

Sexual Equality in Russia:
Reconciling Gay Pride & The Russian Tradition

An Honors Thesis for the Department of German, Russian & Asian Languages and Literature

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERARY SOURCES

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the present state of Russia's gay pride movement. In particular, this study will focus on why schisms within Russia's gay community are preventing campaigns for gay pride from reaching their goal of greater social and legal equality. An evaluation of the actions and beliefs of different factions of Russian society help to provide answers to this question. The study also gauges the desire of LGBT Russians to have a successful gay pride movement, and what the definition of 'success' is in the Russian context. This definition is elucidated by a discussion of the applicability of Western examples of gay pride to the Russian case.

The scope of the study spans the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the present date. This thesis is designed to portray Russia's gay pride movement at present by assessing past research on the movement's development, addressing current events as they unfold, and making predictions and suggestions for the future. What I term "current events" dates from September 2011 to April 2012, or the period during which I was engaged in writing and researching this thesis. The brief time frame of this study means that it provides an abbreviated account of the nature of Russia's gay pride movement as a whole. I do my best to illustrate the essence of the movement during this brief period of time, with the concession that my observations and suggestions are part of a larger, fluid, and ever-changing examination of the fight for sexual equality in Russia.

In many ways, I approach this topic as an outsider: a heterosexual American student. My interest in LGBT issues in Russia came to a head when I visited the country in 2010. One of my closest friends during my four-month stay was an American student who is gay. With the

exception of a few close contacts, he made a personal choice to remain closeted while we were in the country. I was surprised at the time to learn that he was not only wary of those outside of the LGBT community in Russia, but also of those within it. He believed that, while most of Russian society was hostile to homosexuality, the gay community itself was an unstable place to turn for support. This opinion intrigued me, and upon my return to America I found myself following gay rights issues abroad more closely. This study is my attempt to better understand the comments of my friend and the Russian LGBT population as a whole through a thorough and thoughtful examination of the gay community and the nature of the country's gay pride movement. With this study, I hope to provide a more current assessment of Russian gay pride and culture.

The research presented is based on publications from numerous online periodicals, previously published scholarly texts, and documentary films that are related to the subjects of gay pride and Russian LGBT culture. Outside of online periodical sources and documentary films, the most recent text that I refer to on this topic was published in 2009. Most of my scholarly sources date from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. I feel it is important to note the contradictory nature of my available sources. Due to a lack of current scholarly work in the field and a flood of online material, I was at once at a loss for relevant sources and inundated by them. With a sparse collection of scholarly works, I turned to an online realm that provided upwards of fifty different periodical references for every event, theme, or account that I searched. As a result, I am confident that the opinions and specific accounts of some online sources have been missed. However, I acknowledge that this is a consequence of the nature of my study, and make an effort to indicate the biases at hand throughout my writing. Furthermore, while I have attempted to access as many Russian-based sources as possible, a number of texts come from outside of Russia, particularly from American scholars or publishers. Again, I am aware of the

bias this presents in my attempts to examine the essence of Russian gay pride and its related conflicts. Whenever possible I make note of this potential bias in the presentation of my findings. All references are appropriately cited to the best of my knowledge.

In order to acquire a well-rounded background on homosexuality in Russia, I read texts that both predated and fell within the timeframe of my study. Dan Healey's *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* examines homosexuality from the turn of the century and through the Soviet period. A senior lecturer of history at the University of Wales Swansea, Healey gives a thorough historical account of sodomy laws both in pre-Soviet and Soviet era contexts, and provides a number of written accounts of homosexual encounters. Healey also studies the theme of homosexuality in Soviet era literature, a subject banned by the censor yet capable of eluding it with the use of ambiguous literary devices. While Healey's research is all at once expansive and meticulous, it provides little for a reader about gay culture in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. His text nonetheless stands alone as a reference to homosexual culture and philosophy for the early and mid-twentieth century.

Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other by Middlebury professor of sociology Laurie Essig could be considered a continuation of Healey's narrative on homosexual life in Russia, as Essig documents her experiences with members of the LGBT community in Moscow from the early to mid 1990s. A difference between Healey and Essig's works is their approach – Healey opts to use historical and legal documentation as the foundation of his text, while Essig maintains a sociological approach. Much of her study is based on her own personal interviews and experiences with activists, friends and acquaintances in Moscow's gay community. As such, her accounts are much more lively and accessible than those captured in Healey's text, though they rely substantially less on statistical data analysis and formal

documentation. *Queer in Russia*, written retrospectively as an account of Essig's experience in the early '90s, offers the reader an array of situations, scenes, and opinions from within a tight-knit circle of LGBT contacts that gives a very human quality to Russia's gay community. Essig's text is a formidable source on gay activism in Russia, albeit one of the most dated.

Brian James Baer, professor of Russian language, literature, and translation studies at Kent State University, reviews Essig's work in his study of homosexuality in post-Soviet literature *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-soviet Identity*. He criticizes her use of primarily city-based contacts and disregard for LGBT culture and activism outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Furthermore, he finds in Essig's work "a profound ambivalence over the central thesis that gay and lesbian identities have failed to emerge in post-Soviet Russia. At one moment Essig appears to lament the fact; the next, to celebrate it."¹

While Baer criticizes Essig's lack of a broader regional base for her interviews and observations, he himself has very few personal accounts in his own text. Most of his study of homosexuality in the post-Soviet era comes through contemporary and modern literature and its cast of homosexual or sexually ambiguous characters. Baer scrutinizes the literary devices of many authors in an attempt to provide examples in support of theories of Russian homosexuality and gay culture. He discusses homosexuality within the context of the Russian soul and the Russian concept of humility, drawing conclusions as to the current public opinion of homosexuality when possible. Published in 2009, Baer's text is the most recent of the scholarly sources I refer to for my own thesis, and his writing is contemporary with the gay pride movement beginning in 2005. I feel it is important to make note of his assessment of the movement thus far, seeing as his is the only academic text that makes direct reference to the gay pride parades of this decade. However, Baer's use of fiction to validate his opinions on the

atmosphere surrounding homosexuality in Russia proves to be weak; he too literally equates Russia's real LGBT population with fictional gay characters cited from Russian literature.

There are several documentary films that are relevant to the gay pride movement in Russia at present. *Beyond Gay: The Politics of Pride* (2009), *Moscow. Pride '06* (2006), *East/West – Sex & Politics* (2008), and *East Bloc Love* (2011) are some of the most recent sources that refer to the battle for sexual equality in Russia and Eastern Europe. The presence of the words “politics”, “pride” and “east/west” in the films' titles suggest that political institutions, the ideology behind gay pride, and comparisons between Western and non-Western gay activist movements should be understood and incorporated into a thorough and versatile definition of gay pride itself.

Beyond Gay: The Politics of Pride is the most widely available of these four films. It covers the gay pride parade attempts in Moscow only briefly, including it in a collection of portrayals of gay pride parades from around the world. The goal of the film is to compare and contrast different nations' conceptions of pride, and how that pride is able to manifest itself, legally or not. While Russian pride is not the main focus, the film does make clear that there are ideological, cultural, legal and political differences between the type of pride that exists in Russia and pride movements elsewhere. The manifestation of gay pride in Russia means something different to the members of the Russian LGBT community than it might in other countries, and director Bob Christie begins to delve into this idea in his portrayal of pride. However, it is important to note that the main subject of the documentary is a Canadian activist, who is essentially comparing his own country's pride to those of others in order to give perspective and meaning to Canada's gay pride movement. The other pride parades that he visits are presented as a tool to aid his understanding of his own country's motives.

Due to time and access restraints, I was unable to view the other three documentaries that I listed above as pertinent to this thesis. I make note of this because I am confident that, had I been able to view their content, they would be a significant source of data about the fight for gender equality that is occurring in Russia and other Eastern European countries at present.

Moscow. Pride '06 (Москва. Pride '06) would no doubt have been helpful in understanding the atmosphere surrounding the first organized and attempted gay pride in 2006. The sentiments and intentions of the activist leaders at that time would have proved to be very useful for making comparisons between that inaugural parade attempt and those that followed in consecutive years.

East/West – Sex & Politics is a documentary that has Russia's gay pride movement and 2007 gay pride parade as its focus. The only access I could find to the German-produced film was a version released through Frameline, an LGBT media company based in San Francisco. Unfortunately, the cost of the film was above my means for this study (\$250 per copy), and I was able only to view short clips of the documentary online. From those, however, I was able to understand that the purpose of this documentary is to reveal just how connected the West is to Russia's gay pride movement, and how its influence is affecting the gay community's fight for sexual equality. The narrator is quick to point out that, "the West is critical of [Russia's] understanding of democracy. The treatment of sexual minorities is regarded as a litmus test for the status of the Russian democratic movement."² It seems that the documentary fails to consider that Russia's principles for democracy may not mirror the democratic movements in the West, thereby making any so-called "test" of Russian tolerance and acceptance for sexual minorities incapable of being evaluated against a Western model. The nonobservance of many Western standards for democracy in Russia should have indicated to the filmmakers that a disapproval of Western-style LGBT culture and gay pride might exist.

East Bloc Love is the most recent of the documentary films, with a release date in the summer of 2011. Due to its small-scale circulation and the fact that it is quite new, the film has not yet been made available to the public and can be viewed only at select film screenings around the world, primarily at film festivals, through the summer of 2012. The film focuses on the fight for sexual equality in Belarus, a country whose gay pride movement faces similar struggles to those of Russia's. Many of Russia's most visible gay pride activists appear in support of Belarus in the film, including Nikolai Alekseev, leader of the Moscow pride movement and founder of GayRussia. Although I was only able to view the trailer for the film, it is clear that it focuses on particular players in the fight for a public gay pride movement in Belarus and exposes the emotional and psychological struggles that their activism has provoked.

Much of the information that I have used for assessment of the current atmosphere surrounding LGBT culture and the gay pride movement has been obtained from online periodicals, newspapers and magazines. I have relied on a variety of online sources, as opposed to only a few, in an attempt to cast the net as wide as possible so as to be unbiased in my topical research. The sources I refer to come from both Russia and the western world, are written in both Russian and English, and consider the opinions of many sides of the Russian gay rights subject. I have personally translated all Russian texts, with the original text included in the notes section when pertinent.

In general, Western sources, whether consciously or otherwise, have a tendency to support Russian gay pride and encourage the publicity of the movement. These endorsements are most likely in keeping with the legal and cultural structures of western nations' own policies on the gay rights issue. For example, many believe that the publicity of gay pride and the gay rights movement in America has caused activists to fight in support of a similar movement in Russia,

since it is often considered a fellow democratic nation. As I discuss later on, this assumption in the West that Russian LGBT culture is similar to that of its own cultures, let alone that its societal structures and institutions are similar, is quite presumptuous, and in many cases, constitutes an erroneous outlook on the state of sexual equality in Russia.

One of the most surprising sources of web-based information for this thesis was the social media website Twitter. As a Twitter user, I follow many Russian and western news sources who use Twitter to post real-time links to news updates and articles. In preparation for this study, I chose to follow GayRussia's Twitter account, which posts hourly articles about LGBT news from Russia and around the globe. Twitter proved to be an interesting source of information, as I was able to receive daily – and often hourly – updates about changes in the fight for sexual equality in Russia.

I would reiterate that I cannot claim to have access to an exhaustive amount of web-based material on the subject of Russian gay pride. While I have done my best to be thorough in my presentation of a number of the different online opinions, I do not purport to have read the innumerable blog posts, forum threads, and daily accounts of the movement's progression that exist online. The accuracy of my cited sources is gauged partially by how often I saw the same data presented in numerous other sources that were published around the same date. Of course, this was not possible with all sources, particularly with quotations and opinion pieces that were written for a specific publication. Surely another reason for citing particular sources and not others was my personal intuition as to the publication's trustworthiness. This itself stands as a bias that cannot be resolved without extensive analytical research on all sources over a longer period of time. I recognize that my account of the Russian gay pride movement at present could be manifestly different had I the opportunity to continue my research for another year, month, or

even week. With these caveats in mind, I hope to provide as thorough an account of the current state of Russian gay pride as possible in the time frame that I have chosen.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The legal status of homosexual relationships in Russia has gone through a number of changes since the beginning of the Soviet period. As Dan Healey shows in his collection of data in *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, homosexuality had existed and been documented throughout Russian and Soviet history, despite the decided silence from the government and society alike about its existence in the Russian cultural sphere. One of the most telling signs of the presence of homosexuality in Russia throughout the twentieth century is the fact that there were regulatory laws in place for the prevention of homosexual relationships. Russian professor and sexologist Igor Kon defines five periods of policy change towards homosexuality from the beginning of the Soviet Union to the present time.³

The first period, spanning 1917 to 1933, marks a time during which homosexuality was decriminalized, though still considered a social and mental stigma by most of Russia's heterosexual population. The rise of Stalin meant re-criminalization of sodomy (*muzhelozhstvo*), or more specifically the act of sex between two men, under Article 121.1 of the Soviet Criminal code from 1934 up to the beginnings of the perestroika period in 1986. If found guilty of the act of sodomy, one could face a five to eight year prison term. Interestingly, sodomy laws did not discriminate against sexual relationships between women, although these were also seen as a social stigma and frequently as a psychological disorder. Females were alternatively admitted into insane asylums and submitted to shock treatment in psychiatric wards. Kon also notes that Article 121.1 was often abused as a way to tack on extra years to a prisoner's sentence once he had been jailed or exiled.

From 1987 to 1990, Kon stresses the influence of perestroika on Russian society's willingness to study and discuss homosexuality more openly. Scholars and scientists were able to present their theories and data for public consumption, and a number of valuable portrayals of gays and LGBT culture appeared in literature. The early '90s saw the rise of the first LGBT groups, publications, and activist movements. While the circle around the gay community was small and its culture remained fairly removed from the public sphere of Russian life, the decriminalization of sodomy in 1993 signified a shift, however slight, in Russian policy-making towards that of tolerance. Perhaps the lifting of Article 121.1 was influenced by the greater tolerance for homosexuality that existed in much of Europe at the time; most European countries had decriminalized sodomy by the early 1980s.⁴ International relations present yet another potential reason for the law's repeal. Whether a rise in national acceptance or the influence of Western policy was at hand or not, homosexuality remained amongst the list of diseases in the country's psychiatric texts until 1999.

The mid-2000s is the beginning of a marked change in the publicity of the gay community in Russia, at least in larger cities. The founding of GayRussia in 2005 set the stage for the rudiments of the Moscow Pride organization and the first gay pride parade in 2006. Creator of GayRussia and leader of Moscow Pride, Nikolai Alekseev, has been the main figure fighting the public battle for equality for the LGBT community. Alekseev is young, highly educated, and highly influenced by the West's various gay pride movements. A young teen at the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Alekseev's formative years paralleled the beginnings of the gay activist movement in Russia. A graduate of Lomonosov Moscow State University in 2000 in the field of public administration, he is well versed in public law and legislation.⁵ His youth, knowledge of legal rights, and bold character in the face of militia and the threat of arrest have

made him the international face of Russia's pride movement. Alekseev embraces a "global gay" vision for the future of LGBT equality in Russia, showing support for the "modern homosexuality" said to be occurring in Western Europe and the United States.⁶

The five attempted gay pride parades in Moscow and the two attempted in St. Petersburg are recognized as the most significant efforts to publicly advocate for sexual equality in Russia to date. Moscow and St. Petersburg stand as the two centers for LGBT culture and advocacy in Russia, although advocacy groups do exist in smaller cities throughout the country. Often these more rural communities have organized branches of either Moscow's GayRussia or St. Petersburg's Equality campaigns. Attempts to protest in these cities are usually coordinated with larger protests in St. Petersburg and the capital. Rural Russia, in contrast to the big cities, has the lowest public tolerance or understanding of the concept of homosexuality, and therefore sees the fewest protests take place.⁷

Moscow has tried to organize yearly pride parades each May from 2006 to 2011, and St. Petersburg has replicated these attempts in 2010 and 2011. The only legally sanctioned gay pride parade known to have occurred in Russia was held in St. Petersburg in November 2010, after the Court of St. Petersburg deemed an initial proposal refusing a pride parade earlier in the year to be illegal and in violation of the protesters' constitutional rights. All other bids for a sanctioned pride parade, however, have been refused, and police and homophobes, whether acting independently or in concert with one another, have not hesitated to use force and brutality on any activists who have chosen to march "illegally". In many cases, violence is the result of a police unit who remains passive as protestors attack parade-goers. Other instances point to the aggression of police as the main source of brutality and disorder.

Many of these parades have garnered international attention due to the activists' use of social media to display the brutality of the police and of anti-gay protesters. The presence of international gay rights activists, along with well-known Russian proponents of gay rights at rallies in both Moscow and St. Petersburg, has contributed to a growing acknowledgement within the national and international community of the fight for sexual equality in Russia. Nikolai Alekseev and other prominent gay activists have submitted complaints to the European Court of Human Rights following many, if not all, discriminatory practices by the local governments in Russia during gay pride pickets, marches and protests. While discrimination against sexual minorities in social settings, education, housing, and the workforce is not technically illegal in Russia, gay activists make a strong case for the illegality of banning public protests, as this infringes upon the rights of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. There has been only one case to date in which the Court has found the Russian government at fault for violating these human rights. In October of 2010, the Court charged the Russian government the equivalent of \$40,000 USD for illegally banning a peaceful march for sexual equality in Moscow. It is unclear whether this fine has yet been paid in full. Despite a few small successes in the fight for sexual equality in Russia, the majority of protests and public attempts to support gay pride have been condemned and banned with little to no consequence.

PROPONENTS

While the ideology and makeup of the broader LGBT community in Russia may not have experienced a remarkable shift in the last 20 years, gay pride and gay rights activism within the community have changed significantly. Different leaders and activist groups have emerged, either to persist, evolve, or dissolve over time. The agendas of these groups and individual leaders have shifted as well, at one time supporting the fight for sexual equality and at others speaking out against it. The back-and-forth nature of the motives of those at the forefront of the gay activist community in Russia for the past two decades helps to explain why there is relatively little unity within the LGBT community for the gay pride movement at present.

Essig makes note of gay activist movement in the early 1990s that managed to make profound strides in developing LGBT presence and support in society, yet faltered due to a lack of organization and solidarity. Her documentation of organizations or events that supported the LGBT community made obvious to her the fact that few members or leaders of gay activism initiatives had the capabilities and resources in place to support a successful LGBT social and political culture. Essig found that a large reason for the absence of framework and planning within the movement's efforts was an underlying lack of ideological consensus, particularly when it came to the question of Western support.

Evgeniia Debrianskaia, one of the most influential and long-standing proponents of gay activism, began to play a leadership role in the gay community in 1989. Debrianskaia started as a leader of the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities, but "had enjoyed a long career as a professional dissident...[which] provided her with a large network of friends and colleagues as well as some idea of how far she could push the Soviet system without ending up in jail. Thus

when a group of queer activists began meeting in the winter of 1989-90, Debrianskaia easily established herself in a leadership position.”⁸ Identifying herself as a member of the LGBT community, Debrianskaia has had both male and female partners. She continues to be an important figure in the gay activist community today despite no longer considering herself a “member of the movement.”⁹ Her undertakings have historically had a dissident face; her early political work in the late 1980s was quite anti-Soviet. She now owns a popular gay nightclub in Moscow called “12 volt”.

In the past, Debrianskaia’s disdain for Western culture – both generally and in the case of gay pride – set her apart from other activists and often led to fragmentation within the movement. She wanted the fight for sexual equality in Russia to grow organically from a call-to-action started by members of the Russian LGBT community themselves. In Debrianskaia’s mind, Western aid, whether in the form of funding or campaign tactics, automatically made Russia’s efforts into an imitation, or knockoff, of Western pride efforts. When she was unwilling to accept Western, in particular American, activists’ and organizations’ monetary donations and technology for the 1991 Soviet Stonewall festival in celebration of sexual minorities, the rift amongst activist leaders widened, expediting the breakup of the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities. Her co-leader, Roman Kalinin, “was the Moscow organizer for the International Gay and Lesbian Human Right’s Commission’s (IGLHRC) ‘Soviet Stonewall’ festival. Debrianskaia and Kalinin differed sharply on the usefulness of an American-organized and sponsored Soviet Stonewall. Although they continued to work together, at least occasionally, the Moscow Association was barely functioning by 1993.”¹⁰ Kalinin, like Debrianskaia, had a political background and a desire to influence society beyond gay activist organizations like the Association. He ran for the presidency in 1991 under the Libertarian Party, of which

Debrianskaia was also a co-founder. However, their discordant opinions about how these smaller start-up organizations should be run and how they should function both socially and ideologically made for an unsteady beginning for Russian gay activism.

Although in the eyes of many the Soviet Stonewall of 1991 was highly successful, drawing thousands of Russians from all over the country together to celebrate what were considered “unnatural” sexual orientations, the activist movement that organized the event lacked the strong foundation needed to repeat its results. Activists, recognizing the weakness of the Moscow Association and the debate amongst its members, called for a countrywide conference of LGBT activists in order to amend the issue. “According to its organizers, the all-Russian conference managed to achieve several goals. First, activists from all over Russia participated. Second, information was successfully exchanged at a series of roundtable discussions.... The result of the conference was not the continuation of the Moscow Association of Gays and Lesbians, but its replacement by Triangle [*Treugol'nik*]. Triangle was to be an umbrella organization for ‘gay, lesbian, and bisexual’ groups and persons throughout Russia.”¹¹

Triangle’s beginnings seemed well constituted, as its establishment had been agreed upon by Russians and Russians alone, and moreover by LGBT members from many corners of the country. It helped to rejuvenate the institutions born two and three years earlier, and accompanied the 1993 decriminalization of Article 121.1 of the Russian criminal code, the anti-sodomy law applying only to men. However, Essig’s observations of Triangle’s operations in 1994, only a year later, present it as just as fragmented and delicate an organization as those it had meant to replace. Furthermore, the influence of Western investors and activists that Debrianskaia had fought so hard to keep out had again made a place for itself at the center of the organization’s outfit:

In the course of six months in 1994, I attended nine meetings of Triangle. There were generally almost as many Americans as there were Russians. These meetings were full of the details of any organization – arguments among members, discussions about what should be done and how. The meetings also exhibited a variety of Russian problems. People were working too many hours just to have enough money to buy food. They did not have much time to spend on activism. In addition, an inordinate amount of hope was placed on the generosity of Western activists in terms of time and money. When Western activists did not supply the necessary initiative or financing, the result was disappointment in Western notions of identity and politics.... These meetings were.... rife with differences and disagreements. These arguments echoed larger problems with the organization. Triangle members disagreed with each other over how the organization should function, the organization's goals, and most important, whether or not there should be leaders... The lack of commitment to common goals was evident in the way the group planned and executed a 'fundraiser'... Fundraising (the word and concept were taught to Russians by the Americans) was an end in and of itself. The fundraiser also revealed just how divided the organization members were over its purpose or even whether there should be a purpose... The lack of common goals or even an ideology to unite the members was evident when the second annual conference did not take place.¹²

The state of Triangle as Essig describes it in 1994 reveals much about the strength of the gay activist movement on the eve of the late '90s and early 2000s. The largest gay activist organization at that time in Russia, its incapability to unify in almost every aspect of the movement explains why relatively little occurred in the way of LGBT support or prevalence in society in these later years. Members' indecision about leadership positions, the role of Western actors, and the basic purpose of the organization kept their progress at a standstill. Had they committed to a particular path – whether this included leaders, Western influence and concrete goals, or not – perhaps the significance of Triangle for sexual minorities in Russian society would have been greater. Their inability to make a choice either way left those who yearned for a more substantial activist movement frustrated at an impasse.

The activist movements begun in St. Petersburg, the most prominent being The Tchaikovsky Fund [*Fond Chaikovskogo*], which successfully organized “queer cultural festivals”

known as the Christopher Street Days and “attracted thousands of the city’s queers to a carnivalesque revelry in the form of large queer discos, as well as smaller numbers to seminars on AIDS and the ‘development of gay and lesbian community’”¹³ were also incapable of becoming strong advocates for sexual minorities in the second half of the 1990s. The responses of both Moscow and St. Petersburg factions no doubt affected the movements in other regions of the country, as in many cases these groups were in coordination with those from the larger cities. In a 2011 article written for Open Democracy Russia, correspondent August Come notes that, “from the 1990s to early 2000s, the [LGBT] community displayed a degree of lethargy that undermined the very existence of a real LGBT movement in Russia. Several LGBT organizations were certainly working in the country throughout this period, but their activities were limited to local initiatives on public health issues, like the fight against AIDS/HIV. Put simply, there was no body capable of carrying out a political fight in defence of LGBT rights on national level.”¹⁴ In fact, following the 1999 repeal of homosexuality as a psychological disorder, a diagnosis used well into the mid-1980s to prescribe psychiatric shock treatment for lesbians, the argument can be made that Russia’s stance against equal rights and societal acceptance for sexual minorities hardened.

The lack of a substantial unified effort on behalf of gay activists and their supporters can only have contributed to a society less aware and less concerned with the cause of Russian sexual minorities. Of more immediate import was the country’s economic crisis, a task that newly inaugurated president Vladimir Putin was determined to control. Putin’s first term ushered in a wave of conservatism in Russia’s political, legal and financial spheres that was unknown to the Yeltsin years and the turbulent ‘90s. His first year in the presidency also marked the beginning of the near decade-long Second Chechen War. It was perhaps this more traditional mindset and

regional conflict, coupled with the gay activist movement's failure to unify, which tempered the gay activist movement for Russians outside of the LGBT community.

Indeed, public opinion about homosexuality and rights for sexual minorities has continued to be negative, if not hostile. A 1994 public opinion poll found that 24% of Russians felt homosexuals should be isolated, and 29% felt they should be left alone.¹⁵ In 2005, polls showed that 43.5% of Russians were in favor of the re-criminalization of homosexual acts.¹⁶ A 2010 poll conducted by Russia's Center for Public Opinion Research found that 39% of those polled felt "that homosexuals should be forcibly treated for their condition or isolated from society."¹⁷

These statistics point to the fact that Russian society has not warmed to the idea of an open and equal status for LGBT citizens, no matter if a gay activist movement exists or not. Relatively little activism occurred during the late '90s and early 2000s, yet 43.5% of Russian people favored re-criminalization just 12 years after the law against sodomy had been revoked. As will be substantiated in the following sections, the wave of activism and gay pride parades that began in 2005 and 2006 has had a negative impact on public opinion of homosexuality, suggesting that any attempt by gay activists to appeal to the broader Russian population has backfired.

The 2005 creation of GayRussia, the organization whose slogan is "equal rights, no compromise" (*ravnie prava bez kompromissov*), marks the beginning of the contemporary installation of the gay activist movement in Russia coming from the capital city. Its leader, Nikolai Alekseev, had no previous involvement with gay activism and no ties to the activist culture of the '90s. Choosing to form an activist group following his dismissal from Moscow

State University's graduate studies program on account of his research on the legal status of sexual minorities, Alekseev has been a staunch and public advocate for sexual equality ever since.¹⁸

On the organization's well-maintained website, GayRussia.ru, they explain that one of their main goals is to "lift the LGBT community out of anonymity and ultimately gain recognition of the rights of sexual minorities in Russia." The site explains that, "the group believes that independence is key and that receiving grants could only have a negative impact on the work of the activists. Experience [has shown] that LGBT groups that received funding are turned into bureaucratic organizations allocating more resources to renewing grants than advocating changes in the society. Furthermore, receiving foreign grants would restrict the freedom of the organization."¹⁹ While this statement is in all likelihood true and shows that they have perhaps taken note of what occurred with Western contacts in the '90s, it attempts to mask GayRussia's close ties to Western pride movements and tactics. The website is available for English translation, advertises Alekseev's prominence overseas, and provides worldwide coverage of gay rights issues, as opposed to just national news. The organization's partners include national groups, such as Marriage Equality Russia, Article 282, activist Yuri Gavrikov's Equality (St. Petersburg), and GayRussia Radio, as well as a number of international organizations, including IDAHO Belarus (Belarus), Comité IDAHO (France), Gay Liberation Network, the Noble Beast Foundation, and Queer Rising (USA), and OutRage! (UK). The site also claims to "rel[y] on an extensive number of media partners which help to relay the campaigns and the actions of the organization in English, French, German and Spanish."²⁰

Like some activists from the early '90s, Alekseev sees Western gay activism and Western support as positive and influential. In choosing to organize annual gay pride parades through the

Moscow Pride Parade project, Alekseev has adopted an inherently Western style of gay rights advocacy. He encourages publicity for Russia's gay pride parades and the movement's fight for sexual equality, while also maintaining a very public persona himself. It is rare to find any article or video pertaining to the gay activist movement in Russia in the last seven years that does not at least mention Alekseev, if not feature his words or actions. Efforts centered in St. Petersburg, including Way Out (*Vykhod*) and Igor Kochetkov's Russian LGBT Network, have very similar goals and tactics as Alekseev's GayRussia and tend to imitate actions taken in the capital city. It is these qualities – Western collaboration and publicity – that many other activists and members of the LGBT community in Russia, like Debrianskaia, oppose in the movement at present, and that have limited the strides that a group like GayRussia may be able to make towards sexual equality in the future.

Since the beginning of 2012, a few notable events have taken place that reflect a continuation of an uphill battle for gay rights activists groups in Russia, and a more urgent need for compromise, solidarity, and support with members of the larger Russian LGBT community. On January 20, no more than a dozen protesters, including Nikolai Alekseev, assembled the first gay pride picket on Red Square in Moscow. The activists, who staged their protest at midnight, called for the most recent proposal for a ban on “homosexual propaganda” in St. Petersburg to be turned down. The group was arrested within minutes, although one member was able to capture the event on video in order for the confrontation to be viewed online. While Alekseev and GayRussia praised the event for being a landmark, given that a Red Square protest advocating for sexual equality had never before occurred, the instance was less effective than a number of other short-lived pickets throughout 2011. Not only was there little audience for the protest (besides those who would inevitably view the video clip online a day later), but the group also

was few in numbers, and was quickly apprehended. However significant Alekseev may believe the event to have been, in the larger scope of the movement it was yet another brief spark in the name of sexual equality that was quickly doused by authorities and movement oppositionists.

In the weeks and months following the Red Square picket the most prevalent topic of discussion has been St. Petersburg's March 30 acceptance of an official city-wide ban on "homosexual propaganda": rainbow flags, public displays of affection, and any words, images, or actions that may, in the minds of lawmakers and politicians, steer young children down the "sinful path of homosexuality". News of the legislation has been largely covered internationally, and a number of international organizations, activists, and celebrities have begun a slew of different campaigns to boycott St. Petersburg as a tourist destination now that the new law is enacted. The ban marks a significant setback for the fight for sexual equality in Russia, as St. Petersburg boasts the largest coalition of gay activists, organizations, and social services for the LGBT community in the country outside of Moscow. While Western interest and investment in fighting against the new legislation is strong relative to other landmark moments of Russia's gay pride movement (i.e. gay pride parade attempts of the past six years), it seems unlikely that foreign protest will prevent lawmakers from reversing legislation that, in many people's minds, is acceptable and necessary in Russian society.

The question that remains for gay pride activists is whether Western involvement and influence in Russia's gay pride movement will be useful in helping the country achieve greater legal and social sexual equality. In the mind of someone like Debrianskaia, turning to the West for guidance will continue to be a mistake and a disappointment. To compare Russia's struggle for sexual equality to that of Western countries takes the movement and those for whom it is advocating out of a Russian context. A comparison of this kind ignores the fact that Russia has

different religious, political, legal, and cultural histories, all of which contribute to the popular sentiment about homosexuality.

The predominant religions in the country, Russian Orthodoxy and Islam, are vehemently opposed to homosexuality as a sexual orientation and practice. There has never been a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered face in Russian politics, or a group of politicians advocating on behalf of the LGBT community. Legally, Russia is a few decades behind the West in considering the legalization of sexual equality in society, in public institutions, and in the workforce, as well as protecting basic human rights for the LGBT community through its police force. Culturally, there is no tradition of talking openly about sex and sexual practices. Sexual education is not a part of the majority of Russian school systems. Furthermore, the AIDS epidemic has led many to associate homosexuality historically with disease.

There are a few pop culture figures who have spoken openly about their homosexuality despite a lack of legal and political support, although this is not unique to Russia and has occurred in a number of gay pride movements in the West. In general, the public seems to be more accepting, or at least indifferent, to the presence of homosexuality in popular culture, since so much of a celebrity persona is contrived to promote a specific image. In this way, the homosexuality of celebrities is not so much a negative quality as one of fascination and entertainment. All of these differences between the Russian case and that of the West, whether they are differences of culture or a question of timing in the context of the gay pride movement, must be considered if activists truly want to achieve broader acceptance in Russia in the future.

Debrianskaia believes that more than anything, there must be a societal change and a change in the protection available for sexual minorities. She has articulated that “social discrimination hasn’t been rooted out in [Russian] society. The society still does not accept

homosexuals and remains hostile to them. Gays get bullied and killed, and no criminal case has been filed in this connection yet....The police [do] not guarantee security for a very large congregation of people. This is what [distinguishes] Russia from Europe. There are many homophobic people in Europe too, but the police guarantee security for such events as gay parades there.”²¹ Debrianskaia’s belief that the differences between the Russian LGBT community and similar communities in the West make a collaboration between the two ideologically unsound does not stand alone. Just as in the very beginnings of the activist movement during late perestroika, the gay activist movement struggles to claim a uniquely Russian identity that will unify the LGBT community around the goal of sexual equality.

OPPOSITION

Similar to the proponents of the gay pride movement, the opposition to gay activism's campaign for legal and social equality is comprised of a variety of individuals and groups who challenge the movement for different reasons. A large portion of this opposition is manifest outside of the LGBT community in members of Russia's religious political, and social institutions. Radical nationalist and religious groups like Intellectuals of the Orthodox Church, Russian Imperial Movement, Movement For Faith and Fatherland, and People's Cathedral have all petitioned and campaigned against gay pride parades. The ex-mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov and present governor of St. Petersburg Georgiy Poltavchenko have both been unabashedly public in their condemnation of the LGBT community, with Luzhkov famously referring to homosexuality as "satanic".²² The disapproval of a majority of the population, including many leading elites and politicians, more often than not translates into little or no police protection for members of the gay community who choose to protest. Indeed, every year since the gay pride parades have begun there have been confrontations between activists, police, and violent protesters that have ended in brutality.

Yet surprisingly, another large sect of the opposition comes from within the LGBT community itself. These opponents are at odds with the ideology of those activists who profess to be representing the community. Particularly, members of the gay community take issue with activists' desire to make the fight for sexual equality a public affair that uses Western-style gay pride parade and picketing tactics. LGBT Russians, like much of the Russian population, are often of the opinion that Russian social and cultural constructs are different from those of the West. Many members of the LGBT community feel that Russian homosexuality differs from

homosexuality in the West, in the same manner that Russians in general believe themselves to be different from Westerners. It seems that there is the impression that qualities that make persons “Russian”, whether they are homosexual or not, differentiate them from the putative qualities of Westerners in a way that, for many in the LGBT community, means the Russian and Western movements should neither be presented as similar struggles nor fought side by side, hand in hand.

As soon as activist groups began to organize in the early ‘90s with the help of Western funding and strategies, opposition groups were formed and alternative activist paths began to be explored within the gay community. In 1991 Vladislav Ortanov, a member of the Moscow Association, left the group in order to form RISK (*Risk*), an organization with a similar goal of fighting for sexual equality, but utilizing a different ideology and approach. “Unlike the Moscow Association’s thirst for controversy, Ortanov felt that queer activists should try not to offend either public opinion or government officials. Ortanov argued that most Russians are strongly opposed to homosexuality and the last thing activists should be doing is further alienating them. Ortanov also believed it was much simpler to work within the system, to show authorities the advantages of decriminalizing homosexuality, rather than remaining permanent outcasts of officialdom.”²³ Ortanov was joined by Aleksandr Kukharskii of St. Petersburg, who created The Banks of the Neva [*Nevskie Berega*], or the beginnings of the more well-known group Wings [*Kryl’ia*], in order to “*gradually* chang[e] the minds of those who make laws and influence public opinion.”²⁴ Both Ortanov and Kukharskii represented groups within the LGBT community that were discontented with the larger Moscow Alliance and Triangle associations, which seemed incapable of unifying on the most important issues: Western involvement, leadership, and group goals. These alternative organizations hoped to use cooperation with

government officials and politicians to make a case for the rights of sexual minorities and to develop a stronger gay activist movement.

Essig herself suggested that Ortanov and Kukharskii seemed to be on a more realistic path towards building a foundation for gay rights activism than the larger, floundering organizations of the early '90s:

That the early activists' extremely courageous appearance in the public sphere as self-speaking queers did not develop into a 'movement' means that Soviet Stonewall never really occurred. Russian queers are not 'just like American queers, just twenty years behind'; there is no universally true path of sexual otherness that follows through the rather unimaginative steps of 'the closet, the movement, pride and community.' This 'standard' Western fairytale is far too simplistic to have ever occurred, even in the United States. To ask why a movement did not develop in Russia is to impose the Western model in the posing of the question. Rather than examine the reasons a movement failed to develop, it seems more important to consider what is, and is not, happening among those queers who believe that common sexual practices and identities produce common social and political agendas.²⁵

In recent years it has been unclear if LGBT citizens who are against the activist movement have formed an opposition group similar to that of RISK or Wings, which tries to work with and within the political sphere. Seeing as there has been little support for the gay community as a whole from Russia's political circle, it is likely that the actions of LGBT activists have alienated their community as a whole in such a way that political compromise of any other kind is unrealistic. Many LGBT community members resent the kind of publicity that the activist movements have created for gays and lesbians who prefer to keep their sexual preferences and life choices private. They feel that this publicity has led only to an increased antagonism and a threatening, often violent, public atmosphere. While it is true that many "arrests occurred throughout the Soviet period, they did not appear in the press, creating a very real discursive void, which left homosexuals at one and the same time vulnerable to prosecution

and largely cloaked in a protective invisibility. This helps to explain the comment of the one lesbian...who rejects activism insofar as it exposes gays and lesbians to social surveillance by letting people know that gays and lesbians exist.”²⁶ According to like-minded members of the LGBT community, by refusing to work with politicians on a campaign for sexual equality legislation, and by making their outcry against the inequality that stands at present an increasingly public affair, the gay activist movement is losing the support of the citizens it is trying to advocate for.

A 2010 article written by student correspondent Maksim Krylov for the Echo of Moscow (*Ekho Moskvy*) radio station blog also questions whether the exposure of gay pride parades and protests are beneficial, either to the LGBT community or to those outside it who are perhaps trying to understand. Krylov posits that the homophobia that exists in Russia at present is not necessarily all the fault of ignorant homophobes, but a result of gay activists, who, through aggressive gay pride campaigns, have managed only to increase tensions by failing to explain why gay community is fighting for increased tolerance. Lamenting the past four years of parades and pickets, Krylov points out that there has been very little change in any direction since the parades began in 2005, leading him to question what the meaning of any activism has been. In a criticism of Western gay activist movements and their influence in Russia, Krylov describes gay pride parades as nothing but a show. His final conclusion is that, “the idea of a gay parade in Russia broke from the real problems of the LGBT community long ago and has now become its own entity.”²⁷ Krylov’s opinions reflect the discontent of so many in the gay community, and perhaps those outside of it who struggle to understand LGBT culture except in the context of gay pride parades.

This sentiment is a popular response to today's gay activism not only from general members of Russia's gay community, but also from many political and social elites. In 2006, the editor of popular gay publication *Queer (Kvir)* Eduard Mishin spoke publicly against holding the first gay pride parade in Moscow as part of Alekseev's Gay Pride Parade project, asserting that marching in an unauthorized parade would only worsen the antagonism felt towards the gay community and fail to support GayRussia and Alekseev's goals in the long run.²⁸ Mishin is a longstanding leader in the gay community, having founded Gay.Ru in 1997 and *Queer* in 2003. While he has been known to speak out against instances of sexual inequality in the workplace and in social institutions, and even attempted to marry another man in 2005, Mishin, like Krylov, does not believe that gay pride parades and the current tactics carried out by activists have the LGBT community's interests in mind.

Politically there is virtually no support for LGBT issues and the rights of sexual minorities. The one exception to this is nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskii, who has consistently been an advocate for sexual minorities since his presidential campaign in 1991. As Essig notes,

Even more surprising than Zhirinovskii's political popularity is his peculiar brand of queer nationalism...his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) – which is of course anything but liberal or democratic – [has] consistently defended the rights of 'sexual minorities'...the Liberal Democratic Party attempted to create a parliamentary faction to represent [their] interests...Although the request was turned down on a technicality (the LDP did not have sufficient numbers of sexual minorities to create a faction), the fact remains that the nationalist-fascistic party of Zhirinovskii has been the lone voice among Russia's politicians for the rights of queers.²⁹

However, Zhirinovskii's support has also been contingent upon the degree of gay activists' adaptation of Western tactics and ideology. He has spoken out against the gay activism occurring at present, "argu[ing] that it is the spread of 'western' notions of (homo)sexuality that

have turned sexual norms upside down and stigmatized traditional forms of male-male interaction – up to and including sexual contact. Western-style activism, they suggest, has made it increasingly difficult to see homosexuality in Russia as another form (albeit undiscussed) of male-male bonding.”³⁰ It is hard to say how influential Zhirinovskii’s opinion may be in the realm of politics, as he is often seen as a radical and a provocateur. Regardless of whether he is capable of influencing the political sphere, it still stands that he, like many others, disagree with the public image of gay activism in Russia at present and would be hard-pressed to support it without a slew of changes taking place.

Another social celebrity who has spoken out against the current practices of activist organizations is Boris Moiseev, singer, actor, and performer. Perhaps the most celebrated and respected of all gay Russian celebrities, Moiseev’s flamboyance has not deterred people from recognizing his talent, as he has been held in high acclaim across the country. With a sexuality debated by many, given that he is married to a Russian-born American woman, he still manages to remain a prominent figure in the gay community and frequently agrees to speak on gay issues. In a 2010 article for the news publication *Piterburger*, he advocated against an upcoming gay pride parade in St. Petersburg, stating that Russians of all sexualities, genders, and ethnicities should simply live their lives, as opposed to forcing the issue in an unnatural manner. Moiseev urged those considering marching to instead “prove, that they are equal members of society with their good deeds – for example, by helping the elderly, orphans, and the seriously ill.”³¹

Some argue that celebrities and social and political elites choose to oppose gay pride parades in order to reflect popular opinion, and therefore garner public popularity. In assuring that their views align with most of the population, whether they be simply opposed to parades or homophobic, these public figures can rest assured that their position is that of a large portion of

the population. Personally, I feel that this assessment of celebrity opinion is quite shallow. No matter who protests the gay pride parades, social elite, LGBT community member or outsider, all take issue with one particular aspect of this campaign: its clear Western influence. An anti-Western sentiment seems to be the uniting factor for almost all sides of the opposition, whether they be a part of the LGBT community or not. Why is it that so many oppose an ideology and strategy imported from the West? I believe the answer, elucidated below, lies in the Russian cultural and moral traditions that have influenced Russian perception of social institutions, their objectives, and how they choose to achieve those aims.

AT PRESENT

"West and East, Pacific and Atlantic, Arctic and tropics, extreme cold and extreme heat, prolonged sloth and sudden feats of energy, exaggerated cruelty and exaggerated kindness, ostentatious wealth and dismal squalor, violent xenophobia and uncontrollable yearning for contact with the foreign world, vast power and the most abject slavery, simultaneous love and hate for the same objects...the Russian does not reject these contradictions. He has learned to live with them, and in them. To him, they are the spice of life."³² This quotation from George Kennan, U.S. foreign advisor to the Soviet Union in the early 1950s tends to generalize about the contradictory nature of Russian citizens and their way of life. Russia has indeed had a historically contradictory relationship with the West, at once attempting to contend with Western nations in the cultural, economic and political spheres, and refusing to let similarities between themselves and Western models be drawn. This complex of wanting to be inclusively distinctive within a group of powerful nations pervades many facets of Russian life. The broader LGBT community faces a similar problem at present, as they hope for a sexual equality similar to what they have observed in Western nations thus far, yet strive to achieve this equality through non-Western-influenced means.

On the surface, there would seem to be some similarities amongst social institutions in Russia and many Western nations. Their respective gay pride movements are a potential example of one of these similarities, given that at present they are using many of the same tactics to advance the cause of sexual equality. However, the ideology behind how these separate institutions should function is different in Russia. It is important for leaders of the gay pride movement to recognize that, while there may be similarities between Russia's pride movement

and that of Western nations, the distinctions that make it a fight particularly for Russian sexual equality are crucial to comprehend and be aware of if activists want to see substantial change. The differences that I refer to are moral ones, particularly differing views on egoism and justice that exist in Russian society. Although these concepts are not expressly tangible, their foundations are longstanding, making them crucial to understanding why a Western approach will likely not help Russia's gay pride movement champion its cause.

Russia's notion of the West, specifically America, as an egotistical, individualistic society was born during the 19th century under the Slavophiles, who believed that Western individualism, rationalism, and industrialization were antitheses to the religiosity, mysticism, and reverence for nature that "were intrinsic to the Russian experience"³³ This negative perception of the West persisted during the Soviet period, when a communal lifestyle and ideology were at the core of institutional and moral tenets. The capitalistic "American dream" was scorned as ruthless, greedy, and self-interested by Russians who became accustomed to a society in which every citizen was supposed to play an equal part and receive an equal share. While Russia has since entered into its own phases of capitalism, and has had its own experiences with the degradation of collective values, the remnants of a strong communal mentality continue to affect much of the population's view of American culture and values.

This Russian perception of Americans as narcissistic and aggressive in their self-promotion is a pivotal realization that Russian gay activists have yet to arrive at, or perhaps have yet to consider, as a substantial roadblock to their campaign success. However they need only examine Russian society's overwhelming disdain for Western feminism to understand where their movement may be headed. As another cause that began to receive attention in the early '90s, feminism was a concept imported from the West. Small groups of women began to

advocate for gender equality in the workplace and in Russian family hierarchies. Their message and campaign was, and continues to be, received negatively across the country for a number of reasons. Women's rights advocate Nadia Kakurina explains:

The reasons for the near absence in Russia of a feminist tradition, or of any tradition of women...articulat[ing] about their own problems, seem to lie...in Russian history, where one finds the figure of a strong, domineering woman, safeguarding the traditional values of society....Indeed, when we say that women in Russia are not articulate about their specific needs, we do not mean that they are not articulate about their needs as human beings. They are extremely articulate, but not specifically on behalf of women. For example, the lack of contraception and period protection, so much deplored in the West, was, until recently, hardly ever talked about in Russia. There are shortages of everything and so much suffering around, so why should we voice our own special needs more than anyone else's?³⁴

Kakurina asserts that feminists, or women who advocate for their own interests as opposed to the interests of the broader society, disregard the traditional roles of women in Russian society, instead siding with the egocentric values of many women from the West. Russian novelist and essayist Tatyana Tolstaya reinforces Kakurina's opinions about the differences between the beliefs of Western feminists and Russian women: "There is a deeper, cultural difference about relations between the sexes in Russia and in the West...A different...collective psychology. 'The western world is built on logic; our world is built rather on intuition, reflection and myth. Irrationality permeates our lives. And that's a traditionally feminine principle'"³⁵ Tolstaya suggests that it is not only an individualistic mindset that distinguishes Russian women from the Western feminists, but also the qualities that are organic to traditional Russian womanhood. The title "feminist" carries a negative connotation because most Russians assume that this is a person who is more concerned with her own future than that of her family's. This is a person who no longer values cooperating with others in order to achieve personal happiness.

The narcissistic and self-promoting qualities that Russians have assigned to the feminist movement are the same that are currently being associated with the gay pride campaign that Russian activists are so desperately trying to push forward. The concept of pride itself is seen as inherently egotistical by these Russian standards, given that it implies gaining personal pleasure or satisfaction from one's own state of being or individual actions. While pride can be communal as well, and brought on by communal undertakings, the case of gay pride applies only to a minority of the population, and within that population it is a minority that actively participates in expressing it. The nature of this demographic makes gay pride in Russia seem like the narcissism of a few attempting to change to the moral outlook of the majority of the country.

American author, radio host, and editor-at-large for both *The Advocate*, an LGBT magazine, and *The Huffington Post's* Gay Voices section, Michelangelo Signorile discusses egoistic stereotypes of gays in his text *Life Outside*. "An obsession with masculine appearance is not, of course, confined to gay men; we live in a culture that is slavishly focused on physical beauty and where men are often highly insecure about masculinity...As a [gay] community, we don't like to discuss the topic. We're loath to be reminded of some of society's worst [and particularly simplistic] stereotypes about gay men: We are 'narcissistic,' 'hedonistic,' and 'self-absorbed.'"³⁶ Signorile maintains that the stereotype of the egotistical homosexual is widely accepted in many countries, with Russia being no exception. There, gay activists, like feminists, have been proclaimed narcissists, looking to better their circumstances at the expense of others. It follows then, that, as with Western-imported feminism, Western-imported gay pride sentiments and parades will not sway the masses to reconsider their moral and cultural roots.

Baer believes that Russia's LGBT community will continue to be misunderstood by the majority of the population if the current concept of pride is not reevaluated. He suggests that the

only way for heterosexual Russian citizens to accept, or at the very least come to terms, with the existence of homosexuality in their culture is to assess it through the construct of the Russian soul or *dusha*. Only by associating homosexuals with the fundamental principles of the *dusha* – suffering, artistic sensitivity, and emotional depth – can Russian society learn to accept the LGBT community as equal citizens:

Recovering the Russian homosexual – that is, the homosexual understood not as a foreign import but as in fact thoroughly Russian – might allow us to better understand local discursive practices relating not only to homosexuality or sexuality in general but to key political and social concepts, such as cultural citizenship, tolerance, and diversity... Russian calls for tolerance of homosexuality – excluding those that make the political argument that it is a prerequisite for Russian membership in the European Union – often invoke categories that are closely tied to the concept of *dusha*, or Russian soul, which, in the words of Anna Wierzbicka, “embodies a different folk psychology fully congruent with what has been described as the Russian ‘national character.’”³⁷

Associating homosexuality with some of the foundational premises of the Russian soul, Baer asserts, may help Russians to become more accepting of the LGBT community’s goal of sexual equality and have a better understanding of “the discursive parameters within which the homosexual has been imagined as Russian. In other words, when associated, as it often is in the Russian cultural imagination, with suffering, artistic sensitivity, and emotional depth, homosexuality provides all the components necessary for the construction of a classic Russian narrative of soul.”³⁸ Baer supports his argument with literary sources, arguing that a large portion of Russian fiction positively portrays homosexual characters and the outcome of their particular storylines when their personae have archetypal characteristics of the *dusha*. From these favorable, but fictional, portrayals, he concludes that LGBT acceptance by a majority of Russian citizens in reality is possible, so long as homosexuality becomes widely associated with the Russian soul.

Baer exemplifies his belief in the reality of homosexuals in Russian society being “accepted, but suffering, artists” by making a cultural reference to Moiseev’s place in Russian society: “The connection in Russian culture between suffering and artistic creativity is an extremely close one...Acute artistic sensitivity is in fact one of the most frequently invoked arguments in post-Soviet Russia in favor of tolerance for homosexuals.... In fact, less than two months after the violent suppression of the 2006 gay pride parade in Moscow...President Vladimir Putin awarded Boris Moiseev, one of Russia’s most flamboyantly gay performers, the title of Meritorious Artist of the Russian Federation (*Zasluzhenniy Artist Rossisskoi Federatsii*).”³⁹ To Baer’s way of thinking, Moiseev has chosen to redeem his sin as a homosexual man by expressing emotional prowess through his art. This is accepted and even rewarded by Russian society, he posits, because Moiseev has shown that his homosexuality is ruled by a Russian soul, not a Western one. With this case, Baer attempts to exemplify that “redemptive suffering provides the homosexual with a discursive entrée into Russian society not as a member of a minority group demanding its civil rights but as a suffering individual deserving *sostradanie*, or compassion. *Smirenje*, or acceptance of suffering, on the other, represents a kind of Russian social contract, according to which homosexuals are granted Russian cultural citizenship, or to borrow Bruce Bawe’s expression, ‘a place at the table’.”⁴⁰ Moiseev’s disdain for Western-style gay pride parades and achievement in the arts would suggest that he has been granted the type of cultural and social citizenship that Baer speaks of. Although it is hard to say whether he was ever considered a non-citizen in this sense, seeing as his sexual orientation is undetermined but believed to be heterosexual by many.

The main weakness in Baer’s argument lies in the fact that he does not, and perhaps cannot, apply his concept of *dusha* to other members of the LGBT community who are out of the

public eye. It seems unlikely that Russian society at large would be as accepting of a common LGBT citizen as they are of Moiseev, especially if that person is not artistically expressive or “suffering” as a consequence of their sexuality. Historically it also stands that many well-known Russians who were in fact gifted in the arts faced sexual persecution in the Soviet Union. Sergei Paradzhanov, a Soviet Armenian film director and artist during the latter half of the twentieth century, was imprisoned in 1974 under the sodomy law despite his renowned artistic abilities.⁴¹ While Article 121.1 may not have been applicable in Moiseev’s case, the Paradzhanov arrest supports a national discomfort and disapproval of homosexuality, whether the citizen in question is gifted artistically or not. The fact that Baer draws the foundation of his argument from fictional descriptions and scenarios makes his reasoning even more problematic. While the *dusha* may play a role in how Russians have related to homosexuality in the nation’s fiction, it is a stretch to assume that the average heterosexual Russian refers to a definition of *dusha* every time he or she considers the worth of an LGBT citizen.

Baer also asserts that his framework for accepting homosexuality through *dusha* explains why Russians have reacted so negatively to Western-influenced gay activism in the country:

A compassionate response to the Russian homosexual as a ‘suffering soul’ ... associates homosexuality with qualities that would seem wholly incompatible with political activism. True, some Russian gays and lesbians have, since perestroika, attempted to retire the image of the suffering homosexual and to write a new social contract, one no longer predicated on the homosexual playing the part of Christian passion-sufferer. The task, however, is not an easy one; first, because the values that undergird that image run so deep in Russian culture, and second, because any attempt to replace ‘spiritual homosexuality’ with homosexuality that is sex-affirming and pleasure-seeking is open to the charge of coopting Western models and propagating a ‘global gay’ culture, perceived as threatening to Russian traditional values and inimical to Russia’s very soul.⁴²

While these Western models may very well be perceived as threatening traditional values associated with *dusha*, I do not believe they are the values that Baer speaks of. As stated

previously, communal tradition and the selflessness associated with living not just for oneself, but also for the benefit of others, is a quality still highly valued in Russian society today. The threat posed by Western influence is to this compassionate, altruistic aspect of the *dusha*, not to Baer's concepts of suffering, artistic expression, and emotional depth. I find it hard to believe that an ideology like the one that Baer posits would convince members of the LGBT community themselves that gay activists are fighting for a social, cultural, and legal equality that applies to them in a more fundamental, more "Russian", manner. His solution to Russian society's intolerance of homosexuality is no better than what gay activists are doing at present.

Another inadvertent consequence of the Western influence that has infiltrated the gay activist movement may be the legal inequalities that members of the LGBT community have experienced in the past two decades. The legal system in Russia is recognized widely as a corrupt institution. Observation of the law is not obligatory in the eyes of many, particularly since the ruling powers of the country consistently violate Russian law in order to maintain power. The life imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovskii for posing a threat to the Kremlin serves as one example of this corruption, as do the suspicious deaths of numerous Russian journalists, most notably Anna Politkovskaya. Bribery is also a regular occurrence in Russian society, a testimony to how little meaning is prescribed to the written law of the country and the "fight against corruption" that is professed by so many Russian leaders.

The social construct that seems to be of more consequence in determining "right" from "wrong" in Russian society is that of moral justice. Whether an action is legal or illegal under Russian legislation is in many cases unimportant, so long as justice is served for the act committed. Therefore, even if gay activists were able to secure specific legal rights protecting LGBT citizens, it is unlikely that these laws would be respected by a society that does not feel

that a public campaign for sexual equality is morally just. Activist leaders point to the fact that their rights as Russian citizens to freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and right to protective services are consistently violated, yet these violations go unrecognized by the higher Russian courts and by the European Court of Human Rights. I believe that, due to many Russian citizens' disdain for the Western nature of the gay pride movement, justice – not law – is being applied to public attempts by gay activists to protest sexual minorities' lack of social, political and legal equality.

The newest legislation banning any and all “homosexual propaganda” in St. Petersburg is the latest, and most public, of the human rights violations aimed at the LGBT community. While bans on public displays of homosexuality are nothing new – laws banning sodomy were not repealed until 1962 in most U.S. states, and repeal of sodomy laws in the United Kingdom occurred from 1967 to 1982 – Russia is returning to these bans after just a decade of repeal.⁴³ Some feel that the gay activist movement has brought this newest legal injustice upon the LGBT community with its Western-style campaign tactics. Not only have the gay pride parades been deemed morally repugnant by much of the Russian population, but they have also now become enough of a negative presence in Russian society so as to require the powers of the law to officially prohibit them. Given that the impression that activists have made on the authorities and legislators reflects the widely held Russian view of a Western pride – self-promoting, brash, and inconsiderate of the views of others – it is likely that these powers feel their moral code has been violated, and that further legal control of the situation must be implemented. The gay activists' violation of Russia's sense of justice is perhaps even more egregious than a legal transgression, in that it disregards a historical, cultural, and societal moral aspect that contributes to the spirit of Russianness, to *dusha*.

The problematic reality that Russia's gay activist movement now faces is not one that will be quickly resolved. Besides being considered sexually immoral by a large contingent of the country's religious population, the LGBT community, and gay activists in particular, now must take charge of the claims that their struggle is legally immoral as well. I doubt that the organizations spearheading the gay activist campaigns have realized that they are not up against their country's legal, social, and religious institutions, but the *cultural traditions* that those institutions were founded upon years ago. Whether gay activists decide to acknowledge the perception of their endeavors from a Russian moral standpoint, and whether this will initiate either discourse about, or change in, their manner of advocating for sexual equality, one thing seems to remain certain: as long as a connection to Western-style gay activism exists, there will be an opposition, social and legal, fighting against the goals of these Russian activists.

LOOKING FORWARD

What is the outlook for the gay pride movement? At present it seems to be scrambling after a large defeat. St. Petersburg's legalization of its ban on homosexual propaganda and enforcement beginning in mid-March marks the fourth Russian region to implement such a law. Just two weeks later, legislation calling for the same bill to be passed nationally entered the federal court. Arrests have already been made under the new law and will only persist. Time will tell whether the homosexual propaganda bill will pass in the Duma, effectively banning any type of public homosexual behavior or exhibition nationwide. If the wave of anti-gay sentiment currently taking hold of the political sphere and consequently being adopted into the legal sphere continues, there may not be much that activists can do to prevent their rights as citizens from being withheld. It is clear that, no matter how substantial the amount of Western or foreign disapproval, Russians legislators will adopt the laws that they feel apply best to most of the population.

It is possible that some swift amendments to the gay pride movement in the coming months could change the atmosphere surrounding the gay rights issue in Russia. On April 3 GayRussia chairperson Nikolai Alekseev announced that a new political party – the party of sexual minorities – will be registered by the end of the year. President Dmitri Medvedev recently signed into law a new set of regulations for the registering of political parties that lowered the initial number of names signed by members from 40,000 to 500.⁴⁴ The gay activist movement has chosen to take advantage of this, and Alekseev seems hopeful that the creation of this party will help to regulate some of the legal violations that occur in connection with the fight for sexual equality. In interviews he has asserted that the “main goal [of the party] is to promote

diversity and tolerance in Russian society through political status... If we add to them all their relatives and friends, the support of such a political party may have at least 10% of Russians. At the present moment they do not fulfill the role of a unified political force, but soon it could happen.”⁴⁵ While it is commendable that Alekseev and other leaders are trying to utilize new tactics for garnering support for LGBT issues and others, it is hard to say whether the creation of a political party for the LGBT community is going to garner the kind of support he envisions. Alekseev does not seem to understand that the presence of a supportive organization or party does not necessarily mean that its tactics and its approach to helping the community members it claims to support will be accepted.

In order for this new political party, GayRussia, and other gay activist organizations and affiliates across the country to be taken seriously, there must be a substantial change in societal views about the lives of LGBT Russians. A large part of the reason that activist organizations struggle to find acceptance in their promotion of sexual equality is their misunderstanding of what the LGBT community at large wants to achieve, and what the rest of the Russian population is willing to accept. The current approach to fighting for equal rights – picketing, protesting, marching – are not viable options in their current form. Information must be gathered from a large section of the population, both LGBT and heterosexual Russians, about how they feel about the movement at present and what would make the fight for sexual equality more acceptable in society.

I hope to follow closely the initiatives set out by Alekseev’s party for sexual minorities for the rest of the year. It will be interesting to see what kind of support they can garner and what causes they will choose to defend. Most telling in terms of their ability to garner national support will be the party’s approach to LGBT issues. If their strategy mirrors the current model of

GayRussia and other activist organizations that have embraced a Western-style pride, then I am doubtful about the effectiveness of, and even the need for, a political party representing Russia's sexual minorities. If Russians cannot find a reason to unite *for* the aims of the party, then it follows, in my mind, that even more will unite against them. However, there is the possibility that the party could win votes through its advocacy for causes outside of LGBT issues, given Alekseev's statement that the party will support a number of environmental and social issues.⁴⁶ If this proves to be the case, perhaps there is hope for a larger sect of the population to become aware of the true nature of the struggle for sexual equality, and perhaps to better understand the LGBT community as a whole.

Given that this thesis is by nature a study of current events and has not been written as a retrospective assessment of the gay pride movement in Russia, it is difficult to provide a definitive conclusion as to where the movement is headed or where it should next proceed. No answer that I can give will determine how gay activism in Russia can overcome the social, cultural, moral, legal, and political biases and institute sexual equality for all. There is a strong case to be made for separation from Western aid, representation, and activist tactics and demonstrations, since some of the most rooted Russian moral values are opposed to the individualistic, prideful, and assertive nature of Western gay pride movements. Russia's gay activists must reconcile to themselves the fact that a longstanding system of beliefs shaping the perceptions of the Russian people will play a role in determining how societal institutions relate to the LGBT community and the concept of homosexuality.

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