

Chapter 1

Constructing Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities

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Introduction

In June 2013 the issue of sexuality in Russia came under the global media spotlight, when President Vladimir Putin signed into law the bill banning the spreading of ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’. While the law was justified by Putin as a means to boost Russia’s falling birth rate and uphold traditional Russian values, it was understood by critics as an attempt to shore up support among nationalist and conservative voters and discredit his political opponents. While the ‘gay propaganda law’ triggered an immediate international outcry, for queer Russians the politicisation of ‘non-traditional’ sexualities was nothing new. Throughout the Soviet Union and post-Soviet space, the legal status of and social attitudes towards non-heterosexuals have always been strongly influenced by political discourse, with homophobia repeatedly instrumentalised to serve political goals. While sexual desire can be understood as being biologically driven, sexual categories and the meanings assigned to them are constructed by institutions that ‘produce and/or reproduce ideologies and norms, which define social expectations’ with regard to acceptable sexual mores and behaviours (Štulhofer and Sandfort, 2005, p. 5). The aim of the introduction to this edited volume is thus to show how homosexuality has been constructed and reconstructed in the Soviet Union and in the states of the former USSR in a bid to provide the historical, social and political context for the chapters that follow.

The first section will analyse the impact of the Bolshevik revolution on non-normative sexualities in the USSR and how the legal situation for gay men and attitudes towards non-homosexuals in general became more negative as the Party’s priorities changed. The second section will look at the situation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. As an analysis of the situation in each of the 15 former Soviet republics is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will identify general social and political trends which have shaped attitudes towards non-normative sexualities throughout the post-Soviet space but will pay particular attention to developments in Russia, as it is the focus of most chapters in the volume and as the Russian response to homosexuality was often taken as the blueprint for equivalent responses in the other Soviet successor states.¹

Constructing Soviet sexualities

Immediately after the October Revolution, the free expression of sexuality was encouraged by the Bolsheviks to demonstrate that Soviet Russia was entering a new age, liberated from centuries of tsarist oppression. Rejecting the religious morality underpinning Romanov-era legislation on sexuality and insisting that the new order would be ‘based on scientific and rational principles’, the Bolsheviks repealed the tsarist laws banning male homosexuality, making Russia only the second major power, after France, to do so (Healey, 2002, p. 352).

More significantly, the new regime refrained from introducing equivalent articles in the first Soviet Russian Criminal Code of 1922 (Hazard, 1965).² Consequently, as Ira Roldugina discusses in **Chapter 2**, the 1920s was a period in which working-class queer Russians had, for the first time, the freedom to construct their sexual subjectivities and make sense of their sexual desires and behaviours with reference to the legal, political and, in particular, medical discourses circulating in Russia at that time.

Although sexual relations between men were not illegal, Bolshevik intellectuals nevertheless prioritised ideology over sexuality, insisting on the ‘wholesale subordination of sexuality to the proletariat’s class interests [...] for the sake of the Soviet state and Communist Party’ (Kon, 1999, p. 208). Indeed, sexuality was largely understood in ideological terms. As Lenin himself explained:

It seems to me that these flourishing sexual theories [...] arise from the personal need to justify personal abnormality or hypertrophy in sexual life before bourgeois morality, and to entreat its patience. The masked respect for bourgeois morality seems to me just as repulsive as poking about in sexual matters. However wild and revolutionary the behaviour may be, it is still really quite bourgeois. It is, mainly a hobby of the intellectuals and of the sections nearest to them. (Healey, 2001a, p. 113)

Despite the insistence that Soviet rule would be based on scientific and rational principles, despite the fact that Lenin was clearly aware of scientific sexological theories³ and despite homosexuality having been the focus of research by the Russian medical and psychological professions for some years, the acceptability to the Soviet regime of an individual’s sexuality was largely determined by political, not scientific, considerations (see Healey, 1993). As the example of the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgy Chicherin demonstrated, the homosexuality of certain members of the Party could be tolerated and even accepted ‘if they performed politically valued functions’ (Healey, 2002, p. 358); at the same time, accusations of ‘pederasty’ were used to attack ‘class enemies’, such as Orthodox priests (ibid., p. 356). In other words, the oppression of sexual minorities in the USSR often had ‘as much to do with their class backgrounds (as perceived by the regime) as with their homosexuality’ (Karlinsky, 1989, p. 360). So, while homosexuality had now been decriminalised, ‘transgressive sexual behaviour’ was still generally seen as the decadent predilection of the bourgeoisie and thus had, according to Lenin, no place ‘in the class-conscious, fighting proletariat’ (Healey, 2002, p. 358). The regulation of homosexuality was also instrumentalised by the regime as a means to facilitate its broader political objectives: In the 1920s, for example, homosexual acts between men were criminalised in the Soviet Socialist Republics of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as it was believed such ‘primitive customs’ were endemic in Islamic societies and would undermine the Soviet modernisation project (Healey, 2001b, p. 258).

Following the death of Lenin in 1924, the political goals of the regime shifted from bringing about the Bolshevik revolution to ensuring absolute control over society and fostering mass industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture, with these new objectives bringing with

them a hardening of attitudes towards sexuality, in general, and homosexuality, in particular. Intolerance towards homosexuality intensified under Stalin in part due to the changing nature of Party elites, whereby intellectuals and urban Marxists were replaced by peasants, resulting in increased anti-intellectualism. In terms of the regime's economic objectives, the policy of mass industrialisation announced by Stalin at the XIV Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in December 1925 required a major expansion of the labour force, with a number of social engineering strategies introduced to increase the pool of available workers. Considerable effort went into boosting the birth rate and this was supported by the institutionalisation of a much more conservative gender order and by endorsing 'the nuclear heterosexual family as the founding unit of Soviet society', whose purpose was 'to serve the needs of the socialist state, rather than being championed as a private commitment or source of personal fulfilment' (Stella, 2015, pp. 28-29). In a society in which citizens were expected to put the collective interest above their individual desires, homosexuality was reconceived as abnormal, decadent and – in that it could not produce children – contrary to the public good (Attwood, 1996, p. 102).

A further strategy to satisfy the increased demand for industrial labour which had an impact on the lives of Soviet queers was to convert so-called 'social anomalies' (female prostitutes, beggars, alcoholics and homeless adults) into 'legitimate factory labor', whereby they were 'taught trades and socialist values and then funneled into ordinary factories' (Healey, 2002, p. 360). While homosexuals were not themselves considered 'socially anomalous', the control by the police of the marginal public spaces in which not only 'social anomalies' but also gay men would congregate inevitably meant 'the male homosexual subculture [...] would come under scrutiny' (ibid., pp. 361-362). Indeed, it was as a result of their encounters with male homosexuals as part of their attempts to rid the socialist city of 'socially harmful elements' that 'the secret police initiated the 1933 proposal to recriminalize sodomy' (ibid., pp. 361-2).

The law recriminalising male homosexuality – Article 121 of the Soviet Penal Code – entered into force on 7 March 1934. Punishment for *muzhelozhestvo* (literally, 'man lying with man') was set at 'five years of hard labor for voluntary sexual acts and eight years for using force or threats and for sex with a consenting minor' (Karlinsky, 1989, p. 361). Sex between women, meanwhile, had never been criminalised and was not criminalised under the terms of Article 121. In general, lesbianism and bisexuality among women were not seen as a crime but as a mental illness, and women were thus often subjected to medical and psychiatric interventions rather than criminal prosecutions (see Essig, 1999, p. 29; Healey, 2001a; Stella, 2015, pp. 30-31).

As homosexuality was constructed as a form of 'decadent bourgeois morality' (Pollard, 1995, p. 186) which would disappear with the establishment of communism, its recriminalisation was hailed as a 'triumph of proletarian humanitarianism,' with Nikolai Krylenko, the Soviet Commissar of Justice, proclaiming in 1936 that after two decades of socialism 'there was no reason for anyone to be homosexual' and anyone continuing to do so must be 'remnants of the exploiting classes' (Karlinsky, 1989, pp. 361-62).⁴ According to Lynne Attwood, lesbians often reported facing greater hostility than gay men. While the latter could be excused for not

controlling their sexual urges – in whatever direction – lesbians had no excuse, because the existence of female sexuality was all but denied (1996, p. 104). Moreover, as the identity of women was tied so closely to motherhood, any woman putting her sexual interests before the interests of her family was considered an outrage. In any case, the Soviet regime was hostile to sexuality in general because it sought ‘to ensure absolute control over the personality’ by attempting ‘to deindividualise it [and] to destroy its independence and its emotional world’ (Kon, 1999, p. 208).

Given its construction in ideological terms, the continued existence of homosexuality in the USSR could have been taken as a sign of the failure of socialism to eradicate the lingering influence of the bourgeoisie, and it was thus imperative not just for (male) homosexual sex to be illegal but also for homosexuals to be rendered invisible. References to same-sex desire were all but absent in the Soviet press and removed from all translations of foreign literature, while gatherings of gays and lesbians in the public sphere were forbidden (Baer, 2013, p. 37). While Brian Baer suggests that, as a result, ‘Soviet culture offered little ontological basis for the representation of homosexuality as an identity, as a stable subject position through which one might assume a voice in the Russian public sphere’ (ibid., p. 38), this view is not shared by Arthur Clech in **Chapter 3**. While taking into account the effects produced by ideology and medical and penal discourse, Clech argues that non-heterosexual men and women in the USSR were nevertheless able to construct homosexual subjectivities that were not reduced to either sickness or criminality but were rather created through language, irony and solidarity.

While the 1960s and 1970s saw homosexuality decriminalised elsewhere in the communist bloc – in Czechoslovakia and Hungary in 1962, in the German Democratic Republic and in Bulgaria in 1968 and in Yugoslavia in 1977 – calls for the decriminalisation of consensual sex between men in the USSR were rejected. In **Chapter 4** Rustam Alexander analyses the debates between academics and Soviet criminologists in the period from 1960 to 1975 and shows how the case for decriminalisation made by scholars on the basis of sexuality research was rejected for reasons of communist morality by criminologists affiliated with the Interior Ministry.

Homosexual acts between men thus remained a crime until the collapse of the Soviet Union. While some gays, lesbians and bisexuals did succeed in living their lives on their own terms in the private sphere, there were few, if any, positive representations of homosexuality in the public sphere to counter the state-fuelled homophobia that shaped the opinions of generations of citizens, who were used to being told what to think by the regime. As one of the Russians whom I interviewed as part of my project presented in Chapter 7 commented with reference to the Soviet era:

The state decided what was normal and what was abnormal and, in the case of homosexuality, it was abnormal, it was a punishable offence. The ability of the people to decide for themselves what should be considered normal or abnormal was taken away from them.⁵

Constructing Post-Soviet Sexualities

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, consenting sexual acts between adult men were decriminalised in all post-Soviet states, with the exception of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where they remain illegal to this day. However, even in the other 13 states, decriminalisation was agreed on the understanding that homosexuals would remain out of sight. In all societies, even socially liberal ones, 'most people feel that sexuality belongs to the private space of the home' and thus 'most public spaces are coded to be heterosexual' (Valentine, 1993, p. 396). While heterosexuals can express their sexuality publicly and thus 'transcend the so-called public-private dichotomy', homosexuals have historically been expected to remain invisible by performing traditional understandings of masculine and feminine behaviour and keeping to their own spaces, such as gay bars (ibid.). In the early years of the post-Soviet era LGBT Russians appear to have adhered to this 'sexual contract', although more radical groups used the new post-decriminalisation environment to engage in queer activism aimed at shocking Russian society (Essig, 1999, p. 62). In the mid-nineties LGBT community organisations and publications mushroomed across the Russia, before dwindling to almost nothing in the early years of the new millennium in the face of official harassment and cuts in overseas funding. Nevertheless, Russian gays and lesbians were now more visible than ever before. The fact that the apparently sudden appearance of homosexuality in the public sphere coincided with the political and economic turmoil and demographic decline of the post-Soviet transition did, however, give the impression that homosexuality was a 'symptom of post-Soviet Russia's decline and [...] a threat to Russia's already embattled social order' (Baer, 2013, p. 40).

In conditions of disorientating political, economic and social change of the kind experienced by the post-Soviet states, it is common to see social diversity (e.g. sexual as well as ethnic or religious minorities) as a threat to the social order and there is thus often a tendency to 'cling to traditional gender roles and sexual norms [...] in an attempt to maximise predictability in an uncertain world' (Inglehart and Baker, 2000, p. 28). In the former Soviet Union this was considered all the more important in view of the perceived distortion of 'traditional' gender roles by the regime (Ashwin, 2000). In Latvia, for example, a 1995 United Nations Human Development Report concluded that the communist experience had resulted in 'the distortion of social relations between women and men' in that it confused the public and private gender roles central to the Latvian nation-family (United Nations, 1995, p. 37).⁶ In Latvia, as in other states for the former USSR, the political response to this state of affairs was a call to return to the traditional mores and values of the pre-Soviet period. As the 'traditional' pre-Soviet era was held up as the opposite of the abnormal Soviet years, *traditional* became equated with *normal*, with traditional gender and sexual roles understood as 'an important aspect of the nostalgia for 'normality'' (Watson, 1993, pp. 472-473). However, what was 'normal' was defined strictly in national, religious and heterosexual terms. Indeed, throughout the post-Soviet region, the three concepts have largely been seen as indivisible.

Nation, gender and sexuality

The resurgence of nationalism after 1991 throughout the former USSR is best understood as a response to the processes of unequalled social, economic and political transformation that had

been set in train by the collapse of state socialism. Not only did the Soviet economic system have to be dismantled and new political institutions rebuilt from scratch but a new cognitive framework also had to be found through which the citizens of the post-Soviet states could make sense of the world around them and guide their decisions about whom to trust and with whom to co-operate. In the Soviet era it had been Marxism-Leninism that had performed this function but after 1991 the ideology had been discredited. The ideological vacuum was soon filled by nationalism, which helped to provide a sense of cohesion and stability by offering a credible explanation of the past and guide for the present and future (Mole, 2013). However, the return of nationalism as the main source of political legitimacy was to have significant consequences for understandings of 'correct' gender and sexuality.

While not true in all cases, nationalists tend to have very traditional understandings of gender and sexuality. Although most academics understand nations as social constructs (Suny, 2001; Gellner, 1996; Hobsbawm, 1995; and Breuilly, 1993), the prevailing view outside academia is that they are natural entities, emerging out of extended kin groups, united by shared blood, culture, history, norms and values, which can be traced back hundreds if not thousands of years. To ensure that the nation maintains its internal homogeneity and its clear demarcation from the Other, nationalists put considerable effort into promoting its biological and cultural reproduction, a process that can only be guaranteed by naturalising the patriarchal family and associated public and private roles of men and women. Nowhere was this felt more acutely in the post-Soviet space after the collapse of communism than in the area of reproduction. After 1991, fertility rates plummeted across the former USSR, with many states recording negative rates of population growth. Fertility rates in Russia, for example, plunged from 2.01 in 1989 to below 1.20 in 1999 and this was used as evidence that the nation was dying out (DaVanzo and Grammich, 2001, p. 24). In response, nationalist politicians sought to boost birth rates by 'limiting women's reproductive options by working symbolically to delegitimise abortion and empirically to cripple the work of newly established family planning organisations and sex educators' (Rivkin-Fish, 2006, p. 152). In this context, the most important role women can play is that of the mother, contributing to the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation by producing future members of the nation and teaching them the ethnic language and culture. By contrast, the key roles men play within the nation are those of breadwinners, defenders and decision-makers. While this hierarchical relationship between men and women first emerges in the private sphere of the home, it is then used to justify, by extension, men's control of women in the public sphere as well as the articulation of the public as superior to the private (Pateman, 1988, pp. 91-92). The nuclear family with its naturalised hierarchy between men and women and between the public and the private is thus felt to be essential to ensure the nation's continued existence in the present and future (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989, p. 7). In the former Soviet Union, however, nationalist politicians warned that this idealised national future was under attack from two fronts.

Firstly, in Russia and other post-Soviet states, the ability of men to fulfil the role of breadwinner – which according to Riabov and Riabova was 'the main criterion of masculinity' – was undermined in the 1990s by the harsh economic realities of post-communism, resulting in a sense of demasculinisation (2014, p. 25; see also Kay, 2006). Interestingly, Russia itself

was also thought to have been demasculinised by the loss of the Cold War, the dissolution of the USSR, the loss of the Soviet empire and its superpower status, the economic collapse, its dependence on foreign loans and the failure to control the secessionist fighters in Chechnya. The path to the restoration of Russian national pride, which according to Eliot Borenstein was interpreted as inseparable from male dignity and sexuality, was via the retraditionalisation of 'national' gender roles and the remasculinisation of Russia (cited in Riabov and Riabova, 2014, p. 25).

Secondly, the idealised national future set out above was thought to be threatened by people performing non-normative genders and sexualities. As the nation is believed to be reproduced biologically, gays and lesbians – by not having children – undermine the idea of the nation as a unified collectivity with a communal future. Moreover, the fact that homosexual sex is not procreative also means that it is seen as purely for pleasure and thus decadent – a very selfish, un-national value, one often ascribed to the threatening Other (Healey, 2001). Stereotypes of gay men as weak and effeminate and lesbians as strong and masculine confuse the patriarchal gender order underpinning most ethno-national discourses. Homosexuality is therefore seen not simply as deviating from but actually threatening the norms upon which the nation is built. As George Mosse explains, the 'ideal of masculinity [...] as a symbol of personal and national regeneration' requires a countertype, against which the normative masculine ideal is strengthened and legitimised (1996, p. 4). These countertypes, of which homosexuals are a key group, are not just different types of masculinity but are constructed as 'enemies', where the 'line between modern masculinity and its enemies had to be sharply drawn in order that manliness as the symbol of a healthy society might gain strength from this contrast' (ibid., pp. 67-68).⁷ The same argument can, of course, be made for lesbians in relation to straight women. In general, LGBT people are constructed as a threat to the nation by 'undermining the patriarchal family, failing to adhere to national stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, confusing the public/private roles of men and women, undermining the nation's internal homogeneity and deviating from its shared norms, especially those derived from religious teaching' (Mole, 2016, pp. 109-110).

Indeed, representatives of the different national faiths in the post-Soviet states have been highly vocal in their condemnation of homosexuality. The Russian Orthodox Church has made it clear that it 'proceeds from the invariable conviction that the divinely established marital union of man and woman cannot be compared to the perverted manifestations of sexuality. She believes homosexuality to be a sinful distortion of human nature.' (Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, 2000) In Islam the Qur'an explicitly condemns homosexuality, which is seen as 'an aberration of Allah's will which threatens Muslims with extinction' (Kligermann, 2007, p. 54). In Catholicism, same-sex acts are considered sinful, as sexuality is presented as being 'naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children' [Catechism of the Catholic Church 2353]. Homosexual acts thus 'close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.' [Catechism of the Catholic Church 2357] (Vatican, n.d.) While Lutheranism is generally thought of as one of the more progressive Christian denominations with regard to support for LGBT rights, with

many Nordic Lutheran Churches appointing gay clergy and blessing or performing same-sex marriages, this is not true of the Lutheran Church in Estonia and Latvia.⁸ When, for example, a bill was drafted by the Latvian National Human Rights Office to allow same-sex couples to enjoy the same rights as married couples, the head of the Latvian Lutheran Church, together with his Catholic and Orthodox counterparts, signed an open letter, which read:

We cannot have special rights for homosexual orientation as a special condition. No one provides laws for kleptomania, vampires, alcoholics and drug addicts. Regardless of whether these sicknesses are inborn or obtained in practice, we have to fight them and not provide new laws favourable to them. (Baltic Times, 1999)

In the face of demographic decline, a feeling of national humiliation and an uncertain social, political and economic future, the retraditionalisation of gender and sexual norms therefore provides a sense of stability and familiarity. By contrast, homosexuality can be presented by nationalist politicians as a threat to the biological reproduction of the nation and to national and religious values, thereby legitimising the marginalisation of LGBTQ citizens and their attempts to restrict them to the private sphere, as was evident across the post-Soviet space. Attempts to bring non-normative sexualities into the public sphere – through Pride marches, for example – have often been met with violence from protesters (Amnesty International, 2008a) or restrictions to sexual citizenship by the state (see Amnesty International, 2008b).⁹ The most notorious example of the latter is the so-called ‘gay propaganda law’ introduced in Russia in 2013.

Political homophobia and ‘gay propaganda’

As the recent experience of nationalist politicians the world over demonstrates, attacking homosexuality can be a useful strategy for discrediting opponents and shoring up support among nationalist and conservative voters. In the post-Soviet context, it is the perceived alien-ness of homosexuality and its association with Western values that proves particularly useful to nationalists, allowing them to construct gays and lesbians as disloyal enemies of the state and reinforce the idea that homosexuality is a foreign import. Statements of this kind have been made by politicians throughout the post-Soviet space from Latvia to Uzbekistan (see Mole, 2011; Tomiuc, 2016).

In Russia, it was the demonstrations against the perceived falsification of the results of the 2011 parliamentary elections that prompted Putin to seek to reaffirm his political legitimacy by protecting ‘traditional Russian values’ in the face of alien ideas from the West, such as tolerance of homosexual propaganda (President of Russia, 2014). Putin and other nationalist leaders in the post-Soviet region repeatedly sought to draw a boundary between the ‘decadent West’ and ‘traditional East’ for their own social and political purposes (President of Russia, 2013). While Western politicians and commentators frequently criticise the politicisation of homophobia in Russia, Laurie Essig and Alexander Kondakov argue in **Chapter 5** that the so-called the New Sexual Cold War, which presents political debates about LGBT rights as a fight between a modern ‘West’ and a backwards ‘East’, is too simplistic and overlooks the

poor record many Western ‘progressive’ states have with regards to anti-LGBT hate crimes and discriminatory legal arrangements vis-à-vis their own queer citizens.

Following a number of regional bills, Putin signed the federal law banning the spreading of ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’ on 30 June 2013, under the terms of which individuals and organisations can be fined for disseminating information on ‘non-traditional sexual orientations’ among minors, promoting ‘the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional relationships’ and/or depicting ‘homosexual people as role models, including any mention of famous homosexuals’.¹⁰ The fact that many of Russia’s cultural icons – including the founder of the Ballets Russes Sergei Diaghilev, the painter Leon Bakst, the actress Alla Nazimova, dancers Vaslav Nijinsky and Rudolf Nureyev, and composer Pyotr Chaikovsky – were queer was to prove problematic for Russian cultural commentators. As Philip Ross Bullock argues in **Chapter 6**, biographers of Chaikovsky’s life have either felt constrained by the homophobic social and political climate in Russia and therefore shied away from examining his sexuality at all or have sought to prove that he was in fact heterosexual.

Appeals to tradition and ‘the symbolic resource of the collective past’ have thus provided politicians in Russia with a ‘powerful lever for political mobilisation’ aimed at strengthening national unity in the face of perceived internal and external enemies (Pecherskaya, 2013, p. 96). According to Wilkinson, homophobia in Russia thus ‘functions as a Slavophile political shorthand for national identity and traditional values’ (2014, p. 368). Restricting LGBT rights enables Putin to clamp down on actual and potential opponents and shore up support among the conservative majority. In addition, it allows him to entrench traditional Russian values in the face of the spread of Western liberal ideas, which he blames for corrupting the nation’s youth and fuelling opposition to his rule. And, thirdly, tapping into pre-existing antipathy towards sexual minorities, he has been able to use homosexuality as a lightning rod to divert attention from political corruption and Russia’s weakening economy.

To ensure that the traditional values/anti-gay discourse resonates with Russian society – and linking back to the previous section of this chapter – Putin frames this as part of a strategy to ensure the survival of the Russian nation. The survival of the physical nation would require a sharp rise in fertility rates, which plummeted following the collapse of the USSR. Tapping into Soviet-era prejudices about the failure of gays and lesbians to contribute to the public good through procreation, Putin argued in a television interview in January 2014 that, to achieve higher birth rates, Russia would need to ‘cleanse’ itself of gay people. To reinforce its specifically *Russian* identity, the nation needs to define itself against its main Others, the US and the EU, rejecting their liberal values. The culture clash between Russia and the West over LGBT rights was evident from the Kremlin-backed human rights report published in January 2014, in which Moscow lashed out at the EU for its ‘aggressive promotion’ of the rights of sexual minorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013, p. 7). It was also apparent in Putin’s address in December 2013, in which he defended Russia’s conservative values as a bulwark against ‘so-called tolerance’, which was ‘genderless and infertile’ (President of Russia, 2013). The international outcry these policies triggered was vociferous but only further strengthened the association of sexual minorities with the West.

Putin could simply provide this Western tolerance of homosexuality at the expense of Russian national values as further proof that he was right all along.

While it has been suggested that the aim of the ‘gay propaganda law’ has been to force gays and lesbians back into the closet and make homosexuality invisible, as it was in the Soviet Union, the legislation has to some degree had a counter-productive effect. Firstly, the top-down pressure from the state has produced bottom-up counter-pressure in the form of a wave of new or renewed LGBT activism. While, for many years, gays and lesbians in Russia were criticised by activists for their political apathy, the anti-gay laws have lit a fire under many sexual dissidents. In addition, the law has brought LGBT rights in Russia – a topic which the state sought to suppress – to national and international attention. The visibility the legislation has inadvertently produced should thus be seen an important component of resistance to the state-sponsored attempts to render homosexuality invisible. Moreover, Russian activists can count on the support of Russian queer diasporas overseas. As I argue in **Chapter 7**, Russian-speaking LGBT migrants in Berlin have been active in raising awareness of the situation in their homeland and in resisting attempts to construct Russian queers as enemies of the nation. In so doing, I show how ‘queer diaspora’ can be used as a heuristic device to think about identity, belonging and solidarity among sexual minorities in the context of dispersal and transnational networks.

The international media focus on Russia’s ‘gay propaganda law’ and other infringements of the human rights of its LGBT citizens has drawn attention away from similar developments elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, despite the legal situation of and social attitudes towards LGBT people often being as bad, if not worse. This is also reflected in academic research on homosexuality in the non-Russian post-Soviet states, which, with some notable exceptions (Davydova, 2012; LaSala and Revere, 2011; Martsenyuk, 2012; O’Dwyer and Schwarz, 2010; Wilkinson and Kirey, 2010), has been rather limited. The aim of the final three chapters of the book is thus to cast the spotlight on four post-Soviet states largely overlooked in sexuality scholarship to show the impact of the shared Soviet legacies and common experiences of the post-communist transition on non-normative sexualities, while also highlighting the specific cultural and political contexts within which LGBT Armenians, Kyrgyz, Belarusians and Lithuanians respond to societal homophobia.

In the context of the memory of the Armenian Genocide and the Karabakh war, Sevan Beukian demonstrates in **Chapter 8** how LGBTQ Armenians have been constructed as a threat to the continued existence of the Armenian nation, while the marginalisation of the LGBT community and the retraditionalisation of gender and sexual mores in Armenia has been used by politicians to strengthen the nation’s ability to fight against the ‘Turk’ through reproduction and militarisation. While LGBT individuals in Kyrgyzstan are also marginalised within society in general but also specifically within the activist community, Joanna Pares Hoare shows in **Chapter 9** that queer activists have used this ‘exclusion’ strategically as a means to attract international funding as well as gain moral and practical support from outside of Kyrgyzstan. In the final chapter – **Chapter 10** – Galina Miazhevich examines the ways in which LGBT Belarusians and Lithuanians construct their sexual identities in the

context of socio-cultural change. In so doing, she questions the teleological bias of existing theories of socio-cultural change and, drawing on the notion of 'cultural identity', points to a complex interplay of past and present, Western and local values and attitudes in the post-Soviet region.

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Endnotes

- ¹ A more detailed theoretical analysis of these debates can be found in Mole, 2016.
- ² Although homosexuality was no longer a crime in most republics of the USSR, Soviet queers could still be prosecuted due to the application of *law by analogy*, which was allowed under the 1922 Criminal Code, whereby 'an infraction not specifically mentioned in the code might nevertheless be prosecuted in court on the basis of its resemblance to a formally recognized crime' (Engelstein, 1995, p.163). For example, if a judge chose to view public displays of affection between two men or women as a threat to public welfare – which was a crime even if displays of same-sex affection themselves were not – the gays or lesbians in question could be prosecuted.
- ³ For late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexological research, see von Krafft-Ebing, 2011 [1886]; Freud, 1962 [1905]; and Hirschfeld, 2000 [1914].
- ⁴ Around 1,000 gay men a year were imprisoned in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Healey, 2004, p. 9).
- ⁵ Interview with Vladimir, Berlin, 11 April 2012.
- ⁶ Social and political debates about returning to pre-Soviet norms of gender and sexuality took place across the post-Soviet space throughout the 1990s (Akiner, 1997; Beukian, 2014; Chandler, 2013; Commercio, 2014; Heyat, 2008; Mole, 2011; Novikova, 2002; Riabov and Riabova, 2014; and Rubchak, 1996).
- ⁷ In addition to homosexuals, other countertypes have historically included Jews, Gypsies, vagrants, habitual criminals and the insane.
- ⁸ While Estonia and Latvia did not experience a marked increase in religiosity, Estonian and Latvian politicians have used religion to legitimise anti-gay rhetoric.
- ⁹ Baltic Pride, which alternates between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, is the only Pride march in the former Soviet Union to take place on a regular basis.
- ¹⁰ The full text is available on *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Dokumenty* (2013).