

I. KON

Homophobia as a Litmus Test of Russian Democracy

An analysis by Russia's leading researcher on sexuality of how attitudes toward homosexuality have changed over time, and what this may tell us about the state of politics and democratic values in contemporary Russia.

But you need to be aware that homosexuality has been eliminated in our country, perhaps once and for all but not wholly. Or, more precisely, wholly but not in full. Or even, more precisely, wholly and in full, but not once and for all. And what is on the mind of the public these days? Nothing but homosexuality.
—*Venedikt Erofeev*

These words of Venedikt Erofeev, spoken many years ago, are more relevant today than ever. The problem of attitudes toward people who love differently has come to occupy a central place in Russian politics, the mind of the public, and the study of public opinion. In the present article, while

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Igor' Kon works for the Institute of Ethnology and Antropology, Russian Academy of Sciences.

I do not touch upon general questions concerning homosexuality and the factors leading to its normalization, which I have dealt with in detail in other works, I do want to discuss: (a) why this problem has become so timely and relevant in today's Russia; (b) how it is refracted in the mirror of mass surveys; and (c) how it influences the state of the mass consciousness and our country's international image.

Homophobia and xenophobia

The normalization of same-sex love and the task of eliminating homophobia, a term that the European Parliament in its Resolution of January 18, 2006, defines as “irrational fear and revulsion toward homosexuality and toward lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders, based on a prejudice similar to racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and sexism,” is one of the most urgent objectives of any democratic society.

Xenophobia, which is irrational hatred of foreigners, has been a trait of mankind since the beginning. Just which ethnocultural group evokes the greatest hatred toward itself and in what terms this hatred is expressed depend on the type of culture and the specific social conditions. In places where religion represents the dominant form of the public's consciousness, all prejudices are formulated in religious terms, and the person of a different faith is the main enemy. “The one true faith” separates “we who are pure” from “those others who are impure.” In other cases, the dividing line is drawn on the basis of origin (non-Russians), territorial or state affiliation (foreigners, people of other lands), skin color (racism), and so on. In a place where, as in the Soviet Union, an ideological monopoly was assiduously maintained, the main internal threat was posed by “enemies of the people,” those who thought differently (dissidents) acting at the behest of the external enemy—“Trotsky's Yids” and Western spies. All of these stereotypes were also applied to people who love differently.

Although the preferred objects of hatred may differ, for the most part these feelings are generalized and interwoven. “Various types of xenophobia intersect (the probability that respondents who express ethnonational antipathies of one sort or another will be found as well to express other types of xenophobia stands at 75–80 percent), and in this way they form complex sets of negative reactions to ‘imaginary others.’”¹ Often it does not matter to the attacker whom he beats up—whether it is “blacks,” Jews, Chinese, Peruvians, or members of a “different” youth subculture—it is enough that they are “alien.”

In the Soviet Union, same-sex love was, all at the same time, a crime

(Article 121 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, a mental disorder, and a product of the bourgeois lifestyle. Making a transition to European norms would require becoming liberated from this legacy.

In 1993, homosexuality was decriminalized. This was done not because the authorities had become enlightened or were pressured from below (gay organizations had no real influence, and it was a matter of indifference to everyone else). Instead, it was exclusively out of political considerations, in order to join the Council of Europe. What motivated the decision was not explained to the public. The criminal article was simply repealed, and it made many personnel of the punitive agencies—which are now, for some reason, called law enforcement agencies—unhappy; Article 121 had provided them with broad opportunities to abuse their power.

A second event took place in 1999—depathologization. The country adopted the classification of diseases of the World Health Organization, which does not include that diagnosis [i.e., mental disorder]. The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), which has been adopted by all of the civilized countries including Russia, Japan, and China, stipulates that there are three sexual orientations: heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual—none of which is, in and of itself, a disease and does not require medical treatment. In the West these shifts were preceded by many years of research and disputes, while the medical people in Russia, as in the case of lawyers earlier on, were simply presented with an accomplished fact. Just why such a terrible “sexual perversion” suddenly became a normal option, was never clearly explained to anyone, even to doctors. Several uneducated psychiatrists and sex pathologists, greatly annoyed over their loss of money and power, gave a hostile reception to the demedicalization of homosexuality, and instead of explaining to the broader public the actual facts of the matter, have continued to release homophobic statements, which have not been met with the rebuff that they deserve in the medical community.

The fact that things happened this way was not due to malicious intent. In Russia the custom has always been to hope that everything will just turn out all right by itself. But the only result has been trouble.

The legalization of same-sex love made it more visible and brought it out in the open, and this has irritated older, conservative people and all those who feel that they have been cheated by the transition to market relations and by the democratization that calls for tolerance toward different lifestyles. Given the fact that no sex education at all is taught in this country, people’s attitudes toward sexual minorities remain contradictory and quite

hostile. According to the data of representative national surveys by the Levada Center in 1998, 2001, and 2005, 31 percent of Russians continue to firmly believe that homosexuality is a disease or the result of mental trauma; 36 percent say that it is a consequence of licentiousness and a bad habit; and only 20 percent say that it is a sexual orientation with the same right to exist as the conventional kind (in 2005 the proportion of these answers rose to 39.5 percent among people between eighteen and twenty-four).

Ordinary homophobia is supplemented by political homophobia

Assaults against sexual minorities by fascist nationalist organizations became more prevalent throughout all of the 1990s. In 2001 and 2002, against the background of the rebirth of the imperial mindset, the increasing strength of nationalism and xenophobia and the clericalization of the Russian state, these assaults entered a new phase. In the spring of 2002, a draft law was introduced in the State Duma that called for reinstating criminal prosecution for sodomy. Of course it was turned down—if it had been passed, Russia would have had to “get out” of Europe. But the campaign in the mass media to discredit sexual minorities continued.

Gays were demonized and were made the scapegoats not only for their own sins but also for all the misfortunes and contradictions of life, from the demoralization of the armed forces to the decline in birthrates (it would be just as reasonable to blame that decline on the increase in the number of monasteries). The main moving force behind this campaign was the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church’s hostile attitude toward homosexuality is based not only on canonical but also political motives. Having made homophobia a kind of national religious idea, the Church people are trying to rally conservative forces and faiths around itself not only inside the country but also worldwide. In my view, it is a shortsighted and utopian strategy. A negative ideology that replaces positive values with the image of an enemy is not going to work in the long run. And since the Church’s homophobia is being sold in the same package as sex-phobia (which bans sex education, condemns erotic art, demands sexual abstinence until marriage, etc.), homophobia is more acceptable to retired people than to young people. Condemnations of temptation that are too strident can even result in “promoting homosexuality”: after all, if the fruit were not so sweet, who would ever talk about it so much?

A specific feature of Russian political homophobia: Its harshly expressed anti-Western orientation

The fact that at the beginning of the new millennium Russia and the West began to develop in opposite political and ideological directions in no way depends on sexual minorities, but it does have a powerful effect on their position. In the West, after the processes of decriminalization and depathologization were completed, sexual minorities began to fight to have their human and civil rights recognized, and with the support of democratic forces they made substantial progress in this regard. In Russia, gays were no longer criminals or sick, but they received no rights or guarantees of safety. Although they have their own clubs and Internet sites, in regard to social concerns it is as if they did not exist. Since 1995, the Moscow authorities have regularly denied registration to gay civil rights organizations “on moral grounds.” In the electronic media they are usually portrayed as caricatures or in hostile ways. When a proposal was made in the State Duma to ban Jewish organizations, President Vladimir Putin, during a speech in Poland, departed from his text to say that it made him ashamed. But no one has apologized for abusive statements against sexual minorities, and no one feels ashamed.

Vox populi, vox Dei?

Quite a few surveys of public opinion have been devoted to the dynamics of Russians’ sexual tolerance, and I have cited their findings and analyzed them in my own books.² In interpreting these data, however, it is essential to keep in mind what questions are being addressed for discussion and in what context: (1) determination of the nature of homosexuality and designation of it as “normal” or “not normal,” without explicitly specifying the criteria of either one; (2) moral and psychological assessment of such relations; (3) the degree of their acceptability “for oneself” and for one’s close relatives and friends; (4) recognition of same-sex marriages; or (5) their right to adopt children—these are all completely different situations that call for differing degrees of tolerance.

The content and tone of the answers strongly depend on the wording and the context of the questions and on the answer choices offered. In the beginning, homosexuality was of interest to the organizers of mass surveys only as one indicator of general social tolerance. The following standard question, which showed up repeatedly in questionnaires of the Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion [VTsIOM] and the Levada Center—“How should people be treated whose behavior deviates from

Table 1

What Should Be Done with Homosexuals? (as % of respondents, 2005)

	1989	1994	2003
Liquidate them	35	22	21
Keep them isolated from society	28	23	27
Give them help	5	8	6
Leave them alone	9	29	34
Difficult to answer	23	17	12

the commonly accepted norms?" in which homosexuals are ranked in the same category as prostitutes, drug addicts, vagrants, alcoholics, homeless people, the "congenitally defective," and so on—makes it possible to measure the level of social intolerance in the country as a whole and toward individual stigmatized groups, but at the same time it sets a definite negative attitude toward them. Attitudes toward homosexuals, according to Levada Center surveys, are presented in Table 1.

In August 2005, the figures turned out slightly different: "How should homosexuals be treated?" (as a percentage of respondents, 2005):

Provide medical treatment	17
Isolate them from society	12
Physically eliminate them	3
Provide psychological and other help	27
Leave them alone	30
Difficult to answer	10

As the data in Table 1 reveal, on the whole the dynamics of attitudes toward homosexuals since 1989 provide evidence that hostility toward them has diminished (only a portion of the data at hand are cited). But the sudden upsurge of tolerance in 2005, in my opinion, is due not only to the use of a different scale but also, to an even greater degree, to the fact that this time, questions about "homosexuals" focused on them separately rather than lumping them in with other "antinormative" groups.³

According to Levada Center data, Russians' attitudes toward criminal prosecution for homosexual relations looks contradictory (see Table 2). From 1994 through 2002 the proportion of those in favor of repressive measures declined substantially, from 53 percent to 31 percent, while the share of those opposed to such measures rose by a factor of 2.5. This

Table 2

In Russia Should Homosexual Relations Between Consenting Adults Be Prosecuted According to the Law or Not? (as a % of respondents)

	1994	2002	2005	2006	2007
Yes	52	31	44	37	41
No	21	53	38	45	40
Do not know / difficult to answer	27	16	19	17	18

represented a part of the overall democratic process. In 2005 answers in favor of repression went up to 44 percent, then down to 37 percent in 2006, and up again to 41 percent in 2007. In my opinion, these fluctuations are largely situational and are due to the influence of the mass media.

In a neutral context the answers become more friendly. For example, in response to a Levada Center question in August 2005 that read: “Do you agree or disagree with the statement that gays and lesbians should enjoy the same rights as other citizens in Russia?” 51 percent answered in the affirmative, and more than 69 percent of respondents between eighteen and twenty-four. I think that in their answers to this question, the respondents were expressing their attitudes not so much toward sexual minorities as such as toward the principle of equal rights for all citizens.

Answers to the following question sound even more positive: “The laws of Russia prohibit discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, and religion, as well as the incitement of national, racial, or religious enmity. Would you be in favor of or opposed to a law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation?” (Levada Center surveys). In April 2005, such a ban was endorsed by 43 percent of Russians; a year later the figure was 45 percent, while the share of those opposed to it fell from 36 percent to 29 percent.

A very significant picture of attitudes toward homosexuality on the part of Russia’s urban population—not on political grounds but on the level of everyday concerns—can be seen in a representative Levada Center survey carried out in June 2003, exploring people’s everyday attitudes toward those who love differently (as a percent of the number of respondents):

<i>What is your attitude toward homosexuals and lesbians? (as percent)</i>	
Good will	1
Interest	1

Calmness, no special feelings	45
Apprehension	11
Irritation	16
Revulsion or fear	21
No answer/difficult to answer	5

What would your attitude be if a homosexual or lesbian couple moved in next door to you? (as percent)

Positive	3
No feeling	41
Apprehensive	25
Severely negative	29
No answer/difficult to answer	2

What would your attitude be if you had to work with homosexuals or lesbians? (as percent)

Positive	2
No feeling	41
Apprehensive	21
Severely negative	29
No answer/difficult to answer	7

What would your attitude be if one of your close friends turned out to be a homosexual or lesbian? (as percent)

Positive	2
No feeling	26
Apprehensive	23
Severely negative	35
No answer/difficult to answer	14

As these data reveal, more than half of Russians have a hostile or apprehensive attitude toward gays and lesbians. The same thing was shown by a survey carried out by the Public Opinion Foundation (POF) in June 2006. Almost half of the respondents acknowledged that their attitude toward homosexuals and lesbians is one of condemnation (an opinion shared most often by men and by representatives of groups with the fewest resources, such as older people age, citizens without much education, and people living in the countryside). A somewhat smaller proportion (40 percent) say that their attitude toward sexual minorities is not one of condemnation (a position held more often by women, young people, highly educated respondents, and people living in Moscow and other megalopolises). Another 13 percent of the respondents found it

difficult to express their attitudes toward people of nontraditional sexual orientation.

It is important to emphasize that *hostile and apprehensive attitudes toward sexual minorities do not stem from the respondents' personal experience*. In response to the following Levada Center question (in June 2003), "Are there any homosexuals among people you know?" only 7.6 percent answered yes, while 89.8 percent said no. Among the respondents to a POF survey (in June 2006), 11 percent said that they were personally acquainted with representatives of sexual minorities, but for 9 percent the number of such acquaintances was small, and for the overwhelming majority (87 percent) there were none at all. Moreover, people who are personally acquainted with representatives of sexual minorities have a considerably more positive attitude toward them than other citizens do: in this group, only 28 percent condemn homosexuality, while two thirds (63 percent) are not condemnatory. Among people living in the capital city and megalopolises, one out of six has acquaintances who are homosexuals, and in those places attitudes toward them are the most tolerant. Can it be that gays are not as frightening as the way they are portrayed, and perhaps the time has come to think about who is stirring Russians up against one another and why?

Just as in Western countries, *Russians' degree of tolerance depends on a number of sociodemographic factors*. As a rule, young people, with the exception of adolescent boys and young adult males, are more tolerant than older and elderly people, women are considerably more tolerant than men, better-educated people are more tolerant than uneducated people, and people living in Moscow, St Petersburg, and other megalopolises are more tolerant than villagers and inhabitants of small towns. The respondents' level of tolerance is closely linked to their political views: hostility to gays usually goes hand in hand with other forms of xenophobia. Moreover, regional differences are quite persistent. Other variations in different surveys do not appear very consistent. The correlation between the age and cohort parameters of sexual tolerance and the social, structural, and cultural determinants of it could—and should!—be an object of special study.

Of particular interest is a question about attitudes toward *public manifestations of nontraditional sexual orientation*. A POF questionnaire included this question: "In your opinion, if a person belongs to a sexual minority, should he or should he not conceal it from people around him?" More than half of Russians say that representatives of sexual minorities should conceal their orientation from the people around them, while only 28 percent think that they should not, and 19 percent found it difficult to answer.

Table 3

The Connection Between the Condemnation of Homosexuality and Demands That It Be Concealed (100% by column)

Believe that concealing membership in a sexual minority from other people	Hold an attitude toward members of a sexual minority that is . . .	
	One of disapproval	Not disapproving
Is necessary	68	39
Is not necessary	18	44
Difficult to answer	14	17

Source: Public Opinion Foundation.

Why do people think this way? First and foremost, this attitude is closely linked to the respondent's attitude toward homosexuality (see Table 3).

It is perfectly understandable that people who condemn homosexuality are considerably more likely than tolerant people to say that it should be concealed (68 percent versus 39 percent); only one out of six (18 percent) does not share that opinion. But even among those who do not condemn gays and lesbians, more than a third (39 percent) say that homosexuality should be concealed. Why?

Immediately the "unnamable vice" comes to mind: nontraditional sexuality is a sin that one must be ashamed of. But it is all much more complicated than that. In responses to the open question "Why do you think that the Moscow authorities did the right thing when they prohibited representatives of sexual minorities from holding a parade?" first place ranking (16 percent of those who approved of the decision) went to the answer that "intimate relations should not be put on display." But various arguments motivate this: "If you are a minority, just keep quiet," "Why put it on exhibit for all to see?" "Why bring it out in the open? It should be done in secret," "Why put your orientation on display?" "Why exhibit it to people? Do what you are doing and keep quiet about it," "Everyone's personal life is taboo, and it should not be put on display," "It is wrong to advertise your orientation," "There is no reason to put on display the details of your personal life, especially the intimate details," "It is not right to advertise your affiliation with a sexual minority."

These are completely different arguments. In one case the condemnation of public manifestation is based on a hidden or unconscious hostility

toward nontraditional sexuality; in another case it is a failure to understand that any minorities may have problems that are in need of public discussion; in still other cases it is the conviction that a person's sex life should not be manifested at all.

This latter aspect is especially interesting, since the traditional Russian culture is considered to be more closed off and introverted (some call this a virtue) than Western culture. In a 1999 spot survey by the Levada Center, only 22 percent of the respondents said they were in favor of "frank discussions of sex," while 52 percent said they did not like it. But could we be overstating ethnocultural differences if we try to make people's actual behavior fit normative attitudes? Many European travelers in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, especially Anglo-Saxons, were absolutely shocked by the sexual openness of our ancestors, and when NTV put on a program called "All About That," I was astonished at the number of people who were willing to report their most intimate experiences to the audience; in my conservative opinion, it is not very prudent and not very decent. In any case, it is a topic that needs special study.

By the way, "not conceal" and "put on display for all to see" are two completely different behaviors, and not just in the area of sexuality, but at the same time a great deal depends on perception. When any stigmatized group "comes out of the closet" it is always, at first, perceived as overstepping established boundaries and, consequently, as an act of aggression. Compare these statements: "I love women, but nonetheless their place is in the home and not in politics"; "I don't have anything against Jews, but I wish they would just sit in their synagogue and keep out of my sight"; "I don't have anything against gays, but why do they have to put on such a display?"

Summarizing the conclusions of most of the surveys, we can say that:

1. The overall level of hostility toward people who love differently in this country is high, and it varies depending on gender, age, level of education, place of residence, and political views.
2. In the case of the overwhelming majority of people this hostility—which is five times more powerful against gay men than against lesbians—is not based on any personal experience of associating with them; rather, it is a consequence of traditional homophobic indoctrination and the influence of the mass media.
3. The overwhelming majority of Russia's population, including the intelligentsia, does not have even the most rudimentary knowledge of the nature of homosexuality, and there is practically no place they can get this information.

4. Russians' attitudes toward sexual minorities cannot be reduced only to the antithesis—homophobia or homophilia. A substantial portion of the population, on the order of 40–45 percent, is indifferent toward these issues, which they think have been blown out of proportion. According to estimates by analysts of the Levada Center, based on a national survey April 15–18, 2005, the proportion of consistent homophobes is about 22 percent, and of consistently tolerant people, about 23 percent.
5. The entities that deliberately incite homophobia are the same people and organizations that preach traditionalism, national and religious exclusiveness, and hatred toward democratic values.
6. When comparing the data of different surveys it is essential to pay attention both to the way the questions are formulated and to situational factors, including the time and the conditions under which the survey is conducted. It is possible that the use of more complete statistical methods would introduce substantial adjustments to the interpretation of the survey data.

The uproar over gay pride

Until 2005, sexual minorities in Russia did not cause any special worries to the authorities. In spite of numerous instances of defamation and discrimination, many gays and lesbians figured that the repeal of criminal prosecution, the ability to satisfy their sexual affinities without hindrance, and the fact that they had their own subculture and entertainment industry (clubs, discotheques, etc.) were sufficient conditions to provide for their social well-being. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual [LGBT] organizations that emerged in the 1990s, which were not very large and were widely scattered (they did not succeed in creating a national center) because they did not dare to squabble with all-powerful authorities, confined themselves primarily to working on local projects, creating an association infrastructure (a major role in this is played by the Internet), providing counseling, and, in cooperation with state and public medical centers, preventing HIV infection. They did not try to get involved in politics, and they did not even do much in the way of civil rights activity. It was a situation that, on the whole, was satisfactory to socially successful and apolitical gays. However, the contrast between what they saw in the West (including the legalization, in some form or other, of same-sex unions) and what they saw in their own country, could hardly fail to prompt

psychological tension and feelings of resentment. A new round in the struggle to eliminate homophobia in Europe evoked a response in Russia as well. When a small group of activists headed by N. Alekseev (the Gay-Russia.ru project), with the support of European LGBT organizations and contrary to the opinion of the LGBT organizations in Russia, announced that an international gay pride parade would be held in Moscow on May 27, 2006, it was as if a bomb had been set off.

By Western standards, a gay pride parade is nonconfrontational. Europeans may argue fiercely about the legalization of same-sex marriage or whether gays should have the right to adopt children, but it has been a long time since anyone there disputed the rights of sexual minorities to enjoy general civil equality, to organize themselves, to be represented in parliament, to conduct mass political demonstrations, and so on. The term *gay pride* refers to a parade to manifest gays' pride. But is it reasonable to be proud of your religion or nationality, especially if you did not choose them yourself? Nonetheless, people do cultivate such feelings. The underlying sociopsychological problem is that there are different ways to destroy a person. A person can be destroyed not only physically and legally but also morally. All it takes is to teach him the following from childhood on: we do not forbid you to exist, but you must at all times remember that you are depraved, an outcast, inferior, so just sit still and keep quiet and do not complain about anything. The child who absorbs this—a phenomenon called “internalized homophobia,” but the same thing was also done in the case of Jews, people of color, women, and all kinds of others—will spend the rest of his life feeling scorned and hated. A person whose self-respect has been destroyed truly will end up being socially and mentally inferior.

Parades to manifest different kinds of “pride” historically emerged as a means for oppressed minorities to provide themselves with sociopsychological self-defense. The slogan “Black Is Beautiful” is just a response to white racism; “Feminism Is Good” is a response to male chauvinism; and “Gay Is Good” is a response to those who say that same-sex love is “the unnamable vice.” No one in a democratic society should be either “untouchable” or “unnamable.” All a “Gay Pride” parade means is that this group of human beings, like any other group, need not be ashamed of itself and can go out into the streets openly. This does not mean, certainly, that when he does go into the street such a person wants to “entice” everyone else to embrace his own faith. In the West, such demonstrations [parades] have been familiar sights for a very long time; they are an entertaining spectacle with elements of politics. Whoever wants to can watch it; whoever wants

to can participate; whoever does not want to can turn away. It is certainly the case that President Bush considers homosexuality a sin, and he does everything he can to prevent the spread of same-sex marriage in the United States, but even in his dreams he would not be able to ban Gay Pride.

In Russia and in certain other countries that only recently acknowledged democratic values, there are no such traditions; in those places, Gay Pride is perceived exclusively to be “a demonstration of nontraditional sexual relations,” and objectively this provides grist for the mill of political forces that have an interest in strengthening homophobia. The way things stand in France, where homosexuality was decriminalized back in 1810, certainly differs a great deal from the situation in Russia, where this did not happen until 1993 and where many legal norms in general are only in effect on paper. Serious politicians cannot help drawing a distinction between (a) attitudes toward homophobia and (b) specific methods to combat them. The former is a matter of principle, while the latter is a matter of political expediency. In October 2005 I analyzed the situation in Russia from this standpoint, and I concluded that despite all of the legal and moral credentials of the idea, staging a Gay Pride parade in Moscow was pretty much unfeasible and not politically expedient.⁴

Unfortunately, my apprehensions came true. The Gay Pride idea was exploited by fascists, nationalists, and religious fundamentalists to serve as a pretext for carrying out mass acts of intimidation. Their calls for violence were completely open, and the victims of the violence were people who were not guilty of anything, and their exact number is not known. The position taken by the authorities and the police was at best ambiguous, and often they were in on it with the thugs. The attempt to hold the Gay Pride event split the Russian LGBT community (most of the LGBT organizations refrained from taking part in unsanctioned street demonstrations); it helped the Black Hundred homophobic forces to consolidate, gave impetus to aggressive homophobic propaganda, for which no one anywhere was made to answer, and it strengthened anti-Western sentiments by making it possible to portray homosexuality as something that was being foisted onto Russian culture from outside. Things have reached the point of a complete rejection of the principle of toleration, to the point of equating it with prostitution, with calls to “put a ban on the profession,” and so on. Public opinion does not come into it at all. The most important question is: Whom do the mass media belong to and who controls them?

Even though the action drew a lot of attention, not a single well-known Russian politician or civil rights activist gave it any support, and its pur-

pose remained unknown to public opinion. Quite aside from Russians' ambivalent attitudes toward street actions in general and toward manifestations of sexuality in particular, the country does have plenty of very urgent problems, and going out into the streets is something that people understand if it has a specific aim, such as getting paid, recovering stolen money, managing to get a hated minister recalled, or whatever. It is not clear to the general public why the gays are taking to the streets. After all, they are not being put in jail, their clubs are not being closed down, so what else do they want?! They just do not know when they are well off! The organizers of the parade did not know how to explain their motives, the most influential mass media were not accessible to them, and in fact the concept of personal dignity is not an easy one. In response to the following Levada Center question in 2006, "Should the representatives of sexual minorities have the right to put on street demonstrations?" 76 percent of Russians said no, while only 9 percent said it was acceptable. According to the findings of a June 2006 POF survey, the Moscow authorities' decision to prohibit the Gay Pride parade was approved of by 77 percent of Russians, while only 9 percent thought that the decision was not right, and 14 percent found it difficult to express an opinion on the ban. At the same time—and this is an important point!—51 percent of the Levada Center's respondents do not approve of antigay protest actions.

According to Western *norms*, a Gay Pride parade in Moscow was absolutely lawful, and European politicians and activists had a perfect right to take part in it. But, according to Russian *conceptions*, it was just a European show, intended to be performed primarily for the European viewer. Russians who had a hostile attitude toward the West saw it as a provocation, one designed specially to spoil Russia's reputation on the eve of the meeting of the Big Eight in St. Petersburg (although the coincidence of the dates was just an accident, as May 27 marks the thirteenth anniversary of the repeal of the criminal article).

To people of a neutral outlook the action had the appearance of theater, reminiscent perhaps of the kind of college student agitation brigades of the Soviet era that went out to exhort the kolkhoz peasants to bring in the crops without any losses, or perhaps the Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century who were resolved, by their own personal example, to encourage the cannibals in the jungle to start wearing civilized clothing. In order to get in on the benefits of civilization, a one-time supreme chief of the tribe signed an international convention that permitted diversity in clothing, but the foreign shamans, not wishing to give up their own principles and

revenues, convinced the brave warriors of the jungle that trousers, which cover up a man's "dignity," not only make it smaller and thus diminish his potency, but also conflict with their traditional tribal, spiritual values, the highest in the world. "Real men" gave the unarmed missionaries a bit of a beating along with the few of their fellow tribesmen who had joined the missionaries, and the local chieftain solemnly announced that as long as he was alive, no man would be allowed to show himself in the village street wearing trousers. The European powers were shocked by such a violation of human rights, but because the price of oil kept rising they did not send their gunboats but confined themselves merely to verbal denunciation. . . .

But if the Gay Pride parade in Moscow was doomed to failure from the outset, the ban on it and its dispersal were just as fatefully destined for world success. I would compare the significance of these events to the effect of the infamous "bulldozing" of the exhibition of unofficial art in the Soviet era. In and of itself, the abstract art hardly bothered anyone, but when paintings are destroyed by running them over with bulldozers, that is something else! *The Moscow pogroms vividly demonstrated the connection between homophobia, xenophobia, religious extremism, and fascism.* For many foreign observers, the acts of pogrom thuggery and their justification in public by Church and secular authorities, represented the moment of truth that made it possible to see the political face of Russia without its "democratic" makeup on.

This is especially important in the long-term perspective. Broken heads and arms and irresponsible speeches may be forgotten, but a small band of decently dressed people who have been bold enough to come out with open faces and flowers in their hands against an enraged mob of fanatics is going to evoke sympathy and will remain fixed in the historical memory, especially considering that all of these events have been recorded on countless video and movie cameras and widely disseminated by the mass media in the West. Drunken thugs, maliciously pious old men, cartoonishly militant carriers of church banners, and a fearsome OMON [special purpose police squad], all produce an indelible impression on anyone who sees them, regardless of sexual orientation or political sympathies. It was a much more impressive show than any Gay Pride demonstration in Europe, even if participants in it there had taken all their clothes off!

World reactions to the events in Moscow, which the Russian mass media tried to hush up or play down, turned out to be quite serious. It turned out that there are no double standards in the West in regard to human rights, and there they expect from Moscow the same tolerance as from Catholic Warsaw (in spite of opposition from Poland's president [Lech] Kaczyński,

the mayor's office in Warsaw authorized a Gay Pride parade in 2007, and it came off without any excesses). The pogroms were denounced by both the left and the right. A letter to Putin was signed by fifty members of the U.S. Congress. And when a deputy from the Christian Democratic Union [CDU] said, in regard to a left-wing German deputy who was beaten up in Moscow, that, in effect, the man ought not to have taken part in an unauthorized rally in a foreign country (a view fully in keeping with the Russian mentality), German chancellor Angela Merkel issued an apology for her fellow CDU member. The Christian Democrats do not endorse same-sex marriage, but beating up on peaceful demonstrators, no matter where it happens, is unacceptable to them in principle.

In May 2007, history repeated itself. The organizers of the demonstration, having learned their lesson, this time gave it the modest name of just a march to submit a petition to the mayor's office in defense of the rights of homosexuals; but the authorities still prohibited it. And even though no one ever expected a peaceful resolution of the conflict after the "dissenters' marches" were routed, the scenes of unarmed people being beaten up, and the arrest and subsequent prosecution of the organizers of the march for "violating the traffic laws," could hardly fail to make an impression on the world community. At the same time, the Moscow authorities' fear and panic in the face of a small group of unarmed people also produced a comical effect, turning a bugbear into a laughing stock. By now, not only human rights activists and members of the European Parliament spoke up in defense of the rights of Russia's sexual minorities but also several heads of state and nonpolitical international organizations. In particular, the United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) announced that "the violence and assaults committed against activists who were demonstrating for gay rights in Russia's capital city on May 27 undermine both the rights of human beings and effective measures to combat AIDS in Russia. . . . Whenever the physical safety or freedom of expression and assembly of gay males (or any other group of people) are placed in jeopardy, it leads to social marginalization. In turn, this marginalization restricts such men's access to health care and information services and thereby exacerbates their vulnerability to HIV infection."⁵

Reactions within the country have become more variegated. The pro-government parties and the mass media have been stepping up the volume of their claims of a "European conspiracy" that is designed to undermine Russian morality and statehood. Opposition politicians, as a rule, disassociate themselves both from Gay Pride and from sexual minori-

ties. But even though not a single political party in Russia has expressed a willingness to recognize the rights of sexual minorities, it has been done, in spite of difficult relations with the organizers of the Moscow demonstration, by leading civil rights organizations as well as by a few deputies (A. Mitrofanov) and stars of show business, for example the Tatu group, and TV personalities such as V. Pozner and M. Maksimovskaia. The organizers of the march were given the chance to present their views on a few popular radio stations, including Ekho Moskvyy. A number of ordinary citizens, whose interests the authorities do not wish to consider and who feel downtrodden and disregarded, are also starting to ask this question: Might it not be that under the guise of “traditional values” the ruling class and its ideological accomplices are just protecting their own unlawful privileges? On one of the gay Web sites is a vivid photo of the gates of a fascist concentration camp with the inscription: “We Will Meet in the Same Concentration Camp.”

On the whole, however, the ideological polarization worsens the situation of Russia’s sexual minorities. Quite aside from their own desires and wishes, *they have ended up hostages to the new standoff between Russia and the West*. The organizers of Gay Pride parades in Moscow may travel about in triumph in Europe, but this has no effect on the everyday lives of ordinary people who love differently in Russia, the West is not able to help them, and the campaign of defamation and provocation that has been organized against them is accelerating and becoming increasingly dangerous. The resulting dead-end situation is also doing damage to the state interests of Russia. If the homophobia only spoiled the country’s foreign policy image, the authorities might just disregard it, saying “Let them slander us—we’re still the best!” But by refusing to engage in constructive dialogue with sexual minorities, the authorities have created a political problem for themselves, they have turned the formerly unknown Nikolai Alekseev into a figure of international significance and gained a headache they did not need.

In my opinion, the chief danger now is that the real problem is being ignored. Today, *both the Russian authorities and their Western critics are basically treating the social problems of sexual minorities as nothing more than an issue of whether Gay Pride parades should be permitted*. No one is talking about the actual situation of gays and lesbians, and why homophobia has to be combated, and how, while the specific complaints and claims of the politically unpopular LGBT activists are turned down right off the bat. Yet these are all serious and complex things.

Who is hurt by homophobia?

In the West the reason that the rights of sexual minorities have been recognized is not, by any means, that the authorities there are kindly or that they have had enough of family values and traditional religions; it is just that they have come to realize that the well-being of their own children and fellow citizens is at stake. Whether we realize it or not, the situation is exactly the same in Russia.

Parents' worries about the supposedly potential wholesale "homosexualization" of the youth culture are understandable but severely exaggerated. Relative toleration of same-sex love entails neither sympathy for those who engage in it nor, much less, that an adolescent himself would be willing to experiment along those lines. In a 1995 survey of 2,800 people between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, 57.7 of the young women and 43.5 percent of the young men agreed with the statement "In our times, same-sex relations should not be condemned," while 21.2 percent and 32.3 percent, respectively, disagreed. However, 48.8 percent of the young men and 21.2 percent of the young women said that they have a feeling of revulsion toward homosexuals of their own sex, and in response to the question "Do you feel that it would be permissible *for you* to have sex with a person of your own sex?" 79.7 percent of the young women and 88.7 percent of the young men answered categorically "No."⁶ Social tolerance toward Others and sympathy for them, and a willingness to follow their example, are two completely different things.

For many young men, attitudes toward homosexuality are a painful issue. In a 2001 survey of 1,429 school students in Moscow in grades 7, 9, and 11, 24.9 percent of the young men said that they "hate people of nontraditional orientation and believe they should be combated by any means" (only 2.7 percent of the young women gave that answer), while 12.8 percent of the young men and 5.1 percent of the young women said that such people "irritate" them and that they should be "forcibly placed in specialized institutions."⁷ This does not mean, of course, that all of these boys are ready to go out and kill or beat up their comrades, but what must it be like to live under such conditions? Who should help to resolve such conflicts? And is it even possible to accomplish this unless the nature of homosexuality is explained?

People in the provinces have it especially hard. According to a questionnaire survey of 1,330 upper grade school students in Ulianovsk in 1998 and 1999, homosexuals turned out to be the most hated group in the eyes of the young men: 16.4 percent said that they should be killed; 33.3 percent said they should be isolated; and 28.2 percent said they should be forced

to undergo medical treatment (the young women were considerably more tolerant, as is the case everywhere). In places where young people gather, gays are hated and despised: “First, decide which sex you are and then I will talk to you”; “He can exist and has the right to exist, but he does not have the right to associate with others”; “It is a real disease.”⁸

An eighteen-year-old college student from a remote Siberian town desperately wants not to be gay, but his dreams are filled exclusively with male images:

I want very much to experience normal human joys (a family, children); I do not want people to poke their fingers at me and say those hurtful words *pidor-pidovka* [queer, passive homosexual], and so on. Not long ago a gay in our town was brutally murdered. . . . It really scared me, wondering if the same fate is in store for me. I realize, of course, that heterosexuals are not completely safe from it either, but it is still very frightening. (From a personal letter)

Secret tragedies like this often end in suicide.

Even more tragic is the situation of transsexuals, who are mostly the target of mockery in our mass media.

The fear of homosexuality is also psychologically damaging to heterosexual adolescents. Twenty-three-year-old Valera, who was often teased during his adolescent years because of his attractive looks and called a “fairy,” tells this story:

At first there was the fear of being a homosexual, a childish fear. . . . If I am a homo, how will I know? And I began to worry myself about it: I began to look at guys that way . . . I began to explore my feelings while watching porn. . . . I would ask myself, “What am I feeling?” My fear of being a homosexual passed when I realized that I really did not have that tendency, . . . the fear of turning out to be—putting it crudely—a monster, the fear of finding out something bad about myself.⁹

Quite a few heterosexual man are tormented by these fears all through life, which makes it difficult for them to experience emotional closeness to friends and comrades.

Homophobia has a negative impact on people’s health regardless of their sexual orientation. It hinders the development of sex education, without which it is not possible to combat AIDS effectively or to accomplish many other absolutely essential things (see the UNAIDS statement cited above). The task of preventing AIDS forced governments in Europe not just to “recognize” gay organizations (which did not need the recognition) but also to cooperate constructively with them and even to give them money for these projects.

Homophobia is a natural prerequisite to and the inevitable companion

of *dedovshchina* [primarily, hazing and harassment of military recruits by their superiors], in which some sexual component is always present. It sanctions, sanctifies, and reinforces the hierarchical character of closed male societies and the right of “real” men to lord it over those who are “not real men.” To demean another man is to humiliate him, to strip him of his masculine dignity. Do we want to really sort out all these problems or just appoint the next whipping boy to blame for new atrocities?

Belligerent homophobia is linked psychologically and in terms of its ideas to terrorism. Il’ia Tikhomirov, the college student who was convicted in the case of the bomb that was exploded at the Cherkizovo Market, had taken part in antigay pogroms prior to that act of terrorism. The young terrorist’s private diary shows clearly that his hatred of foreigners has a close connection with homophobia along with uncertainty about his own masculinity: “I don’t have the spirit to say ‘No’—it is a disgusting characteristic of a soft wimpy character, an unmanly character. I now realize that I do not have will power and character. I can never strike the first blow, I am afraid to fight. It is strange that I am not a gay. But the character of a fairy!”¹⁰ This is the clinical pattern of an authoritarian mind. Do we really want to have more people like this?

Nor have I said anything about the macrosocial aspects of the problem. Can any country be socially well off if the people living in it are convinced that all things that were not officially approved by their ancestors (even if they themselves did not adhere to those things) are the result of a foreign conspiracy? If you believe that the only shortcoming you have is that you have bad neighbors, then you can forget about any chance of good neighborly relations. And why should one portion of the population have the right speak of their love out loud, while the other portion has to conceal theirs? Who benefits from the resulting social tension? Under such conditions, is it not the case that almost *any* information about life in other countries becomes politically subversive?

Eliminating homophobia is going to be a difficult, lengthy process, and it cannot be the object of concern to the sexual minorities alone. In the dispute between “to beat or not to beat” [a deliberate pun on “to be or not to be”] and whether the country should obey its own laws, there can be no place for appeals to God and national traditions. If the Church calls something a sin, that is the Church’s right. Anyone who does not agree with that assessment is free to choose a different church; so far, no one has succeeded in “privatizing” God, although there have been plenty of pretenders. But whenever politicians and state officials use such language,

they infringe on people's freedom of conscience and civil rights—and not just those of particular minorities but of all the people.

Attitudes toward homosexuality constitute an ideal litmus test for measuring democratism and tolerance. Under Soviet rule, the litmus paper was crimson with blood. Today, it blushes red for shame.

Notes

1. L. Gudkov, *Negativnaia identichnost'* [Negative Identity] (Moscow: NLO, 2004), p. 174.

2. I.S. Kon, *Liki i maski odnopoloi liubvi* [The Faces and Masks of Same-Sex Love], 2d ed. (Moscow: 2003); idem, *Seksual'naia kul'tura v Rossii* [Sexual Culture in Russia], 2d ed. (Moscow, 2005).

3. In the VTsIOM questionnaire (April 1–2, 2006, Press Release no. 429), the question was worded this way: “Representatives of the religious community are demanding that certain phenomena in society be prohibited because they conflict with the norms and precepts of the Church. What is your personal attitude toward . . .?” In the case of homosexuality, 57 percent of the respondents chose the answer “it should be prohibited, up to and including criminal prosecution,” while 21 percent said “it should not be prohibited but it should be severely restricted.” However, these awful figures are obviously conditioned by the “church” context. In a different VTsIOM survey (February 2007, Press Release no. 633), in which there was no obvious negative context (the question read “How should society and the state react to the acts and phenomena listed below?”), only 19 percent of the respondents said that they supported criminal prosecution—4 percent less than in a similar 2005 VTsIOM survey. Even though 56 percent of the respondents—3 percent less than in 2005—say that such behavior should never be excused, only 13 percent say that it is very prevalent. According to this survey data (answers to the question “Which of the following acts, in your opinion, should never be condoned, which ones should be permissible sometimes, and which should be treated tolerantly?”), homosexuality evokes more negative emotions among Russians than does abortion or evading armed forces service, but fewer than in the case of irresponsibility in business, obscene language, drunkenness, and many other things. People do not have any feeling of panic on this score.

4. See “Sotsiologicheskie zametki o gomofobii i sposobakh ee preodoleniia” [Sociological Notes on Homophobia and Ways to Eliminate It], available at www.neuro.net.ru/sexology/info154.html.

5. See http://data.unaids.org/pub/PressStatement/2007/070531_russia_final_ru.pdf.

6. Kon, *Seksual'naia kul'tura*, p. 365.

7. V.S. Sobkin, ed., *Problemy tolerantonosti v podrostkovoi subkul'ture* [Problems of Tolerance in the Adolescent Subculture] (Moscow, 2003), pp. 230–31.

8. E. Omel'chenko, “‘Ne liubim my geev . . .’: Gomofobia provintsial'noi molodezhi” [“We Do Not Like Gays”: Homophobia Among Young People in the Provinces], in *O muzhe(N)stvennosti: sbornik statei* [On (Wo)manliness: A Collection of Articles], comp. S. Ushakin (Moscow, 2002), pp. 602–8.

9. Ibid.

10. “Ispoved' terrorista” [Confession of a Terrorist], *Moskovskii komsomolets*, December 14, 2006.

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