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Russia’s Anti-Gay Laws: The Politics and Consequences of a Moral Panic

A guest post from Cai Wilkinson on recent LGBTQ developments in Russia. Cai is a Lecturer in International Relations in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Deakin University, Australia (http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/shss/staff-directory2.php?username=caiw). Her research interests include critical approaches to security, fieldwork-based securitization studies, norm contestation and resistance, and genders and sexualities in International Relations. Her geographic focus is on the former Soviet Union, and she is currently working on projects about LGBT rights and human rights norms in Kyrgyzstan and Russia. She received her PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK, in 2009 for a thesis entitled Interpreting Security: Grounding the Copenhagen School in Kyrgyzstan, which drew upon seven months of fieldwork conducted in Bishkek and Osh in the aftermath of the 2005 overthrow of the Akaev regime. Her work has been published in Security Dialogue (http://sdi.sagepub.com/content/38/1/5.short), Central Asian Survey (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2010.533970) and Europe-Asia Studies (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2012.712267), and she has contributed chapters to volumes on securitization theory, statehood in Central Asia, and fieldwork-based research methods. Cai is also Chair of the International Studies Association LGBTQA Caucus (http://www.isanet.org/ISA/Caucuses/LGBTQACaucus.aspx).
The issue of LGBT rights in Russia first properly came to mainstream international attention in March 2012, when the St Petersburg Duma passed a law prohibiting “public acts aimed at the propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality and transgenderism amongst minors”.

The law provoked an international outcry, including calls for tourists to boycott St Petersburg, sister-cities to consider cutting off ties with Russia’s “window on Europe”, and condemnation from the EU, with the European Parliament passing a resolution noting that it was “gravely concerned by developments which restrict freedom of expression and assembly on the basis of misconceptions about homosexuality and transgenderism” and calling on Russia and other countries considering the adoption of similar legislation to “demonstrate, and ensure respect for, the principle of non-discrimination”.

In actual fact, this was not the first “anti-gay” law to be passed in Russia; Ryazan Oblast’s Duma adopted an amendment to local legislation to outlaw the “propaganda of homosexualism” in May 2006, and Arkhangelsk and Kostroma Oblasts followed suit in 2011. Yet the passing of the St Petersburg law proved to be a catalyst for other administrations to introduce similar laws, with a further six subsequently adopting similar legislation and others considering it (so far only the Moscow Regional Duma has rejected legislation) Most significantly, these laws paved the way for consideration of a federal bill outlawing the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors”, which the Russian Duma passed on June 11 despite continuing international condemnation and the fierce opposition of local LGBTQ activists and their supporters, who frequently endured physical attacks and arrests while protesting against the law.

Despite being a long-time Russia-watcher, the swiftness at which anti-gay laws have spread and at the ferocity of both popular and state homophobia has been striking. This is not, I should add, simply the result of not paying close enough attention. As a queer undergraduate student studying Russian with a compulsory year abroad to plan for, I was extremely conscious of attitudes towards homosexuality and queerness and the stigma and dangers that local LGBTQ people faced (Laurie Essig’s *Queer in Russia* was an essential primer), and was extremely careful not to out myself to anyone who wasn’t definitely queer-friendly while living with families first in Krasnoyarsk and then Voronezh in 2001-2002.

At the same time, it appeared until the mid-2000s that slowly but surely Russia was becoming more tolerant. Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1993 without any notable opposition, declassified as a mental illness in 1999, and the percentage of survey respondents advocating for the “liquidation” of homosexuals fell from 31% in 1989 to 22% in 1994 and all of 5% in 2013 (although inevitably survey results are heavily contingent on the phrasing of questions and, as Alexander Kondakov demonstrates, attitudes to homosexuality are no exception). Attempts to recriminalise homosexual relationships between men failed in 2002, 2003 and 2004.
Popular culture in the first half of the 2000s appeared to offer further evidence of the trend: singer Boris Moiseev (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6Vcgkivtqw) was openly gay, flamboyant pop star Oskar released singles such as the homoerotic Mezhdu mnoi i toboi (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09Fd7dsZ1Ac) and the suggestively titled Mazh’ vaselinom (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsPoH2w6-I) [Smear with Vaseline], t.A.T.u (http://www.tatugirls.com/#!featured)’s debut single featuring the pair engaging in some heavy petting dressed as schoolgirls was played regularly on MTV (four years later their UK debut caused considerably more consternation (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-157922/Richard-Judy-lesbian-single-banned.html), and the Russian version of Ugly Betty (http://www.jerriblank.com/betty/russia.html) included an openly gay character. Granted, problematic stereotypes abounded, but, relatively speaking, it seemed like progress nonetheless for those of an optimistic inclination.

Arguably the first indications that such optimism was somewhat misplaced came in 2006, when an application to hold a Gay Pride Parade in Moscow was rejected by then-Mayor Yuri Luzhkov (http://www.nbcnews.com/id/12803288/ns/world_news-europe/t/gays-russia-face-backlash-plan-protests/#.UcU7O4--ph8), who has repeatedly described pride parades as “a satanic act (http://www.towleroad.com/2010/01/moscow-mayor-yuri-luzhkov-calls-gays-satanic-again.html)”. Despite further rejections in subsequent years and the imposition of a 100-year ban on pride parades in 2012 (http://en.rian.ru/society/20120607/173899632.html), LGBT activists have gone ahead and held unsanctioned pride parades each year, clashing with supporters of the Russian Orthodox Church and police (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/27/AR2006052701002.html) with such regularity and predictability that well-known activist Masha Gessen this year described Moscow Pride as the city’s “Gay-Bashing Ritual (http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/27/moscows-gay-bashing-ritual/?_r=0)”.

Similarly, even if public opinion was gradually becoming somewhat more tolerant, this was only relatively speaking and when an estimated 800-1,000 men were imprisoned annually between 1934 and 1993 (http://libertyandsocialism.org/2011/07/19/soviet-homophobia/) for consensual homosexual relations, the benchmark for assessing an improvement in the situation was not exactly challenging to meet. Indeed, while the decline in the number of people wishing to “liquidate” LGBT people is welcome (to make an understatement), it’s certainly not an indication of acceptance of homosexuality, as 2012 data from the Levada Centre demonstrates (http://rbth.ru/multimedia/infographics/2013/02/12/are_russians_homophobic_22779.html):
But why the sudden intensification of homophobia to the extent that legislation is required to deal with the putative threat posed by “persons of non-traditional orientation”, to use a direct translation of the Russian term? It would be very easy to try and explain the sudden rise of state-sponsored homophobia in Russia in any number of simplistic ways: that Russia hasn’t yet shrugged off its Soviet past and become a “civilised” country; that the targeting of LGBT people is a case of populist scapegoating to distract the population from other issues; it’s the result of the increasing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church over public and political life; that there’s been a post-Soviet crisis of gender roles and especially masculinity; that Russia is seeking to reestablish its international position by leading opposition to Western human rights norms and their explicit extension to LGBT people (Russia has sponsored three UN Human Rights Council resolutions calling for “traditional values” to be the basis for human rights abuse); or that, fundamentally, Russia is just an illiberal country and that the brief period of relative tolerance for homosexuality seen between 1993 and the mid-2000s is an anomaly — after all, official homophobia having a history that considerably pre-dates the Soviet Union, beginning with the Military Code of 1716 when sex between men in the army and navy was criminalised.

All of these explanations contain elements of truth. Yet in the same way as trying to find a “root cause” for homosexuality, trying to explain why homophobia is currently so strong in Russia...
brutal-murder-bloggers-question-roots-of-russian-homophobia/) misses the point by suggesting that it is somehow “normal” and inevitable, and that we cannot or should not expect any more from Russians. This is patronising to the growing number of Russians who are speaking out about not just growing homophobia, but also growing intolerance for dissent from the Kremlin-authorised line in general, as has been seen with the Pussy Riot trial (http://freepussyriot.org/about), the prosecution of Mikhail Khordokovsky (http://www.khodorkovsky.com/), the attempted posthumous prosecution of Sergei Magnitsky (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-set-for-posthumous-magnitsky-trial-8498751.html), and the ongoing crackdown on NGOs deemed to be “foreign agents (http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/14/russia-foreign-agents-law-hits-hundreds-ngos-updated-june-17-2013)” (including leading LGBT NGO Coming Out (http://comingoutspb.ru/en/en-news/verdict), which is seeking to raise funds to pay the 500,000 rouble, or almost £10,000, fine).

It also misses the point that the anti-gay laws are having very real consequences for LGBT people living in Russia. Reports of homophobic violence have increased dramatically, including the incredibly brutal rape and murder of 23-year old Vladislav Tornovoi (http://rt.com/news/man-killed-homophobia-russia-198/) in Volgograd, who was beaten, sodomised with 3 beer bottles and then had his head smashed it with a 20kg rock, and the murder of 38-year old Oleg Serdyuk in Kamchatka (http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/06/03/uk-russia-killing-gay-idUKBRE9520A120130603), who was stabbed and trampled to death for being gay. TV journalist Anton Krasovsky, meanwhile, was fired having come out on during a show that he was presenting (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-the-country-that-hates-gay-people-8616223.html). LGBT youth who were already at high risk of bullying and abuse, have now become “Children 404 (https://www.facebook.com/children.404)”, whose existence is refuted by the authorities.

Text reads “Children 404 – we’re here!” Photo from the ‘Children 404’ Facebook page, where Russian LGBT youth are posting their photos and experiences in order to demonstrate that they exist.
Rather than merely looking to find reasons for homophobia, therefore, we need to be looking at the broader socio-political dynamics and how to challenge them. In this respect, I suggest that the concept of moral panic provides a useful starting point for such an investigation. A moral panic is defined as the outbreak of moral concern over a supposed threat from an agent of corruption that is out of proportion to its actual danger or potential harm. The concept originated with British sociologists researching social deviance in the 1960s and 1970s, with Stanley Cohen’s *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (now in its third edition) providing a foundational study of the phenomenon focused on how mods and rockers in 1960s England came to be seen as “folk devils” who were seen to threaten the moral order of society.

The concept’s utility in my view stems from two things. Firstly, as Stanley Cohen notes, “successful moral panics owe their appeal to their ability to find points of resonance with wider anxieties meaning that they can provide insights into the wider socio-political context and the current concerns of society by examining what arguments are being made about the threat posed by a particular folk devil. So, for example, Vitaly Milonov, initiator of the St Petersburg law offered the following explanation for why a law prohibiting “homopropaganda” was required:

> As a person, I am profoundly against gay parades, because I am an Orthodox Christian and the demonstration of the sin of Sodom is repellent to me. If, God forbid, I happened to see a crowd of those citizens — like they do in Berlin, I’ve seen photographs where men with all sorts of dildos are running around semi-naked — it’s natural that I’d try to take my children aside, so that they would not see this perversion.

Thus, while Russia’s anti-gay laws have been justified by the need to protect children from being corrupted and uphold Russian (i.e. Orthodox Christian) moral values in the face of an apparent threat from liberal European values that are personified by LGBT people, Milonov’s explanation also touches upon issues of public displays of sexuality, the role of the Orthodox Church as a moral guardian, and Russia’s national identity being distinct from Europe.

Secondly, as Alan Hunt argues, moral panics are part of wider dynamics of “moral politics […] in which some agents act to problematize the conduct, values, or culture of others and seek to act upon them through moralizing discourses, moralizing practices, and regulation”. Seen this way, Russia’s anti-gay laws are the product of not only domestic moral politics, but also an international moral politics, a central feature of which has become contestation of the notion that “LGBT rights are human rights and human rights are LGBT rights”, as Hilary Clinton put it in 2011. This argument, first put forward by LGBT activists in the 1990s, has also been taken up by the UN, with Secretary General Ban Ki-moon reiterating his support for LGBT people and observance of their fundamental rights on more than one occasion and rebuffing claims that “traditional values” are a valid reason for denying LGBT people fundamental human rights:
Some will oppose change. They may invoke culture, tradition or religion to defend the status quo. Such arguments have been used to justify slavery, child marriage, rape in marriage and female genital mutilation. I respect culture, tradition and religion, but they can never justify the denial of basic rights.

LGBT people in Russia are currently on one of the front lines of this contestation. Russia’s anti-gay laws amply illustrate that political homophobia is a serious challenge to the current global human rights regime and especially to norms of citizenship in seeking to deny an entire group of people on the basis of a subjective moral judgement about their identity and/or behaviour.

Moral panics and the wider moral politics of which they are part are a stark reminder that the personal is political and the political is – or can rapidly become – intensely personal. As has already been demonstrated in the US and other countries in relation to debates over reproductive rights and sexual violence, as well as by events in Russia in relation to LGBT rights, the practices of moral politics are inherently divisive and dehumanising, costing people their lives and livelihoods and blaming them for their own victimisation. This is why LGBT rights is an issue that does not just affect LGBT people: If we accept the logic that is presented by proponents of “traditional values”, then we are not only accepting current inequalities and hierarchies of power, we are also also contributing to their perpetuation and in the process leaving ourselves vulnerable to further restrictions of rights if we do not meet criteria that are imposed by someone else and over which we may have no control. If we do not want this to happen, as Anton Krasovsky argues, remaining silent is not an option, both for the sake of other people and ourselves.

Tags: Alexander Kondakov, Anton Krasovsky, Boris Moiseev, Cai Wilkinson, Children 404, Laurie Essig, Masha Gessen, Mikhail Khordokovsky, Oleg Serdyuk, Pussy Riot, Sergei Magnitsky, Stanley Cohen, Vitaly Milonov, Vladislav Tornovoi, Yuri Luzhkov
8 Responses to “Russia’s Anti-Gay Laws: The Politics and Consequences of a Moral Panic”

Sarah Rosenthal July 16, 2013 at 10:15 pm #
Reblogged this on Rome/Rohm/Roam.

REPLY
c,l, August 12, 2013 at 5:27 am #
But we have to remember that this anti-gay law was voted 1 year ago! Why this protest comes only now? Because USA gvt is using this issue to retaliate against Poutine who refused to give them Snowdon, and rallying its allies against Russia by getting them to boycott the Olympics! Very obvious! Do we want to be a pawn of the US gvt?

REPLY
Ralph August 12, 2013 at 7:21 pm #
No, afaik the law has been voted in parliament last month, the violence against LGBT has enormously risen within the last weeks.

REPLY
c,l, August 12, 2013 at 9:26 pm #
http://gps.hypotheses.org/331
Le 1 mars 2013:
C’est de façon presque unanime que la Douma (chambre basse du Parlement) russe a adopté en première lecture, le 25/01/2013, une loi condamnant “la propagande de l’homosexualité auprès des mineurs” [3] (388 voix pour, une contre [4], une abstention, 60 absents). Les députés ont jusqu’au 25/05/2013 pour adopter des amendements et notamment clarifier le projet de loi en définissant précisément notamment ce qu’il entend par “propagande”. Cette loi fédérale apparaît comme l’aboutissement d’un processus entamé dans les années 2000, lorsqu’un certain nombre de régions russes se sont mises à adopter les unes après les autres des projets de loi similaires, sous différentes formulations, alors qu’en parallèle des tentatives étaient déjà faites pour faire voter une telle loi au niveau fédéral. Par ailleurs, l’Ukraine a adopté une loi similaire le 02/10/2012.http://gps.hypotheses.org/320

jerbearinsantafe September 15, 2013 at 3:59 am #
Reblogged this on JerBear’s Queer World News, Views & More From The City Different – Santa Fe, NM and commented:
This is an informative post that provides information on the attitude of the Russian public to its LGBT citizens as well as the politicians. The post also looks at how attitudes first improved then slipped back towards more homophobic.

REPLY
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1. Russia’s anti-gay crackdown: Fines total 20,000 euros | 76 CRIMES - June 25, 2013
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2. Links: Protests in Brazil, Eurozone, Spying, MOOCs - IR Blog - July 2, 2013
   […] Cai Wilkinson refers to the moral panic in recent Russian anti-gay laws. […]

   […] Foto de cabecera de The Disorder of Things, que tiene un excelente post sobre la política de las leyes anti-gays rusas. […]

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