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How homophobic propaganda produces vernacular prejudice in authoritarian states

Jeremy Morris
Aarhus University, Denmark

Abstract

An understanding of gendered homophobia in authoritarian states like Russia provides insights into intolerance as a function of propaganda. What is the effect on ordinary attitudes of "political homophobia" (Boellstorf, 2009) disseminated at fever pitch by state-controlled media intent on dividing the world geopolitically into debauched gay-friendly states, and those willing to defend "traditional Christian" values? Despite authoritarian societies appearing very different from pluralist ones, attitudes are plastic, diverse views possible, and survey polling unreliable. The ethnographic materials presented here show the need to meaningfully engage with vernacular prejudice and differentiate it from regime and media messaging. Everyday forms of homophobia and heterosexism have their origins in complex social phenomena and historical legacies beyond geopolitically-motivated hatred.

Keywords

Homophobia, heterosexism, authoritarianism, conservatism, vernacular prejudice

In the Russia of 2022, vociferous public and political reactions at "nontraditional" sexuality have become a standard of parody. Recently, an upmarket retailer issued an abject apology after featuring a single mother with lesbian daughter for its marketing campaign called "Recipes for Domestic Bliss." Despite consulting lawyers about how to depict queerness without falling foul of anti-gay propaganda law, they had not anticipated the harsh backlash which included death threats to the featured family and widespread

Corresponding author:
Jeremy Morris, Aarhus University, Aarhus 8000, Denmark.
Email: jmorris@cas.au.dk

boycott calls (The Russian Reader, 2021). Satirical news site Panorama responded with a spoof story that the retailer had now made plans to ban same-sex pairs of customers: "We do this to limit the number of LGBT visitors to our stores and exclude even the theoretical possibility of homosexual propaganda […] People of the same sex will have to either visit the stores singly or prove they are relatives. We will carefully check people with an unconventional appearance" (Panorama, 2021). In the previous months, Panorama had run similar pieces satirizing official discourse about a dangerously permissive Europe—commonly known as "*gayropa*." Stories included one on how Netherlands authorities planned to remove children from families who refused to send them on a school trip to watch porn, and another on how George Soros would pay a grant to gay Russians coming out.

Meanwhile, my ethnographic research interlocutors frequently express concern that "over there," in an imagined Europe, children are put under pressure by schools to "experiment" with their gender identity, that LGBTQ "impose" their visibility via frequent pride marches on the public. As a reflection of state media's "culture war" on the "woke West," opinion polling also suggests some propaganda effects linking "tolerance" (as a negative, decadent value) with "Europeanness." Polls find a majority believe in "some kind of organisation" that attempts to destroy Russian spiritual values by propagandizing "non-traditional sexual relations," but the young are evenly split on whether defending gay rights is compatible with Russian values (Vtsiom Novosti, 2018). Recent polling shows a slow but steady trend towards majority toleration in the 18–40 group (Levinson, 2021). At the same time, social researchers have attempted to gauge the influence of Russian state media. Recent sociology on conservatism in the former Soviet Union includes Höjdestrand's (2020), who argues that Russians' defence of gender difference is an act of resistance against neoliberal standardization. Ukhova (2018) argues that family traditionalism is a way of signaling social distress in conditions of economic precarity. Morris and Garibyan (2021) extend this argument to homophobia and gender norms as expressions of vernacular social conservatism. It is to these three approaches that my article responds.

My contribution is as follows. Drawing on ethnography from long-term interactions with a core group of Russian heterosexual men and women, and building on previous work (Morris and Garibyan, 2021), I focus on everyday perspectives towards sexuality in a society dominated by geopolitically motivated homophobic narratives.[1] Although much current research on "culture wars" focuses on hetero- and homo-nationalism (Kulpa and Mizielińska, 2011; Renkin, 2009; Slootmaeckers, 2019), there remains a lack of anthropological research investigating how homophobic rhetoric "works" in practice. This move is necessary to shift debate away from unsatisfactory psychological or culturalist frames of intolerance (often packaged as a civilizational values approach). Similarly, understanding homophobia as an analytical concept frequently lacks empirical underpinning and an intersectional framing (Murray, 2009); the dyad heterosexism/homophobia (Adam, 1998; Boellstorff, 2004) points to the need to differentiate between socially structured and "cultural" dispositions (Kulick, 2009: 25) while acknowledging how personal experience, life-course events and the broader social milieux contribute to prejudice.

In the Russian case, vernacular narratives of prejudice emerge that are confluent with state media's homophobic nationalism, but they are heavily laden with content that departs significantly from the official transcript. The enduring tension between ideas of "European tolerance" and Russian conservative identity in official discourse is something research interlocutors repeat. However, following debates on theories of homophobia (Adam, 1998; Speer and Potter, 2000) I argue that Russians' vernacular prejudice draws on political and social resources that are different from official discourse. Objections to non-normative sexuality oppose it to "sincere," as well as "equal" personal relations which trace back to Soviet norms, in contrast to official homophobia which relies on a notion of Judaeo–Christian tradition. People should relate as equals despite gender/sexuality differences; there is suspicion of claims to "difference." Nonetheless, people acknowledge diverse sexuality. Further, strong public identarian claims bring risks to moral order—the claim to "minority" status can lead to exceptions to the rule—again emphasizing order from conceptions of equality-sameness. Following the work of Ukhova (2018) and Morris and Garibyan (2021), heterosexism and, to a lesser extent, homophobia are key aspects of vernacular social conservatism; heterosexism helps people in accessing and elaborating a discourse of socio-economic distress largely silenced in what is an authoritarian state. Heterosexism co-exists with homophobia. Homophobia reflects irrational fears and has roots in psychological notions of the individual. Heterosexism reflects how anti-gay sentiment is produced via the actions and implicit/explicit values of social institutions (Adam, 1998). Although research materials here show personal experience connects with both heterosexist and homophobic expressions and cues, people's reactions are strongly gendered in Russia. Although men only hypothetically acknowledge that gay men exist, Russian women ground their attitudes in concrete encounters of a homosexual, homophilial, or queer orientation.

My conclusion is that work on intolerance in sexuality and gender studies needs to take more seriously the potential of ethnographic methods to uncover the meaning of vernacular prejudice and other phenomena of exclusion and othering. Moreover, given the geopolitical alignment of right-wing populism, there is a political imperative for researchers to "get their hands dirty" in work on homophobia-in-practice more generally. Finally, a phenomenological sensibility is useful in moving from simplistic models of the effect of discursive othering by media and elites, to understand how dispositions about sexual identity and practices are produced in everyday life. This "everyday" approach in an atmosphere of trust between researchers and researched can effectively show how prejudices are produced within intersecting inequalities and conditioned by historico–social milieux where "homophobia is rarely ever just about (homo)sexuality" (Murray, 2009: 3). This is necessary too to move away from a self-congratulatory mode in research about the "sociopathologies" of intolerant societies and show how prejudice emerges in the intersection between the local, the national and the global.

Structure and methodological considerations

A short section reviews the scholarly literature on the gender–sexuality nexus in Russia. A second section summarizes trends in public opinion in Russia towards sexuality. The

third, main section, presents ethnographic fieldwork from European Russia based on long term immersion (redacted citation for peer review). Research materials were collected from mid-2018, mid-2019, and then in 2021 during three research stays of approximately 6–8 weeks each. However, I also draw on intimate knowledge of the life-course of my participants and involvement in their lives stretching back to 2009 and earlier. Some conversations were recorded (c.15 h). Conversational materials were summarized in note form both during and after the meetings.

For the purposes of readability and economy I make use of composites: "ethnographic characters" combining actual interview material. Composites are a useful technique and tool for compressing diverse yet sample-saturated materials—the four women and three men featured here exist only as aggregates, while the detailed descriptions of their particular relations reflect real situations and encounters, not constructions. Composites also present a solution to ethical issues when representing sensitive materials that require the disguising of participants' identity (Humphreys and Watson 2009). Although "representativeness" is a difficult concept to work with in ethnographic research, the materials here summarize and condense immersion over many years in the field and many hundreds of conversations and interactions about gender roles and sexuality with a core of over 50 women and men participants and their extended social networks. The women's discussions here were mainly conducted with a Russian cisgender woman researcher and parent, while the discussions with men were mainly conducted by the author—a cisgender man and parent. The broader social context is a "meta-occupational" community comprising a rust-belt town and district in European Russia, the long-term research site of the author (Morris, 2016). This is a mainly working-class and deindustrializing space, but also contains many multi-national corporations and foreign workers, as well as relatively easy access to the metropolis Moscow—4–5 h away.

One of the imperatives of my approach is to show that a more sociologically satisfactory knowledge of prejudice can be produced by using ethnographic methods. Derogatory or phobic talk can be set in its social, cultural, and personal context, and its operationalization linked or disaggregated from elite discourses (cf. Speer and Potter, 2000). Further, the weight given to the ethnographic is intended to serve as an explicit example of how reliance on survey methods cannot tell us much about prejudice.

Russian sexuality studies

Although the Bolshevik criminal codes omitted sex between men, Stalin recriminalized male homosexual activity [*muzhelovstvo*-sodomy] from 1934 under Articles 154a and later 121 of the criminal code. Some women were subjected to repressive psychotherapeutic treatments for deviant sexuality in the USSR. Male homosexual activity was only decriminalized in 1993. Article 121 remains in force but now defines male-male rape. So-called "anti-gay propaganda" laws had been proposed since 2003. From 2006, Regional laws to this effect were passed, and from 2013 a federal law. Sex and sexuality in the USSR became largely taboo subjects, and homosexuality was marked ideologically as, variously, a mental illness, an example of decedent bourgeoisie culture, and later as a form of "moral degradation" (Healey, 2001). Sexuality as expressing moral ambivalence

remains a key reference point in everyday homophobia. More broadly, same-sex relations in Russia have historically been associated with coercion in the army and in the Gulag (although a thriving gay subculture and even literature existed historically). Signaling state support for homophobia and heteronormativity, anti-gay laws from 2013 (Wilkinson, 2014) had a significant effect on further invisibilizing LGBT people from public and media spaces and denying gay rights as human rights (Edenborg, 2019). Despite this, local activist-scholars have played an important role in documenting homophobic violence and arguing for gay rights (Kondakov, 2013).

As a contested field of Soviet and Russian biopolitics, sexuality has long attracted the attention of sociologists and other researchers. Dan Healey, pre-eminent historian of sexuality in the USSR, focuses particularly on the Gulag period (2017). Igor' Kon, prolific researcher of sexuality in general, published openly on this topic during Glasnost in the USSR after 1986. Kon emphasized that despite Soviet legacies, Russia was liberalizing. Nonetheless, he highlighted the historical lack of systemic sex education, taboos on sextalk, and the risk of moral panics around pornography, homosexuality, and sex-ed. Kon predicted the conservative turn in biopolitics by the current Russian regime: viz, Russian spirituality and religiosity as part of a "sexual counter-revolution," an antidote to "dirty and vile" Western permissive decadence and deviance (Kon, n.d.).

A Western normative approach that associates sexual identity with civic recognition is visible in the earliest post-Soviet scholarship. Brian Baer (2000) notes how in the 1990s gays and lesbians become publicly visible and legible to non-LGBT people for the first time primarily as victims. Laurie Essig (1999) was one of the first Western scholars to attempt a history of queer subjectivities in Russia, writing on the misrecognition by the Soviet medical establishment of lesbians as "transsexuals," and the "friendly" institutional settings where male homosexual activity could take place. Essig presented to a wider audience Russian nurture theories about homosexuality, such as infantilization of men via pervasive same-sex socialization within Soviet institutions.

Francesca Stella builds on Essig's approach, seeing the avoidance of binary categories as potentially liberating, or at least providing discursive space for non-heteronormative relations (2015: 46). This paper complements Stella: a discursively cleared ground starts to take shape in cisnormative talk about sexuality and experience, despite remaining "phobic." Other aspects of Stella's approach are useful, particularly the idea of an arena of ambiguous action for women in the late Soviet and post-socialist periods to explore same-sex relationships that blur friendship and sexuality. At the same time, I remain mindful of the continuity of official and unofficial attitudes towards homosexuality as contradicting "public standards of morality," as "morally offensive," and the historical perspective after communism that certain types of legal equality are a threat to social stability (Rivkin-Fish and Hartblay, 2014: 100).

From toleration surveys to ethnographic data on prejudice

A Levada-tsentr (2019) poll on "attitudes to LGBT people" is typical of how "tolerance" and permissiveness are framed in Russia; it found a hardening of attitudes against homosexuality: 56% "disapprove" of homosexuality. Longitudinal data show variation from

51% *approval* in 2005, to a low of 39% in 2013, and back to 47% in 2019 (Levada-tsentr, 2013). In 2019, the main question was: "Do you think sexual orientation can be changed under the influence of external circumstances or is it an innate characteristic?" Russians gave a resounding "no" to this answer in 2013. But in 2019, 46% agreed that sexual identity is malleable, while 27% thought sexuality was innate. It is partly the dissatisfactory nature of these survey findings, reflecting more the "salience" of official homophobic messaging, that prompted the current research.

Sociological comparisons over time give a different picture. Analyses of "civilizational" differences between Russians and "Europeans" show a relatively rapid movement from harsh intolerance of homosexuality to a less intolerant mindset by 2011 (Fabrykant and Magun, 2014). Long-term polling shows a sharp fall in people wanting to "exterminate" homosexuals (from 31% to 5%) while "toleration" nearly doubles to around 25% of respondents. Fabrykant and Magun are optimistic about changes to normative values given that even the highly stigmatized meaning of homosexuality shows moderation over time. On the other hand, their comparative results show that in 2013, 70% of respondents still gave answers indicating they thought homosexuality was somehow pathological.

Russia differs little from Western European countries on issues like extra-marital and premarital sex, divorce, abortion, contraception, and gender roles. In some cases, Russia is more "liberal" than other so-called "Western" countries. Homosexuality is the outlier, with Russia more similar to some Asian and African countries. However, much depends on how questions are phrased; returning to the question of nature-nurture and sexuality, Russians do not look so much like outliers. A recent UK poll, for example, records 34% of respondents as believing that gays are not born but made (YouGov, 2017). As recently as 1998 a majority (62%) of British people thought homosexuality was "wrong" (Clements and Field, 2014). In 2007, 49% of respondents in the US did not "accept" homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2020). Recent EU-wide polling reveals around 25% of people do not agree that LGBT people should enjoy equal rights, 45% would feel uncomfortable seeing their child in a "same-sex love relationship," and 49% feel comfortable with public affection displayed by two men (European Commission, 2019). That survey shows very large differences, with some countries showing a majority against equal rights, with even Nordic countries showing meaningful differences. The framing of homophobia as a "global divide" between the West and the rest is flawed, reinforcing unsociological essentializations. Intolerance is not clearly mapped on to "culture," as recent studies of rapid changes in attitudes attest (Boellstorff, 2004).

We should also note the abstract nature of "rights"-based questions. Walters (2014) argues that the legal focus on antidiscrimination and a social consensus about "toleration," while important in their own right, avoid a more fundamental conversation about LGBTQ inclusion. In a sense, this argument is about a society-wide form of "pinkwashing"—representing LGBTQ achievements and lives in ways that makes queerness "safe" by mapping it on to heteronormativity. It also distracts attention from negative currents—such as ongoing everyday homophobia, structural inequalities. Thus, for Walters "tolerance" is a "trap" in that it settles for less than genuine inclusion of difference and may even work against the acceptance of equality-in-difference.[2] This is not so far from the everyday interpretations of some of my research interlocutors.

To summarize—headline statistics on improving "toleration" in the West are equivocal. Returning to the Russian polling context, similar uncertainty can be observed that undermines the idea of measuring consistent, clear, or even meaningful "values" in isolation from state signaling, with a poll showing a fall in people answering "yes" to the question: "do you consider Russia a European country" (from 52% in 2008 to 29% today). Soviet sexologist Igor' Kon (2007) proposed homophobia as correlated with attitudes towards democracy in Russia. Gays becomes a repository of blame for all the misfortunes and contradictions of a society in transition. With so much attention paid to survey data on "values" in authoritarian states and the increasing weaponization of social science to paint such spaces as civilizationally deficient, or at least un-European, I turned to ethnographic methods to try to excavate what everyday prejudice talk really sounded like, and how much it reflected "elite homophobia" and anti-West propaganda—the kind of messages parodied in the quotations at the beginning of this article. When men and women did repeat talking points like the "dangerous permissiveness" of sex-ed in European schools, I was not surprised. Similarly, people made frequent references to what they thought was irresponsible encouragement of youth to "experiment" with gender identity—a topic Vladimir Putin has also mentioned. These were the core state messages that cut through regardless of gender. Men tended to be outright "phobic" in that they made many remarks of disgust (but not fear). Men also frequently referenced threats to normative ideas about family and masculinity, as one might expect. In the sketches that follow, I focus mainly on the less expected outcomes. In the course of conversation, they were not less frequent than the propaganda tropes, leading me to give sufficient space for discussion of a more vernacular meaning of heterosexism and homophobia. I also focus more on women's talk, as it has been less discussed in previous research (Morris and Garibyan, 2021).

Men in conversation about homosexuality

Ilya is a single man of 30. We are sitting outside in his native village. Ilya has been unemployed for about a year now having previously been a factory worker. He gets by using his car as an informal taxi. Often though, there are few customers, and he comes to water his mother's little plot from the town, his main residence. My words are in italics.

> I recall last time we spoke we talked about how *pidory*[3] are people with a non-traditional sexual orientation…Your 'gays' is something else, fashion maybe.
>
> *And how do you feel about real homosexuals?*
>
> Oh, immediately, 'tratratra' [imitates sound of machine gun firing]. But in the West it's all normal, right? They go on parades, smile? […] They are everywhere. So many have appeared; there didn't used to be them.
>
> *Probably before they kept themselves to themselves. Does it bother you?*
>
> … In Russia it's a man and a woman, they live together. But if it's man and man then it's complete trash. Now though, homos get married (someone was telling me about it), even Russians […] It does exist, even in our town. I've heard about guys kissing in the entry-ways.

> But without a woman, beautiful kids, what is a man? […] It's not that there aren't homos here, it's just that in the West they walk freely, raise flags – it's fashionable. Here they are afraid. Just try to raise a flag to show you're a *pidor* and they'll stamp on you and crush you. And even the cops won't say a word and there'll be no consequences. Honestly, I do believe that this fucking mess came from the West, from English-language countries. […] Before that there were *pidory* only in prison, or they put them in the loony-bin. […] Well actually there was this attempt to have public gay parades in the 80s or something in Russia, and in those days, you know, they didn't say anything, but now they understand that this fucking mess is growing. They tried it in Moscow but the police broke it up immediately and Putin said, 'It's a Russian country, we have boys marrying girls, giving birth to kiddies and we can't have all this shit.' Go and google it yourself, in our country we don't support homos.

Zhenya, a male factory worker, is 36 years old. He is unmarried. Zhenya never served in the army and lacked an experience of its brutalizing effects both in terms of acceptable masculine roles, and attitudes towards homosexuality: "They can do what they want. I don't want to see them kissing. I can't look at that. But they should have the rights that others do. To get legally connected, not in a church, but why not?" Elsewhere Zhenya lamented the frequent lack of a father figure in family life and flirted with the idea of a lack of "proper upbringing" as contributing to same-sex attraction and "experimentation." However, quite unusually for a male interlocutor, he was willing to defend gay rights when we spoke in company, on the grounds of individual freedom and the right to privacy.

Denis, a 50-year-old sales representative of an international industrial firm, comfortably off, well-travelled: "these are not people, but scum who prey on the young and impressionable. They seduce youth – they are just opportunists. It's a measure of the degradation of Europe that they are allowed to openly recruit through those parades." Denis elsewhere reflected on youth problems closer to home relating to his own children. He emphasized the lack of state support for youth. His sense of injustice was not related to economic issues, but state capacity for pastoral care and providing opportunities for youth's flourishing. Even for this successful executive, the possibilities of successful social reproduction were a source of doubt and concern.

Let's take these three composites in turn. Ilya, while repeating many of the widespread homophobic tropes is more concerned with homosexuality not so much as a threat (because it remains relatively abstract), but more as an unpleasant "social fact" that sets into relief his own fragile sense of masculine wholeness (hence the repeated reference to the nuclear family he has been unable to form). Indeed, after the quoted exchange, the conversation veered off into a long monologue about the impossibility for "ordinary guys" to achieve satisfactory status as breadwinners of a family, the fault of the ruling regime. Homosexuals also interest him as a category of people subject to the violent policing state, underlining again his own precarious social position. At the same time their "incorrigibility" and fickle at the same time, the latter aligning with Ilya's experience of the social world as frustrating, not to be trusted and set up to disadvantage "ordinary men" like him.

Zhenya, it should be said, is an outlier among male interlocutors, more heterosexist than homophobic. Ilya's and Denis' responses are more typical. Denis too curiously

articulates social distress and dissatisfaction through a homophobic and heterosexist foil. Denis' vision of homosexuality is nonetheless different from the others—gays are not "incorrigible," they are an example of rootless exploitation, standing in for aspects of the brutal neoliberal capitalist state Russia has become (Morris, 2021). A perceived lack of anchoring forms of socialization emerges, a discourse which makes use of "social conservatism" as well as negatively referencing some aspects of "western permissiveness" from elite discourse. However, given evidence from survey data on the otherwise socially liberal views in Russia and a high level of concern for inequality and social mobility, like Daria Ukhova (2018) I argue that a striking element of vernacular conservatism is as a politically acceptable expression of social distress. Ilya's and Denis' rehearsals of lament are typical of the responses I encountered. "Social distress" can be further broken down into a response to socio-economic dislocation and sense of injustice, particularly for working-class men; political expression that contains a desire for punitively enforced order where there is perceived moral and social "disorder"; a fear of arbitrary "justice" dealt by the state and practical knowledge of its capacity for collective punishment. Finally, there is an elective affinity between state-led conservative narratives of "protection" from the West, and lay values around a loss of guiding moral and social order more generally.

Women in conversation about homosexuality

I introduce my women composites together, as they comprised more of an ethnographic "focus group," in contrast to the men, who were reluctant to discuss sexuality in company.

Lena is in her mid-sixties. Born in a peasant family she moved to factory work at 16 in a regional city, married there, gave up work but had no children. Her husband died in his 40s. She made a second "career" as a nanny for upper-middle-class families to whom she is recommended by word of mouth.

Tanya by contrast is a born Muscovite who lives in her village property. She has an incomplete tertiary education and worked as a technician in industry before the 1990s when many women lost their jobs. Since then she took up a serious of precarious self-employments, typical of women her age. She is now in her mid-70s and retired. She and Lena are friends going back to the 1980s.

Galya is in her mid-thirties, has a higher education and two children. She lives in the local town and works in a branch of the state bureaucracy dealing with local social policy. Commensurately, she has a professionalized profile. Fourth, I introduce her sister, Katya—also in her mid-thirties but a housewife living in the regional capital and with a secondary education and different set of work experiences—in shopwork and hairdressing.

Lena and Tanya—two city pensioners with different homosocial experiences

Lena is sitting comfortably in the tiny wooden house of her older friend Tanya. After tea and bread rolls she is eager to get into the topic.

> I don't really like them – those gays and lesbians. I was a good looking girl when I came to the city and I was singled out at the workers hostel by this girl called Sveta who used to visit. She was seven or 8 years older than me, and was so attentive and we spent all this time together until our lives were like they were on the page together – I would always think – what would Sveta do? What's she thinking of? Like I was really attached to her. And it was only later, perhaps a couple of months after that I was told by this other girl at the factory that this Sveta was coming to the hostel because she was one of *those* girls and had a woman – an older woman at the hostel. That woman started to get very jealous and got me kicked out. And then when I realized – it's so disgusting to me and I couldn't, I just couldn't. I had to get away from her, from her. And since I have this dislike of that kind of thing.

Lena almost immediately segues into what she perceived as a coercive or controlling element in this relationship. She links it, unprompted to a generalization about gay parents adopting children and "forcing their beliefs onto that child. You try to tell me it's not like that over there, but I can see that European children are different." She speaks of her experience of nannying for expatriates and well-to-do Muscovites—"they copy the parents – their movements are less constrained than those of ordinary Russians. I'm not saying whether this is good or bad. However, in Russia, childhood is about '*vospitanie*' [upbringing] first and foremost. Have we ever been Europeans? I don't think so – not with our history."

Later she talks about how Russia is changing too, and not for the better. Children no longer have clear models of prospective behavior, "which would set them in good stead in these difficult times. I hadn't thought about why I feel that way until now, but now you've prompted me, it's coming back." Lena, somewhat upset, relates how one encounter with "that girl" involved coercion and how she "hardly was able to get away." Essentially, she is describing a sexual assault. Tanya, her friend, characteristically sensing the need to intervene, is skillfully able to move the conversation away to her own experience. This was in the mid-1980s when she was working as a technician in a large industrial enterprise in Moscow. Tanya:

> We worked in the same laboratory. She was the granddaughter of a priest who'd been repressed. And she had this empathy and strongly felt my [difficult life] situation. She led me out of that condition. […] later she gave me her poetry to read and it turned out she also had these bipolar tendencies. And so what? She had a [girl]friend who had entangled her in a relationship, who was, by the way, successfully married – it's not unusual, you know.

Lena interjects: "But she didn't press you into a corner with her pestering though." Tanya: "No, no, but you know, I'm so grateful to her for how she helped me. I phone her up now and again now. And regardless of her tendencies, that does nothing to diminish her positive qualities … I consider it all decided at the genetic level – if it comes through, it comes through." Lena: "All the same I disagree – it's the parents who have an influence."

These kinds of conversations were typical. Almost all the women interlocutors of all ages and backgrounds had a homosocial story with undertones of stronger attachment. Most had little or no sexual content, but certainly were interpreted by the women as

containing that potential. Most of the women also responded along the lines articulated by Tanya: "it was a pass, but I diverted it onto friendly tracks."

Katya and Galya—the bureaucrat and the housewife

This time, we are in the local town in the kitchen of Galya. Galya is stressed out from covering for her boss in the "institution." Her sister Katya joins us. Katya predictably talks about how homosexuality is a deficit in upbringing, a result of bad influences, not protecting children from external dangers, typical of interlocutors who base their opinion on a lack of personal experience, and whose talk does reflect various media tropes. Galya, by contrast, because of her work in the institution, frequently comes across minors whose parents are concerned about "sexual deviance," and her specialist social work also takes her to groups of adults who, not identifying as gay, are in same-sex intimate relationships. Although she uses medicalized vocabulary, related to a traditional view of homosexuality as reflecting pathology, her reflections are as follows:

> There is no action taken among the adults – these groups do their own thing and they are left to it. Instead, I'll tell a typical story of a girl of 16 for you. There was a moral panic about Emo 10 years ago. And here the town newspaper warned people about it. Well every few years these subcultures reinvent themselves. We had this charming mouse like girl referred to us because of a conflict between the estranged father and mother. And the mother was violent and it was reported and I had a number of formal meetings with the family, including the grandparents – with whom the girl went to live for a while. The girl had started dressing as a boy, had cut off all her hair, was online in these forums discussing Nordic warriors – she wanted to become a warrior and so shaved the sides of her head and had a top-knot. She was wearing heavy leather boots: that was the worst thing, according to the mother. Things came to a head when she started talking about getting hormone treatment to become a boy so that she could run away and join the navy. Then she could get to Norway, or something like that. Perfectly normal adolescent fantasies – ways of discovering things about herself. There was hardly anything beyond a kind of innocent non-sexual role-play to it. I – and others – went through all this, but of course, the extended family were most concerned that this was all due to malign influences.
>
> Unfortunately, the girl did run away somewhat later. But only for a day. She had indeed been on a forum where there was discussion of transgender issues, and a gay couple in the city had taken her in. My role was to remain professional in my dealings with the parents and try as much as possible to ride the line between intervention and advice. The main advice being to treat the child as an adolescent and not as a little girl. Locking her up and beating her was unlikely to have any desired result. We also discussed the potential issues, from a medical, social and psychological perspective with the minor, her interest in hormone treatment for gender dysmorphia. The main point was to explain the implications of the latter in our country according to the laws we have at the moment.[4]

Galya's sister is listening. She's heard this story before. She interjects

> I guess it is her private life once she's of age – it's their private life [referring to the gay couple] and so that's fair enough. What I can't understand is this word 'tolerance'. Why should one tolerate? This implies the imposition of something undesirable on the rest of us – the 'majority'. In their own private space they can do what they like, but no gay parades – shoving it in the face. For, what? Two percent of the population? We shouldn't have to tolerate that. I don't tolerate pain – I take an analgesic.

Galya's mother has also been listening to the whole conversation. She's a woman who her whole career has worked in positions of seniority in the local factory. She has her own story:

> You know in Kaluga they wanted to have a gay parade. It didn't actually happen in the end, but there was a religious protest on Kirov Avenue about it. I see all these placards. And these nuns – you know we have that nunnery near here…. Like fat and thin ravens, with beady eyes and headscarves. They're shouting something about God and Jesus and I was in a mischievous mood, so I pretended I was a bit stupid: 'Why are you shouting like that? What difference does it make who they sleep with! Protest all you like, but no one's going to sleep with you! Is that what this is about? Go home and get yourselves a candle!'

The grandmother chuckled and continued

> 'A nun will always find a candle', we used to say. It's always existed in single-sex environments. I thought about that [protest] when they passed the law about offending the feelings of believers in 2013. What about offending the feelings of non-believers? Surely we should judge others on the basis of their actions, not on how they make us feel? I don't like the word 'tolerance' either – what's wrong with 'fraternity of peoples' [a Soviet slogan] and peace. That was always enough for me.

Discussion

The deployment of "Europe" as dangerously permissive features in people's talk and it is difficult to disentangle from everyday talk about what many consider to be insincere "toleration" of lifestyles they believe are inferior to "traditional" heteronormative family models. Similarly, their view is that queer visibility—its lack of "modesty" in making claims—such as "Pride" is an aspect of Euro–American culture alienating to Russian values. Russia then comes out as a defender of traditional values. The visibility of "intolerance" entrepreneurs, from politicians to churchmen in Russia and their consistent propagandizing of moral panic over matters of sexuality—particular in terms of the "corruption" of minors, has real affects.

Populists both in Russia and in Europe claim Euro–American culture has lost its way, become decadent and permissive and thus undermines its own Judaeo–Christian heritage and morality, while countries like Russia have retained spiritual identity. However, ordinary people seem more concerned about a general loss of guiding principles, or at least role models in communicating them adequately. "*Vospitanie*"—moral upbringing—

loomed large in discussion (cf. Morris and Garibyan, 2021). It is persistently deployed as explanation and interpretation of how gays are "made" and not "born" through flawed socialization and enculturation processes.

To return to "measurable" attitudes, my long-term interlocutors supplement larger survey data that show that intolerance towards diverse identities, sexual or otherwise is decaying in Russia while social distress remains high on the agenda. The more a defence of the private individual and her personal choices is buttressed, the easier it becomes to defend the rights of the individual and of groups—including those of victimized groups—from the state. In Lena's story, her homophobia arose from an unequal relationship of power and the experience of coercion. It's worth emphasizing the majority of Russian women experience heterosexually coercive relations in institutional contexts. By transference, this everyday experience of Russian women is projected onto a suitable "untouchable" group—so-called "sexual minorities."

A corollary is found in many men's talk. Their failed attempt to emulate hegemonic modes of masculinity aligns with homophobic attitudes, as one would expect. Talk continues to implicitly place queer lives in the category of pollution and deviance. All forms of sexual behavior outside the family lack a non-stigmatizing public language in Russia; this results in an impoverished form of private discursiveness and a retreat to a defence of "equality" over "tolerance." At best, if publicly shamed behaviors (such as sex work, extramarital sex, and homosexuality) retreat to the private sphere, they are tolerated. That a story of same-sex assault on an innocent person is highlighted, indicates a vernacularization of the morality tale of LGBT people as a hidden danger or an illegible "other." Is this different from the less visible discourses of homophobia that persist in "western" societies? It is hard to say. A repeated subtext is a concern that strong identarian claims bring risks to moral order—that the claim to "minority" status can lead to exceptions to the logic of order stemming from sameness producing equality. Thus, vernacular conservatism is diverse and inflected by state homophobia but tends to articulate anti-gay sentiment within a broader context of socioeconomic distress and political powerlessness in which a social imaginary of the past (state-enforced moral order) serves a frame of reference.

Conclusion

Although signs appear of more accepting attitudes towards privatized behavior, elite discourse on homosexuality is reproduced in vernacular talk, as is media discourse of Europeanness as permissive and deviant. Furthermore, the conservative turn in politics is also powerful in pre-empting much discussion on such topics in everyday life. The ethnographic conversation is not a "typical" situation, but nonetheless produces reflection, contestation, and reflexivity that occur in "real life" too. Vernacular talk that struggles to name or describe same-sex encounters in the language of differentiated sexual identity continues to reflect the legacy of an absence historically of "homosexuality as a distinct and visible category" (Baer, 2000: 611). Further, the ethnography here rehearses the recurring problems of Western queer theory and sexual identity politics as applied to

contexts with no or little history of civic recognition of other sexual identities (see Chang, 2014; Oswin, 2006).

As Rivkin-Fish and Hartblay argue: "Attitudes about sexuality are thus wrapped up in anxieties about reproduction and the survival of the Russian nation—and young Russians' bodies are marked as potential national resources to be funneled toward heterosexual reproduction" (2014: 201).

In the Russian authoritarian case, vernacular narratives of prejudice emerge that are confluent but not entirely congruent with official homophobic nationalism; they are strongly infused with content that departs significantly from the official script—playing a role in expressing social distress in an environment where open criticism otherwise lacks legitimacy. Such talk draws on political and social resources that oppose non-normative sexuality and gender roles to "sincere," as well as "equal" personal relations which trace back to Soviet norms. A shift to investigating vernacular prejudice is essential in fully jettisoning unsatisfactory psychological, individual, or culturalist framings of intolerance (often packaged as a civilizational values approach). Homophobia is rarely approached empirically in the social sciences; such research can help differentiate between deeper socially structured and malleable hegemonic dispositions, while acknowledging how personal experience and the life-course do contribute to prejudice. Given the global alignment of right-wing populism, there is a political imperative for researchers who investigate intolerance in sexuality and gender studies to take more seriously the potential of ethnographic methods to uncover the meaning of vernacular homophobia/heterosexism and other phenomena of exclusion and othering.

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ORCID iD

Jeremy Morris https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8861-9929

Notes

1. I have a number of self-identifying gay, lesbian, and trans research interlocutors, but because of potential risks to them I have made a conscious ethical choice not to write about their experiences.
2. Walters (2014) argues that "tolerance" is a particular project that integrates LGBTQ lives as "just like" heterosexuals, thereby eliding that these groups mental health, legal, or political needs are not necessarily the same.

3. *Pidor* literally translates as "pedo." It indicates the (un)easy association between forms of sexual deviance as well as a sense of unmasculine contempt. As with North American English uses of the word "faggot," usage may easily slide between literal and figurative use ("repellent male" and "useless person"). Like the term "faggot," the pejorative gendering implications of the term "pidor" may be more important than those pertaining to sexuality (Pascoe, 2007).
4. Hormone treatment for gender dysmorphia, as it is defined, is permitted for adults under the direction of a specialist doctor.

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Jeremy Morris is professor of Russian and Global Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. His research combines ethnographic methods with critical political economy and focusses on neoliberalism, state capitalism and everyday politics. His most recent book is Everyday Postsocialism (Palgrave 2016).