
Reconceptualising the Russian LGBTQ+ Community: The Impact of Russia's 'Gay Propaganda' Laws on LGBTQ+ Discourse

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Abstract: Russia's regional and federal 'gay propaganda' laws adopted between 2006 and 2013 have had a significant impact on the Russian LGBTQ+ community and LGBTQ+ discourse. The laws contain ideologically marked expressions whose aim is to reconceptualise the social image of LGBTQ+ people by reshaping the language used in reference to the community. Both federal and regional laws utilise ideologically-laden expressions that link homosexuality with pathology and criminality, and erroneously try to present it as an ideological concept or a political strategy that can be influenced by the media, fashion trends and propaganda. By establishing a new opposition between 'traditional/natural' and 'non-traditional/unnatural', this discourse has reconstructed homosexuality as a modern phenomenon completely alien to Russian society and in contradiction with the country's traditional values. As a result of this discourse having been employed by the authority that has the power to determine what language be regarded as legitimate, all non-heterosexuals have become regarded as inner enemies Russia needs to fight against.

Keywords: gay propaganda laws, LGBTQ+ discourse, discursive practices, homophobia, sociolinguistics

Introduction

Language and society are two closely related terms connected to each other in various different ways. There are several possible relationships between the two, with one of them being that linguistic structure and/or behaviour may influence society (Wardaugh 10). According to the Linguistic relativity hypothesis, the grammar of each language is not only "a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of

ideas” (Whorf in Wardhaugh 222). Our impressions of the world are organised by our minds, or rather the linguistic systems in our minds, which is why our perception of the world is always limited, determined and filtered by the language we speak (Wardhaugh 223–25). If a language lacks certain words to describe things, the speakers of that language will find it harder to talk about those things and vice versa (223). Consequently, if one language makes distinctions between particular things or concepts, the users of such a language will find it easier to perceive these differences.

Russia’s anti-gay propaganda laws adopted between 2006 and 2013 have not only had a significant impact on the lives of Russian LGBTQ+ people, but have managed to completely reconceptualise the LGBTQ+ community by changing the way it is perceived by Russian society. In this paper, we analyse the discursive practices employed by the authorities in order to identify the linguistic devices that have helped redefine homosexuality and construct a new, negative image of the Russian LGBTQ+ community.

Homophobia and Discourse

Homophobia is a “culturally produced fear of or prejudice against homosexuals that sometimes manifests itself in legal restrictions or, in extreme cases, bullying or even violence against homosexuals” (Anderson). Although the suffix *phobia* generally designates an irrational fear, in the case of homophobia the word instead refers to an attitudinal disposition of people towards homosexuals, which can range from mild dislike to loathing (ibid). However, homophobia is not just the fear of homosexuals, but also the fear of being recognised as one of the homosexuals, meaning “not manly enough”. (Kuhar, *Homofobija* 546). This concept of ‘manliness’ is closely related to sexuality and the perception of homosexuals as primarily sexual beings.

In this context of sexuality, a homosexual started to establish himself as a subject (549) that does not have a meaning on its own, but is rather constructed within a discourse (Kuhar, *Medijske* 17). Therefore, a person does not have an inherent meaning – they become that which is said and written about them (ibid). According to Foucault, discourse is a practice defining the subject and its position in the society by “the situation that it is possible for him to occupy in relation to the various domains or groups of objects” (Foucault, *The Archaeology* 52). This occurs due to the fact that language does not only describe, but also shapes the world we live in (Grobelšek 7).

The discursive position of a subject is thus the result of the relations of power which cannot themselves be “established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse” (Foucault, *Power* 93). Needless to say, discourse production is always controlled by power and as individuals we know the limits of what we can say depending on the matter and circumstances. It is the authority that holds the power over the production of any discourse and determines

which words and linguistic units be regarded as legitimate (Fairclough in Grobelšek 7). The ultimate goal of the dominant discourse is hence to suppress any other discourses to such an extent that we do not perceive it as arbitrary anymore, but rather as the only legitimate norm (Kuhar, *Homofobija* 548). Following the absolute prevalence of the dominant discourse, “particular linguistic devices become the only logical choice” (Grobelšek 7) – the truth of power which individuals are subjected to and forced to reproduce (Foucault, *Power* 94).

Homosexuality in Russia

The first mentions of homosexuality in Russia date back to the Kievan Rus’ era with many writings confirming that it has been a part of Russian society throughout history.¹ Over the course of centuries, public views on homosexuality have changed many times, but before the era of Peter the Great, ancient Russia had had a much more open attitude toward homosexuality compared to old Europe. Although the first governmental ban on homosexual relations was introduced in the 18th century, it was not until the late 1920s that societal attitudes toward homosexuality became explicitly hostile. This public sentiment followed the re-criminalisation of homosexual relations due to which hundreds of homosexual individuals were persecuted and sent to gulags. After decades of oppression, homosexuality was finally decriminalised and declassified as a mental disorder in the 1990s, resulting in a more tolerant public attitude toward homosexuals. According to a gay rights activist Yuri Gavrikov, the 90s “ushered in a new era of relative tolerance [and it was] common to see openly gay singers and celebrities on television” (Lang). It was also during that time that the first LGBTQ+ organisations fighting for gay and lesbian rights were founded in Sankt Petersburg and Moscow.

Following the period that some compared to France’s Belle Époque (Lang), the social status of the LGBTQ+ community again started to worsen after the re-election of President Vladimir Putin in 2012. Putin’s new political ideology (also dubbed ‘homophobic nationalism’ (Eisenstein 184)) advocating tradition, family, and Orthodoxy as its main values conveniently scapegoats the LGBTQ+ community, blaming them for the demographic crisis and other social issues troubling the Russian Federation. This new hateful rhetoric demonising the LGBTQ+ people helped create favourable conditions that enabled the government to successfully reconceptualise the LGBTQ+ community and legitimise homophobia.

Before the federal ‘anti-gay propaganda’ law legalised homophobia, similar regional bills had been passed in various federal subject of the Russian Federation, starting with

1 See: Dynes, R. Wayne, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality, volume II*. Routledge, 2016 or Haggerty, George, ed. *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia (Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures, Vol 2)*. Garland Pub., 2000.

Ryazan Oblast in 2006. However, the first attempts to ban 'gay propaganda' date even further back to the early 2000s, when two members of the state Duma proposed almost identical bills on three separate occasions but were always unanimously rejected. Even when two other federal subjects followed suit and passed regional 'anti-gay propaganda' bills into law, the whole concept did not gain any significant momentum. It was only when Sankt Petersburg banned the propaganda of homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, transsexuality and paedophilia that these anti-LGBTQ+ laws got extensive media coverage. In addition, this event sparked a nation-wide debate initially resulting in similar regional bills being passed in seven other federal subjects, finally culminating in the federal law banning the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors that was introduced in June 2013.

Reshaping LGBTQ+ Discourse

All 'anti-gay propaganda' laws contain ideologically marked expressions that link homosexuality with pathology and criminality, and erroneously try to present it as an ideological concept or a political strategy. Just by analysing the name of the federal act itself (to be more precise the 2013 amendment), we can isolate three problematic expressions – '*propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations*'.

Firstly, the newly-coined term *non-traditional* creates the notion that there is such a thing as traditional – natural and non-traditional – unnatural sexual orientation, with the former being heterosexuality and the latter all other non-heterosexual orientations. The distinction between the two creates a new opposition in which all non-heterosexual orientations are reconstructed as a modern, unnatural phenomenon completely alien to 'inherently heterosexual' Russian society, whereas heterosexuality becomes the only accepted norm (Gorbachov 90). In relation to this new 'norm', homosexual relationships are perceived as inferior due to their 'fruitless' nature. With the family taking the central position in the Russian value system, it is then clear why homosexuals are treated as enemies – by not producing children they are the cause of the demographic crisis (Kondakov xiv). With regard to the concept of 'fruitlessness', we must also mention the word *sexual*. Non-traditional relationships are not referred to as 'romantic relationships' but rather 'sexual relations'. This wording implies that homosexual relationships are based mostly on sex and not emotions, thus reinforcing the stereotype of promiscuous, sexual nature of homosexual relationships.

Before the law was renamed as not to include any 'controversial terms', it initially banned propaganda of *homosexuality*. The decision to include this expression instead of the unmarked word *homosexuality* is not incidental considering that *homosexuality* is a medical term dating back to the Soviet period when homosexuality was criminalised and classified as a mental disorder. The suffix *-ism* hence links homosexuality with

criminality and pathology, and stresses the notion of homosexual orientation as deviant and immoral. The tendency to use ideologically-laden words is also reflected in a newly-coined, hitherto non-existing term *bisexualism* which was used in place of *bisexuality* (Gorbachov 90).

In certain regional laws, homosexuality is further explained or even replaced by the term *sodomy* (Russian: мужеложство) which is synonymous with the word *pederasty*. Despite the fact that *pederasty* is not a marked word in the Russian language but is used to define male homosexuality, it originally denoted “sexual activity involving a man and a boy” (Oxford). The inclusion of these words insinuates that there is a link between homosexuality and paedophilia, a concept further reinforced primarily by the regional laws which concurrently banned propaganda of homosexuality *and* paedophilia, as if the two were equal. According to modern sexology and medicine, homosexuality as well as bisexuality are regarded as two normal sexual orientations and are not classified as mental illnesses, whereas paedophilia is still classified as a psychiatric disorder and in many countries treated as a legal offence.

Finally, the last item I would like to highlight is *propaganda*. In the most neutral sense, it means to “disseminate or promote particular ideas” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2), but the usage has rendered the term pejorative. Nowadays, we see propaganda as something negative or dishonest and usually relate it to the promotion of a political cause or point of view. Regardless of the definition, propaganda is always about promoting *ideas* or *causes* that we *choose* because they speak to us, so talking about propaganda in the context of homo- and bisexuality presupposes that sexual orientation is not determined, but is rather a thing of personal preference (Gorbachov 89). By suggesting that postulate, the Russian government claims that sexual orientation can be influenced by the media, fashion trends, ideology and, most importantly, propaganda. Consequently, the negative notion of propaganda coupled together with the concept of a ban positions non-heterosexuals as inner enemies who are trying to ‘infect’ innocent Russian children with ‘the virus of homosexuality’ by means of propaganda.

Conclusion

The language we speak has the power to change society and alter our impressions, which is why words play a significant role in shaping ideas and the world around us. Since a person does not have an inherent meaning but is always constructed within a specific discourse, the words we use to describe them can alter their status and role in our society. As a consequence of holding the power over the production of any discourse, the Russian authorities have managed to reconceptualise the LGBTQ+ community by portraying them as deviant, promiscuous, and paedophilic individuals responsible for Russia’s demographic crisis. They achieved this by utilising ideologically-laden expressions

alluding to outdated concepts that play on Russian collective memory. In doing so, they have rendered homosexuality unnatural and inferior, whereas heterosexuality has taken the place of the only legitimate sexual norm. As a result of this newly-established distinction between natural and unnatural, Russians have become more susceptible to these 'differences', and have hence started to perceive the LGBTQ+ community differently – seeing them not as people, but enemies.

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