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*Violent Affections: Queer Sexuality, Techniques of Power,
and Law in Russia* by Alexander Sasha Kondakov (review)

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former leader of pro-Brexit UKIP and currently leader of the Reform UK party, asked the rhetorical question: ‘Do we really, wholly trust Volodymyr Zelenskyy?’ (GB News Live, 16 November 2022 <https://x.com/Nigel_Farage/status/1592979825043468288?lang=en>). Then, during the 2024 British general election campaign, he became the centre of attention by suggesting that NATO had provoked Putin by expanding eastwards, thereby sparking war in Ukraine (Nigel Farage, ‘The West’s errors in Ukraine have been catastrophic. I won’t apologise for telling the truth’, *The Telegraph*, 22 June 2024).

Professor Harasymiw’s long and distinguished record at the University of Alberta has inclined him to investigate concepts that other political scientists may have discarded some time ago. These include patronal politics, transitology, authoritarianism, failed-state research, bargaining theory and offensive realist theory *inter alia*. Yet the author is a realist in practice and abhors the chronic corruption that has brought Ukraine to its knees: ‘this evident lack of consolidation and coherence constitutes a threat to Ukraine’s existence as an independent state: domestically, by alienating its own public in terms of electoral support and trust in institutions; externally, by alienating Western support for realizing its Euro-Atlantic aspirations’ (p. 285). He concludes, realistically then, that ‘[t]o help at long last to liberate Ukraine it would take an improbable alliance of the people of Russia working in combination with the West, an unlikely prospect’ (p. 301). *Post-Euromaidan Ukraine* therefore represents the master stroke of a well-grounded political scientist.

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Kondakov, Alexander Sasha. *Violent Affections: Queer Sexuality, Techniques of Power, and Law in Russia*. FRINGE. UCL Press, London, 2022. xii + 231 pp. Figures. Tables. Notes. References. Index. £20.00; open access e-book.

WHILE Putin may have hoped that the 2013 ‘gay propaganda law’ would render queerness in Russia invisible, the unintended consequence of the legislation has been to generate hundreds of media articles and academic publications, which have focused greater attention upon the country’s sexual and gender diversity than ever before. Among the best of these analyses is Alexander Sasha Kondakov’s *Violent Affections*.

On the basis of a unique database of over 300 criminal cases, *Violent Affections* provides an original take on the causes of anti-queer violence in Russia since the introduction of the law, thereby making an important contribution to Sexuality Studies, Socio-Legal Studies and Russian Studies, more broadly.

Kondakov begins by explaining that Russia — perhaps surprisingly — actually has well-developed hate crime laws, which can be applied to cases of homophobic violence. The problem, he argues, lies in the fact that the criminal justice system rarely follows the letter of the law. Rather, in considering testimony as to why perpetrators mete out violence to queer people, judges are influenced more by complex configurations of power relations — what Kondakov refers to as *neo-disciplinary power* — which seek to reinforce heterosexual masculinity as part of the traditional values underpinning Russian statehood.

Kondakov's analysis rests on an understanding of the law as performative. In the Russian context, the 'gay propaganda law', which prohibits the public spread of information about 'non-traditional sexual relations', directly penalizes those violating the law with fines or detention but also indirectly conditions LGBT rights supporters to engage in self-censorship for fear of punishment. And it is through a contemporary version of the panopticon — what Kondakov calls the *memeticon*, a digital conduit through which knowledge is crafted out of pieces of information in 'fragmented, fluid, and messy ways' (p. 141) — that Russian law exerts this disciplinary power. Kondakov pushes the understanding of the law as performative further to argue that it was the law that fuelled anti-queer violence in the first place by constructing a hegemonic truth regime, which naturalizes the idea that traditional values are the basis of Russian statehood and, by extension, legitimizes the control — by violent means, if necessary — of those who threaten these values.

Kondakov builds his argument over four sections, structured around the key themes of Law, Sexuality, Emotions and Power, each comprising a theoretical and an empirical chapter. Kondakov skilfully guides us through these big topics, providing a critical reflection on existing scholarship in the respective fields as well as his own theoretical elaborations.

In the first two sections, Kondakov's analysis of legal cases shows that Russian judges tend to ignore the sexual orientation of the victims, enabling them not to frame cases of violence against queers as hate crimes. The consequence of this indifference towards sexual orientation is clear: 'If hate crime legislation is supposed to send a message to potential perpetrators that their actions are unacceptable given the social position of the targeted population as marginalised, then these indifferent decisions send the opposite message' (p. 52). On the occasions that the victim's sexual identity is highlighted, this is to emphasize that it is abnormal and alien to Russian culture, reinforcing the natural and essential qualities of heterosexuality.

In the third section, Kondakov examines the role of emotions in violent crime and explains how *violent affections* — emotional responses linked to

criminal acts — constitute a ‘mechanism of power relations’ to reinforce heteronormativity (p. 118). By referring to the *violent affections* behind the acts of violence against queer people as ‘personal unpleasant feelings’ instead of ‘hate’, the legal system erases the social conditions in Russia that demonize members of the LGBT ‘social group’ and give rise to the violent acts against them, and instead reduces homophobic violence to disputes between individuals. Moreover, in this discourse, it is the queer victim who is blamed for instilling feelings of disgust in the perpetrator, whose violent response can be justified as an action aimed at restoring the natural hierarchy of heterosexuality over homosexuality.

In the final section, Kondakov shows how memes are used to disseminate the meanings attached to homosexuality that give rise to these violent affections. In this new era of knowledge production, traditional experts, such as academics and medical doctors, are forced to compete with random Internet users to establish ‘the truth’, with the power to do so no longer predominantly in the hands of the former; the ideas that resonate most with the general public will become ‘common knowledge’ regardless of their source.

While Kondakov cautions us against unquestioningly accepting the truth claims of academics, we would be well advised to ignore this appeal in his case and engage with this theoretically nuanced and empirically rich piece of research, which looks set to be a point of reference for academics, activists and lawyers working on queerness and human rights in Russia for years to come.

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