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LGBTQ in Russia: Obstacles in the Late Post-Socialist Period

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Abstract
In the lead up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, President Putin passed a law that placed a ban on all homosexual "propaganda" in the country. The "gay propaganda" law was met with an international outcry, as advocacy groups around the world condemned Russian state-sponsored homophobia. Despite their heightened involvement before the Sochi Olympics, international activists had little impact on LGBTQ oppression in Russia as they failed to address two key obstacles facing the Russian LGBTQ movement: enforcement of conservative "traditional values," and Putin's nationalist project to return Russia to a misremembered imperial past. This essay argues that we must understand and address the two obstacles to advocate and build solidarity with LGBTQ people and movements in Russia.

INTRODUCTION
In the lead up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the treatment of LGBTQ people in Russia took center stage in Western media discourse. Criticism and calls for boycotts emerged from international advocacy groups, as they urged Western political leaders to respond to Putin’s anti-gay stance. This was not the first-time global LGBTQ groups were involved in advocacy in Russia since the fall of the USSR. Western activists have attempted to support and mold Russia’s queer rights movement since its emergence in the late 1990s. However, the political and cultural landscape of the early post-socialist period differs from the present political climate established by two decades of Putin’s rule. While collaborations between Russian and Western LGBTQ groups may have found some success in the early post-socialist period, more recent Western advocacy has been counterproductive to the LGBTQ movement in Russia. The lead up to Sochi Olympics proves a perfect example, as Western advocates tied institutionalized homophobia in Russia to Putin’s growing authoritarianism. A tactic that exacerbated growing nationalist sentiment while drowning out the voices of queer people in Russia. To continue supporting the LGBTQ movement in Russia, international activists must acknowledge the new context of Putin’s Russia and the obstacles it creates for queer people in the country. This essay will discuss two of the key obstacles faced by the LGBTQ movement in Russia: a late post-socialist return to “traditional values” and the rise of

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
nationalism. This essay will first trace the history of the LGBTQ movement since the fall of the Soviet Union, before discussing Putin’s regime and the key obstacles it creates for LGBTQ advocates.

OVERVIEW OF POST-SOCIALIST LGBTQ HISTORY IN RUSSIA

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, space was conceived for LGBTQ voices in Russia. The wreckage of early Post-Soviet Russia created a perfect canvas for foreign intervention and influence in the region. International aid flowed into Russia, with Western powers supporting political and economic reform as the country began undergoing a “capitalist revolution.” During this time, an unusual friendship arose between Russia and the West, a move that allowed foreign bodies to catapult human rights abuses in Russia, specifically those pertaining to sexual minorities, into the limelight. While queer individuals, especially men, faced prison time in Soviet Russia for their sexual identities, by 1993, enormous international pressure led President Yeltsin to decriminalize homosexuality in the country.

By the mid-1990s, multiple educational and advocacy-based LGBTQ groups emerged in Russia, funded and supported by their Western counterparts. Groups such as the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities, Wings, MOLLI, and Tchaikovsky Fund flourished in the early post-Socialist period, gaining large membership bases, organizing advocacy events in major cities, and publishing and distributing progressive LGBTQ information across the country. Foreign advocates also traveled to Russia during this time to support and collaborate on projects with Russian groups and report on the rights of LGBTQ people in the country. In his novel Sexual Culture in Russia, Igor Kon described this period in Russia as “entrance into the battle by representatives of the sexual minorities themselves, mainstreaming the problem of human rights, and transformation of the problem from medical to political.”

Despite the early post-Soviet successes of the LGBTQ movement in Russia, by the second half of the 1990s, membership in advocacy groups was dwindling, organization of LGBTQ events was failing, and many groups flourishing in the early 1990s were barely functioning at all.

5 Ibid.
7 Schaaf, “Advocating for equality”.
8 Ibid. 
9 Essig., Queer in Russia: 68.
minority rights model is critical to consider as organizing around a minority group identity propelled the U.S LGBTQ movement to success and contrastingly led to the downfall of the movement in Russia as sexual otherness did not make up a basis for shared identity and ideology in the country.

Following the undoing of LGBTQ advocacy and educational groups in the late 1990s, an overall lack of visibility ascended queer people. LGBTQ groups during this time, frequently manifested as informal social clubs that provide members with an underground queer space that did not require them to transform into queer rights advocates or identify with a sexual identity. By 2006, however, a wave of anti-propaganda laws washed over the country, culminating in the 2013 federal anti-propaganda law. The law placed a ban on homosexual “propaganda,” and according to the European Court of Human Rights endorsed intolerance and violence towards LGBTQ people in the country. The impact of the anti-propaganda law was devastating, discrimination and isolation of LGBT people increased along with a rise in violent homophobic attacks. The high level of state-sponsored homophobia dismantled the invisibility of queer people in Russia and inadvertently increased the visibility and the danger tied to queer existence.

THE “CRISIS OF MASCULINITY”

Having summarized LGBTQ history in Russia, we can now turn to the obstacles faced by LGBTQ advocates under President Putin. Moving into the post-socialist period, Russia faced a social crisis that liberal discourse has defined as the “crisis of masculinity”. The “crisis” resulted from social malaise as the communist regime barred men from performing traditional male roles by restricting access to property rights, political freedom, and freedom of conscience. Indicators among men, such as low life expectancy and high alcoholism rates, also played into the theoretical framework of the crisis that saw men as victims of their biological nature or structural-cultural circumstances.

The deep anxieties produced by the “crisis of masculinity” contributed to the rise of Putin and his overcompensating performance of masculinity. While the Soviet man was dependent and oppressed, the post-Soviet man, like Putin, displayed a real man’s attributes such as political involvement, economic independence, health, and heterosexuality. According to author Alexandra Novitskaya, Putin’s masculinist wish to rebuild Russia's glory not only played into the crisis of masculinity but also justified growing anti-LGBTQ sentiment. In Putin's Russia, queer people became the "ideal displaced object" of national bad feeling: borne out of his insecurities and projected onto the nation’s cultural and historic identity.

The crisis of masculinity and Putin’s masculinity politics are essential to note as we analyze the forceful return to “traditional values” and Russia’s growing “masculinist” nationalism.

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11 Schaaf, "Advocating for equality

12 Essig, “Believing in Lesbian Utopias”

13 Ibid.


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

RUSSIA’S RETURN TO “TRADITIONAL VALUES”

The first obstacle faced by LGBTQ movements in Russia is a return to “traditional values,” as highlighted by the passing of national anti-gay legislation in 2013. A return to “traditional values” offered Putin’s presidency political support and stability during an especially tumultuous period that saw an eruption of protests, including anti-corruption demonstrations and the pussy riot performance. Putin selectively repressed the protests by focusing on the threat to “traditional values” created by “extremist” gender and sex ideologies, a decision that eventually lead to the passing of the “gay propaganda” law.

To launch a national return to “traditional values” and pass anti-gay legislation required many actors, but none more so than the Russian Orthodox Church. While the church lost power during the Soviet times, by the late 2000s, its influence expanded in parallel to growing political conservatism in the country. The majority of Russians identify as Russian Orthodox; thus, the church's resurgence allowed for the influential production of homophobic discourse and reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Nikita Sleptcov argues that “the Russian Orthodox Church made a significant contribution to the articulation of traditional family values and moral standards, by arguing that Russian society was endangered by individualism, consumerism, secularism, and homosexuality.” Queer individuals were blamed for attempts in destabilizing Russia’s late 2000s political regime and moving Russia away from “traditional” values that uphold the sanctity of the Russian Orthodox Church and the sanctity of Russian families. The destabilizing political climate and the rise of the Russian Orthodox Church played on the real crisis of masculinity to propel a return to “traditional values” and the consequent passing of the 2013 anti-LGBTQ legislation that increased censorship and suppressed protest activity.

The return to “traditional values” has created significant legal and cultural obstacles for LGBTQ advocates. Foremost, it has led to unprecedented intolerance and violence towards queer individuals in the country, where one must sacrifice their physical safety to take part in public LGBTQ advocacy projects. The brutal murder of LGBTQ activist Elena Grigor’eva in St Petersburg last year highlights the danger of queer existence in Russia. Additionally, the 2013 anti-LGBTQ propaganda law banned all promotions of “non-traditional sexual relations.” The ban led to the deportation of foreign activists and convictions of Russian publishers, campaigners, journalists, teachers, and activists. The law also set out that traditional sexual relations are only heterosexual, lumping “non-traditional” LGBTQ identities together with pedophilia, a decision that heightened the imagined threat presented by LGBTQ individuals.

The return to traditional values created a new social climate that threatened the existence of queer folk, stifled the circulation of public information, suppressed advocacy work, and removed NGOs working on LGBTQ rights and other human rights abuses perpetrated by the government from the country. The perceived social, moral, cultural, and religious

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20 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
threat of LGBTQ individuals among the Russian public creates an immense obstacle for the Russian LGBTQ movement. An obstacle that will require social upheaval, political and cultural change, and extra measures to guarantee the safety and rights of queer activists at the very least.

THE RISE OF RUSSIAN NATIONALISM

Closely linked to Russia’s return to “traditional values,” is the rise in Russian nationalism and the political contexts and practices it created. While many argue that intervention by international LGBTQ advocacy groups in Russia leading up to the Sochi Olympics intensified New Cold War sentiments, that reading is overly simplistic and ignorant of national boundaries that define sexual politics. When Russia banned foreign LGBTQ advocates and criticized Western acceptance of homosexuality in the lead up to the Sochi Olympics, it was not just in opposition to European and U.S political contexts. In fact, Russia has received active support from certain fundamentalist Christian groups in the U.S for its anti-gay legislation. Instead, political homophobia in Russia is not only in opposition to the West but also a symptom of a post-Soviet nationalist project through which Putin seeks to return Russia to its glorious, imperial, and entirely misremembered past.

Consider the 2013 anti-LGBT legislation, which states that the traditional Russian family was an “inalienable part of the historical legacy for the peoples of Russia.” The implication of traditional vs. non-traditional sexuality asserts that a range of non-heterosexual activity is alien and not indigenously Russia. Jennifer Suchland argues that refusal to acknowledge “non-traditional” sexuality in Russia constitutes a national project that goes beyond simple East/West divides and reluctance to import liberal Western ideals into Russia. The anti-LGBTQ legislation creates an investment in defining a national population by creating a cultural claim to heteronormativity as part of a nationalist project. When we consider the unsuccessful advocacy efforts by Western groups in the lead-up to the Sochi Olympics, we can see that they failed to mitigate against practices of nationalism and create culturally relevant and politically strategic forms of solidarity. The rise of nationalism and the post-Soviet imperial project is another obstacle the LGBTQ movement faces in Russia as homophobia becomes rooted in Russia’s national identity.

CONCLUSION

The last two decades in Russia have created a political context that has birthed a new set of obstacles and challenges for queer individuals and the LGBTQ movement. This essay discussed two interlinked challenges faced by the LGBTQ movement in Russia: a late post-socialist return to “traditional values” and the rise of nationalism in the country. International LGBTQ organizations must consider these two obstacles when attempting to advocate and build solidarity with LGBTQ people and advocates in Russia. While this essay outlines some grim impediments to an effective LGBTQ movement in Russia, there are opportunities created by a new generation of advocates, such as LGBTQ advocacy groups aiming to

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Healey, Russian homophobia: 12
34 Ibid.
35 Suchland, “The LGBT specter in Russia”
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
cultivate political subjectivity among Russians that offer hope in Putin’s Russia.38

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