2015, the Russian Constitutional Court could rule the decisions of international courts as non-executable if found incompatible with the Russian Constitution. Due to the 2020 constitutional changes, international treaties and decisions of international bodies can be disregarded if they contradict the Constitution. In the wake of Russia's military aggression toward Ukraine in 2022, the country ceased its membership in the Council of Europe and withdrew from the European Convention of Human Rights. Therefore, the ECHR's judgements regarding LGBTQ+ rights are unlikely to be implemented in Russia.

however, may be deemed acceptable since it does not cultivate "the attractiveness of nontraditional sexual relations and/or preferences or sex change" (Article 6.21 of The Russian Code of Administrative Offences). 'LGBTQ+ propaganda' is considered an administrative offence punishable by large fines (up to five million rubles – around 55,000 euros), administrative arrest and deportation (for foreigners).

The Russian Constitution was also amended in 2020 to declare the country's ideological foundation. The amendments strongly highlight the centrality of patriotism, religion, and 'traditional values' (with an emphasis on 'traditional family' and children) and declare marriage a union between a man and a woman. These constitutional changes prevent the possibility of same-sex unions and ensure the superiority of heteronormativity.

There were other policy changes, aiming to negatively affect the situation with LGBTQ+ rights in the country. For example, since 2013, foreign queer couples and citizens from countries legitimizing sex-sex unions are not allowed to adopt Russian children. In the summer of 2023, Russian legislators banned gender transitioning procedures, which would bring another deterioration of LGBTQ+ rights. Prior to the ban, the procedure had been rather straightforward, requiring just a medical diagnosis of 'transsexualism' without the proof of surgery or hormonal therapy. Interestingly, gender transitioning had been performed in the country since the early Soviet years (1926) and was legally defined in 1976. The ban has severely impeded the advancements in medical care and bureaucratic process. Furthermore, in November 2023, Russia's Supreme Court ruled that LGBTQ+ activism is considered 'extremist.' Under Russian criminal law, participating in extremist activity is punishable by imprisonment, which increases the risks of queer visibility in the public sphere.

As can be seen, over the last three decades, the Russian political environment has seen considerable changes regarding LGBTQ+ rights since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and legalization of same-sex desire. These changes have been reflected in and surrounded the issues of queer visibility in the public sphere

3. Visibility politics

Visibility and coming out have become an important part of queer politics in Western democracies. Increased visibility has been critical for many LGBTQ+ movements in those countries to be able to claim and achieve recognition of their rights as well as gain greater social acceptance (Ayoub, 2016; Garretson, 2018). Public visibility may facilitate greater public attention to the issues experienced by the LGBTQ+ communities and give their demands more clout (Currier, 2012; Zivi, 2012). The strategy of visibility and 'coming out' is thought to normalize nonheteronormative identities, which would eventually facilitate equality and recognition their rights (Wilkinson, 2020). As Ayoub (2016) suggests, even if visibility might originally encounter socio-political pushback, such backlash can generate greater visibility and success of the LGBTQ+ movements. But that success is highly dependent on local socio-political contexts.

The necessity and usefulness of visibility have started, thus, to be problematized when applied to non-Western, especially authoritarian repressive contexts (Acconcia et al, 2022; Edenborg, 2020; Wilkinson, 2017). Critics (Stella, 2015; Newton, 2016) emphasized that, since visibility politics is part of the Western approach, when applied in non-Western conditions might harm the local LGBTQ+ communities. In such realities, visibility may be followed by intensified discrimination and violence (Edenborg, 2017, 2020).

Visibility can also be a part of dominant power structures. According to Butler (2004, 2010), hegemonic power manages what can be visible and what should be excluded from the public sphere. In this regard, how queer visibility is presented in the public sphere is depended on dominant powers.

On the one hand, public visibility may be helpful for the development of LGBTQ+ identity and community by generating a feeling of belonging (Edenborg, 2020). Increased public visibility may affect LGBTQ+ people's perceptions of societal acceptance and encourage more queer individuals to come out or engage in activism (Buyantueva, 2018). On the other hand, in the conditions of political queerphobia, queer visibility in the public sphere may be instrumentalized to highlight the 'deviant' nature of nonheteronormative identities (Bosia, 2013). Some non-Western states politicize queerphobia to reinstate themselves and their role on the global stage (Amar, 2013). In essence, a queer becomes a subject of hypervisibility (Wilkinson, 2020), scrutinized "on perceived difference, which is usually (mis)interpreted as deviance" (Ryland, 2013). The state may use such hypervisibility to portray queerness as a threat to society (Wilkinson, 2014). Such targeted 'othering' may facilitate further social marginalization and discrimination of queers.

Thus, visibility may be generated by the LGBTQ+ community with the goal of normalization of queerness in society. It may also be instrumentalized by the state to reinforce hegemonic power balance. The following section will show how those aspects of visibility have been realized in Russia.

4. Becoming visible in Russia

In the last three decades, queer Russians have achieved increased visibility through the cultural scene, media, and work of LGBTQ+ activists. The spread of queer cultural landscape (nightlife venues, literature, art) facilitates the feeling of belonging and contributes to the development of nonheteronormative identities and communities by helping people to (re)claim and realize their queerness in a positive way, especially in the contexts of conservative authoritarianism and heteronormativity. Globalization was conductive to the popularity of Western queer cultures across the globe (Altman, 2002). Russia was not an exception in that regard. It is important to note, however, that non-Western settings do not necessarily blindly import Western queer culture (Jackson, 2001). Local nonheteronormative practices and experiences can be more diverse and less clear-cut as might be expected from the Western perspective. Nevertheless, the Russian LGBTQ+ community has increasingly imported Western ideas. For example, Russian LGBTQ+ organizations and media sources employ the terms 'queer', 'gay', 'lesbian' 'bisexual', 'transgender', display rainbow symbols, and use the rhetoric of LGBTQ+ rights being human rights. Russian queer subculture practices neoliberal economic approaches to queer venues (the rapid development of Western-style bars and clubs and decline of Soviet-style cruising spaces as shown in Healey's study (2018) and popularizes Western queer pop culture.

Since the decriminalization of homosexuality, Russia has experienced the expansion of queer culture via pop culture, television, and cinema. A range of performers (e.g., Boris Moiseev, t.A.T.u, Little Big) generated queer discourses in their songs and visuals. Federal TV channels such as TNT attempted to normalize discussions of various sex practices and sexual and gender identities by broadcasting talk shows such as Sex with Anfisa Chekhova. The country also saw a production of films on queer themes. For example, the first Russian film dedicated to same-sex relations between men '*Я Люблю Тебя*' ['I Love You'] was released in 2004. The film is remarkable for its intersectionality (the relationship is between a middle-class Russian from Moscow and a working-class internal migrant from Kalmykiya[5]) and a happy ending (protagonists end up together, despite the attempts to separate them by homophobic relatives).

In the first decade of the 21st century, clubbing scene in bigger cities has become well-developed and visible through online advertisements and publications in the popular press such as *Афиша* [Post-

5 Kalmykiya is a republic in southwestern Russia. The majority of the local population are the Kalmyks, of Mongol origin.

er] magazine. Two Russian cities in particular – Moscow and Saint Petersburg – have developed the most diverse and vibrant night life scene for queer clientele. As of now, despite the increasingly hostile socio-political conditions, there is still a rich club scene in these urban spaces. This club scene, however, is diffused and spread across different locations for safety reasons (Stella, 2013). Some clubs and bars are hidden and run underground. The venues' exterior does not display any distinct signs that could identify them as part of queer scene. These measures are undertaken for the reasons of safety to decrease the possibility of queerphobic violence.

The development of nightclubs, bars, and parties catering to queer clientele was accompanied by the growth of LGBTQ+ groups and organizations, many of which organized discos and other nightlife events to foster the development of queer identities and community. The first LGBTQ+ organizations (e.g., Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities, *Крылья* [Wings] in Saint Petersburg) appeared in the late 1990s-early 1990s. They were mostly concentrated in bigger cities and were actively involved in the creation, acquisition, and distribution of knowledge through conferences, exhibitions, parties, and festivals. Most of these organizations ceased their activities by the mid-1990s for a range of reasons such as lack of resources and underdeveloped community. LGBTQ+ groups and organizations that started to appear since the mid-2000s (e.g., The Russian LGBT Network, Saint Petersburg group *Выход* [Coming Out], Avers in Samara, Maximum in Murmansk, Rainbow House in Tyumen', Revers in Krasnodar) saw greater geographical expansion and higher levels of visibility. Since the mid-2000s and the first attempts to organize Moscow Pride, LGBTQ+ organizations and groups prioritized visibility through the organization of public events as an instrumental means to achieve their goals (Buyantueva, 2022c).

Queer press, art, and literature are also an important aspect of visibility and belonging since they offer knowledge that there are people with similar lived experiences and struggles (Cart and Jenkins, 2006). The late Soviet and post-Soviet period produced a rich literary scene with such authors as Evgenyi Kharitonov, Victoriya Tokareva, and Mariya Stepanova, exploring sexuality and gender (Doak, 2020; Utkin, 2021). Increased visibility of such artistic and literary sources in the post-Soviet years was a relevant developmental point in the formation of queer identities and communities. The cultural landscape of the Russian LGBTQ+ community has been also enriched by the press, art, and literature that was produced with an active involvement of LGBTQ+ groups and organizations. For example, Moscow lesbian group MOLLI (founded in 1991) organized art exhibitions and concerts and issued a literary almanac. The first newspaper *Тема* [Theme] was published by the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities in 1989. The Russian LGBTQ+ community produced a variety of press such as magazines for male audiences (e.g., Gay Times, *Квир* [Queer]) and magazines for lesbian readers (e.g., *Пробуждение* [Awakening] and *Остров* [Island]. What can be seen is the prioritization of gay and lesbian audiences, without much attention to other queer identities. The publication of most of these sources stopped due to economic issues and the development of the internet and social media.

Cyberspace has provided new spaces (e.g., Gay.ru, VKontante, Facebook, Grinder) for queer individuals to connect and explore their identities. Digital sources have been vital for the development of LGBTQ+ community and connecting people across the country with a large territory. The internet has offered spaces and information unavailable offline, especially in rural and remote areas. Websites like Gay.ru (launched in 1997) and Lesbi.ru (launched in 1998) have served an important role of knowledge production and distribution of information on queer topics, news, events, and venues. The role of social media was also crucial in connecting people across the country. Through social media, queer Russians have been able to engage in 'digital coming out' by sharing their life experiences online (Tudor, 2022). Social media groups such as LGBT Discussion Platform and *Дети-404* [Children-404] for queer teenagers have provided a relatively safe and supportive space to interact and realize oneself as a queer individual and part of the community.

LGBTQ+ activists took an active part in the distribution of knowledge and production of social relations through social media groups and activist group websites. Increased visibility and the new

ways of mobilization brought by digital technologies led to the expansion of LGBTQ+ groups and organizations across the country. Activists employed social media to organize public events such as Pride and Rainbow Flash Mob to gain visibility and recognition of their rights. These events garnered international spotlight and public support. Locally, however, they frequently procured rather hostile and even violent responses from the authorities and homophobic public (Buyantueva, 2022b; Stella, 2013).

On the whole, Russian queer media and cultural landscape has reflected and solidified the public perception of queerness as part of the Westernization process. On one hand, in the eyes of LGBTQ+ audience, the West acquires utopian features of escaping queerphobia. One the other hand, the state makes queerness hypervisible by accentuating the 'alien' nature of nonheteronormativity to protect the nationhood (Doak, 2020). Increased visibility as well as close association with Western queer cultures have made the LGBTQ+ community a convenient target for the state and queerphobic individuals. Even in the less repressive period of the 1990-2000s, queer visibility was not normalized and was often accompanied by queerphobia (Baer, 2013). The illustrative example of that could be the violent attacks on Moscow Pride participants in 2006. That queerphobia, however, was mostly social, impacted by the legacy of Soviet prison culture (Healey, 2018), it was not yet instrumentalized by the state. Since the early 2010s, however, Putin's Russia have politicized anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments by actively promoting conservatism wrapped in patriarchy and masculinity.

5. Russia's conservative turn

The economic hardships of the 1990s exhausted the society. The role and influence of Western institutions in the Russian political and economic areas began to be viewed as a plot to ruin the nation (Malinova, 2020). By the early 2010s, Russia saw the expansion of protests spurred by corruption, dissatisfaction with federal policies, and demands for democratic reforms (Gel'man, 2013). For the Kremlin, the country needed a unifying ideology that would ensure security and obedience of the population (Østbø, 2017). That ideology was found in patriarchal conservatism.

Since Vladimir Putin's reelection in 2012, the state has begun an active promotion of patriarchal conservatism, which emphasizes the centrality of 'traditional values' and rejects gender norms and LGBTQ+ rights (Moss, 2017). Russia's conservative turn has several reasons such as state- and nation-building (Johnsons, 2014), reestablishment on the geopolitical stage (Foxall, 2019), and distrust of the West (Weber, 2016). 'Traditional values' are defined as "moral guidelines that form the worldview of Russian citizens" (Kremlin.ru, 2022). The Russian legislation specifically highlights patriotism, strong family, and religiosity (Orthodoxy in particular) as important 'traditional values' helping to protect and strengthen the nation.

The Kremlin's promotion of conservatism is heavily intertwined with the increased socio-political role of religion, specifically the Russian Orthodox Church and Muslim clerics. In his December 2012 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin declared his commitment to strengthening 'traditional values' with the assistance of religious institutions (Kremlin, 2012). To appeal to the population, the religious elite has built some of its patriarchal approaches on the ideas drawn from Soviet morality and queerphobia (e.g., solid family as a cornerstone of a strong nation, pathologization of same-sex relations), playing into the popular nostalgia for a better glorious past (Agadjanian, 2017).

The value and uniqueness of Russian culture is juxtaposed to Western decadence and lack of morality (Agadjanian, 2017). It is important to note that the Kremlin does not see the country apart from Europe per se, but rather envisions Russia as a bastion of 'true European values' without gender norms and LGBTQ+ rights (Suchland, 2018). Russia positions itself as a protector of majority and heteronormativity as opposed to Western liberal ideals of equality and LGBTQ+ rights (Neumann, 2017;

Weber, 2016). Western liberal countries are portrayed as a space of depravity and moral decay, where gender roles are perverted, same-sex couples can adopt and corrupt children, and masculinity is lost.

Russia's patriarchal traditionalism includes the ideology of masculinity, which can be understood as an active "endorsement and internalization of cultural belief systems about masculinity and male gender" (Pleck et al., 1993). The Kremlin's promotion of masculinity is embedded in national, economic, and geopolitical insecurities. In the 1990s-2000s, Russia experienced a range of issues such as economic and demographic crises and the loss of its impactful role on the international stage, causing the 'emasculation' of the population (Zdravomyslova and Temkina, 2001; Stella and Nartova, 2016; Riabov and Riabova, 2014). The Kremlin has utilized such insecurities to direct the nation's goal in re-establishing itself as a global power. Consequently, the country has witnessed the militarization of society (e.g., glorification of the victory in the Second World War, patriotic military education), culminating in the escalating military aggression toward other nation-states[6]. In this vein, Putin has become a vivid frontrunner of machismo in the form of masculine performances such as visual images of his physical strength and prowess as well as his forceful speeches (Novistkaya, 2017). Putin's masculinity symbolizes his geopolitical stance of a tough guy in opposition to the 'immoral' and 'effeminate' West (Foxall, 2013).

Socio-political promotion of masculinity has normalized misogyny and queerphobia, firmly embedding the idea of a strong man as inherently Russian and rejecting nonheteronormativity as the Western attempt to 'feminize' the nation (Riabov and Riabova, 2014). Kondakov (2014) pointed out that the accentuation of masculinity in the Russian socio-political discourse also stems from the Soviet past. Combined with the Soviet legacy of queerphobia, it generates public and political exclusion of queers.

Marginalizing and radicalizing a certain minority can be helpful in entrenching superiority of a majority (Hansen, 2006). Political popularization of queerphobia appeals to a wider Russian population, who is still mostly conservative. As the public opinion polls show, the majority of Russians (69%) are against same-sex relations (Levada Center, 2021). The narrative of nonheteronormativity as a threat to society justifies discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community and the necessity to make it invisible (Cooper-Cunningham, 2022). Thereby, Russian legislators prohibited LGBTQ+ propaganda to curb queer visibility in the public sphere in order to protect the nation.

6. Precarious visibility

The visibility of a marginalized group may bring public attention and, consequently, facilitate negative socio-political response (Casper and Moore, 2009). In Russia, widely publicized Pride marches and other public events have attracted negative attention from the political and religious elite. Increased queer visibility in the public sphere is presented by the Russian political and religious elite as

6 Russia's aggression against Ukraine that began in February 2022, however, challenged the effectiveness of the state's propaganda. The war has been met with widespread public opposition. Since the start of the invasion, thousands of Russians protested the war and military mobilization (The Guardian, 2022). Russian society also demonstrated somewhat low levels of societal regard for military service. In the fall of 2022, Russian military call-up resulted in the mass emigration of thousands of men trying to avoid fighting in the war. To curb these developments, the state has strengthened repressive measures, introducing an array of laws, restricting freedom of speech, assembly, and expression (e.g., harsher treason penalties, criminal responsibility for the distribution of 'false information' regarding state actors and governmental bodies, stricter regulation of protest activity).

a destabilizing threat to society. According to Russian Orthodox Church leader Patriarch Kirill, Pride parades signify Western liberal values that would lead to the end of civilization (The Moscow Times, 2022). To contain such visibility the authorities banned queer public events for various reasons from 'LGBTQ+ propaganda' to the violation of the regulations on public events (Buyantueva, 2022b). Nowadays, the organization of queer public events (e.g., art exhibitions, movie screenings, street protests) has become nearly impossible due to the potential charges for 'LGBTQ+ propaganda.'

Positive and even neutral mentions of LGBTQ+ rights have become extremely problematic due to the 'anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda law'. Governmental media watchdog Roskomnadzor has actively censored LGBTQ+ information. Apart from blocking online queer content, Roskomnadzor distributed a list of books with queer content that should be removed from the libraries. That governmental body has also regulated cinema, banning or censoring films and TV shows that depict queerness (e.g., film 'Brokeback Mountain' was banned, TV show 'Sex and the City' censored) (The Moscow Times, 2023).

The 2022 amendments to the 'anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda law' have caused self-censorship in the cultural landscape. As the co-owner of two popular Moscow gay clubs admitted, "if clubs are required to stop any displays of affection between patrons, they will do so" (Farniev, 2022). Many book publishers, offline and online bookstores, theaters, and online streaming services decided to preemptively remove presumed queer content to avoid the charges for 'LGBTQ+ propaganda'.

At the same time, Russia's patriarchal conservatism has hypervisibilized queer subjects, demonizing them in the public discourse. The Kremlin strives to establish itself as a 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1979), using 'traditional values' as a discursive notion to embed heteronormativity and exclude the queer. Nonheteronormative identities are presented as 'sinful' and 'dangerous.' The war on Ukraine has spotlighted political and media justifications of aggression, requiring further measures to protect the nation from the imagined enemy, that is, Western liberalism and everything it embodies, including LGBTQ+ rights. In his speech announcing the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin proclaimed the West 'the empire of lies' that aims to destroy 'traditional values' and impose 'pseudo-values,' meaning liberal values (Meduza, 2022). Ukraine is portrayed as falling under 'evil Western influence' and in need of saving. For example, the Orthodox conservative TV channel Tsargrad expounded in detail how Ukraine is manipulated by the Western 'gay lobby' (Khomyakov, 2022).

Policy changes aimed to suppress queer visibility have been successful in facilitating the increase of queerphobia, discrimination, and violence against the LGBTQ+ community. Queer events have been frequently disrupted by the police and anti-queer religious and nationalist groups and individuals (Buyantueva, 2022b). Anti-queer state rhetoric has also encouraged the increase in violent attacks against anyone who could be taken for a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Kondakov, 2022; Stella, 2015).

Online queer visibility has also come at the risk of cyberbullying and even violence. Russian anti-LGBTQ+ vigilante groups and individuals have frequently employed digital technologies to lure their victims, humiliate, and violate them (Buyantueva, 2018). LGBTQ+ groups and online sources such as Gay.ru have had to develop and distribute safety recommendations for online dating to minimize the risks of queerphobic violence.

As a result, queer visibility has suffered to a great extent. Queer initiatives must resort to working underground, relying on anonymity, closed group contacts, and caution. Many LGBTQ+ activists had to relocate abroad, fleeing repression that escalated since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

7. Conclusion

The Russian LGBTQ+ community has gained greater visibility in the post-Soviet years. There are var-

ious groups and organizations, nightlife venues, art, and literature dedicated to queers. However, the increased visibility has come at a high cost related to political queerphobia.

The Kremlin has endeavored consistent political processes to push the Russian LGBTQ+ community to the margin of society. Among various severe impacts of state conservative authoritarianism, one of the most principal changes in queer lives would likely be forced invisibility in the public sphere. There might be a radical transformation of social interactions reminiscent of secretive gatherings of the Soviet era. Online interactions would also face certain challenges. There is a potential issue of queer distancing, disengagement, and self-censorship in cyberspace. Nevertheless, there is hope that technological developments such as anonymizers would keep the online presence of queer Russians. In the context of conservative authoritarianism, LGBTQ+ Russians face the reality of becoming 'subaltern counterpublics' in online space (Fraser, 1992; Kjaran, 2016), generating and distributing alternative discourses of gender and sexuality to challenge the Kremlin's heteronormative patriarchal traditionalism.

Developing strategies that are alternative to those offered by Western identity politics, which accentuate visibility and 'coming out', is of top priority. There is an urgent need to rethink the expectations of visibility in favor of the safe preservation and nurturing of the links between members of the LGBTQ+ community. As Butler (2018) argues, vulnerability can serve as a resistance mechanism, empowering marginalized minorities. Thus, in the context of strengthening conservative authoritarianism as can be seen in Russia, even living an everyday life as a queer may serve as a resistance to hegemonic powers. To minimize the dangers of visibility and 'coming out,' cultural expressions that utilize metaphors and symbolism referring to queerness may also empower and negotiate visibility in the highly repressive conditions (Utkin, 2021). The large underlying issue of the Russian society, however, that needs to be addressed first is democratization accompanied by feminist and queer politics. As long as patriarchal authoritarianism persist and heteronormativity remain mainstream, queers would be marginalized, struggling with mistreatment and discrimination. Negotiating public visibility in such conditions would be extremely difficult requiring greater discretion. It might be that LGBTQ+ Russians would have to resort to the Soviet era tactics of discretion adapted to modern times.

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