

MR PUTIN TEAR DOWN THIS LAW: ANALYSING THE POLITICISATION OF QUEER IDENTITIES IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

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(Submitted April 2019; Reviewed June 2019; Accepted Sep 2019)

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the changing nature of the way in which queer identities have been politicised by the Russian Government under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. The Russian Family Policy in 2013 introduced what has been colloquially referred to as Russia's 'gay propaganda law'. This legislation has led to a change in the way queer people live in Russia now that their identities have become synonymous with treason and unpatriotism, which is due to the way queer people have been rejected from partaking in the common imagined Russian identity. It has been suggested that this is part of a larger pattern of identity renegotiation within the post-Soviet space. As Russia seeks to strengthen national unity around an imagined identity characteristically thought of as strong, masculine, and patriotic; evidence also suggests that queer people are being othered and scapegoated for the ongoing crisis of demography within Russia. This paper will explore how homosexuality has been politicised in Putin's Russia. This research uses a discourse analysis of three ethnographic articles published by openDemocracy as part of an exploratory series known as Queer Russia. The data is analysed within a framework that considers the historical narratives of queer identity in Russia and the Soviet Union. The analysis also considers theoretical frameworks laid out by Nikita Sleptcov, Michele Rivkin-Fish, and Benedict Anderson in order to qualify the paper's thesis.

INTRODUCTION

It has been recognised internationally that, in this decade, Russia has become a significantly more dangerous place for queer people. This is perhaps exemplified by this advice issued to British travellers to Russia from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2018):

In 2018 Russia was ranked 45th out of 49 European countries for LGBT+ rights by [the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association] Europe. There are no laws that exist to protect LGBT+ people from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Russia's queer community has recently entered a new era of oppression ushered in by the Putin government over the last six years. Most notably was the 2013 introduction of 'The Russian Federal Law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values' an addition to the Russian Family Policy colloquially referred to as the gay propaganda law. This led to a heightened international awareness of the negative relationship between Russian gay people and the Russian state and society.

This openly anti-homosexual legislation originated within the Russian Family Policy of 2007 which began the politicisation of sexuality with aims of growing the birth rate and tackling Russia's falling population. The policy's 2013 revision included more direct legislative action against queer communities than just the gay propaganda law, it also banned the international adoption of Russian children by same-sex couples (Associated Press, 2013).

As well as presenting itself in legislation, the new anti-queer sentiment is present in the relationship between the state and Russian civil society with one of Russia's most popular queer events, Moscow Pride, being banned for 100 years (RT, 2012), and the 2018 pride celebration in St Petersburg saw over 30 gay rights activists arrested. This event also saw widespread brutality from both police and the public (Busby, 2018).

Prevalent in Russian society is a staunchly disdainful attitude towards sexual minorities, with hate prevailing at a multitude of levels. Laurie Essig (2014) cites Russian television personality and former Eastern Orthodox priest, Ivan Okhlobystin, as saying he would 'like to shove homosexuals into ovens and burn them alive' while Dmitri Kisilev, deputy general director of the Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, recently said:

They should be banned from donating blood, sperm. And their hearts, in case of the automobile accident, should be buried in the ground or burned as unsuitable for the continuation of life. (Essig, 2014)

President Vladimir Putin (2014) has said that: 'Russia has made its choice. To make the economy better we will consolidate society around patriotism and traditional values.'. This illustrates the entrenchment of homophobia into the Russian national identity. Putin here suggests that homosexuals are not patriots and infers that homosexuality is contributing to or causing Russia's economic problems. This has caused ongoing tension within Russian society. Due to this entrenchment of homophobia within Russian culture only 16% of Russians said that homosexuality is acceptable in today's society (Kazhan, 2013). This suggests the imagined Russian identity has become a heterosexual one.

This paper outlines how homosexuality has been politicised in Putin's Russia. Initially, it explores the existing literature explaining why homosexuality is being used by the Putin regime to advance its political goals, including Anderson's imagined community, the exploration of political homophobia by Sleptcov and Rivkin-Fish's exploration of Russia demographic crisis. It will then deepen its analysis by exploring the history of homosexuality in Russia and the Soviet Union, evaluating whether history has any role in determining the reasons that queer identities are politicised. It will conclude with discourse analysis of data published on the online platform openDemocracy Russia as part of their Queer Russia series which broadly explores the experience of queer people in Russia and how their experiences illuminate the politicisation of their identities. Using this data, this project will draw

conclusions about why the Putin regime has politicised homosexuality.

This paper engages with the term queer which can be used to describe anyone who identifies as non-heterosexual or non-cisgender or otherwise identifies off of the binary of sexual or gendered identity. For many, and for the purposes of this project, queer is synonymous with the umbrella term LGBTQIA+.¹ For the purpose of clarity and brevity in this project when it refers to queer it is primarily focusing on the experience of homosexuals (including male homosexuals, lesbians, and bisexuals).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper will examine three key theoretical arguments surrounding how homosexuality has been politicised in Putin's Russia: Anderson's theory of imagined communities, Sleptcov's analysis of political homophobia, and Rivkin-Fish's evaluation of Russia's crisis of demography.

Nikita Sleptcov (2018) proposes political homophobia as a theory in which we can measure how the state uses homophobic attitudes and oppressive legislation as a political tool to legitimise the current authoritarian regime. Sleptcov draws on the definition of Weiss and Bosia (2013) who define political homophobia as 'a scapegoating of an "other" that drives state building and retrenchment.' (the 'other' in this case being queer people). While Weiss and Bosia understand political homophobia to develop within a regime due to legacies of colonialism, Sleptcov notes that this is distinctly different within Russia, which has never been colonised. He does however note that the loss of sovereignty and independence during the transition from Soviet Union to Russian Federation is what led to the development of political homophobia. Sleptcov also goes on to explore how political homophobia is visible within Russian history citing the state use of homophobia to repress its enemies in the Stalinist era.

Sleptcov (2018) states that political homophobia is used by the Putin regime to stimulate the Russian national identity as a means to boost the economy. He argues that after the collapse of communism, the 'shock therapy' changes to the economy created a level of poverty which had an emasculating effect on Russian society, with men unable to 'meet the new market-derived standards for masculine achievement'. In other words, they struggled to fit the identity of a traditional Russian man and provide for their families in trying economic times. Therefore, Russian public demand formed for a type of leadership who would reclaim Russian masculine identity and Russian sovereignty and would tackle the societal emasculation. As Sleptcov notes:

Putin was such a figure, whose "self-assertion as a tough, strong, masculine, and, above all, patriotic leader protecting Russia" was seen as capable of rectifying the status quo. (Sleptcov, 2018)

This analysis of political homophobia shows that a combination of decline in living standards and a sense of lost sovereignty, independence and a general sense of 'Russian pride' led to the societal call for the qualities of toughness, strength, masculinity, and patriotism to be promoted above all else.

Sleptcov draws on Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities when he discusses why the Putin regime has politicised queer identities. Anderson (1991) proposes that nations are constructed through language and discourse and are 'mobilized into existence through symbols invoked by political leadership'. When this proposition is applied to the Putin regime we can see how queer identities are becoming politicised, one reason being to create and invoke a strong Russian national identity focussed on reinvigorating the economy and returning Russia to its former glory as wished for by the citizens. This is made clear when we see that the beginnings of the Putin presidency are characterised by a change of discourse towards one of patriotism and the reinstatement of Russian masculinity to the national identity (Sleptcov, 2018), which in turn politicises queer identities which are rejected from the Russian national identity as unpatriotic or untraditional. Vladimir Putin (2014) said, 'To make the economy better we will consolidate society around patriotism and traditional values,' showing a clear politicisation of queer identities as unpatriotic, untraditional, and also invoking the theory of political homophobia by scapegoating queer people as the cause of a problematic economy.

In addition to the utilisation of political homophobia as a nation-building tool, Michele Rivkin-Fish discusses the way the Putin regime politicises queer identities by scapegoating them for an ongoing crisis in demography in Russia. Rivkin-Fish (2006) explores the impact Russia's declining population, family size, and birth rate has had on society. She discusses a discourse of 'death of the nation' and implies that sexuality is being politicised in order to increase the birth rate. One particular example she gives is the limitation on abortion in today's Russia, stating that in 2003 the Russian Ministry of Health instituted the first restrictions on access to abortion since Stalin in order to curb falling birth rates and population. She shows that the average number of children per family continues to fall (1.89 in 1989, 1.17 in 1999, 1.25 in 2001) and is a cause for concern for the Russian government leading them to continue their programme of actions politicising the identities of queer people.

In order to promote a growing rate of birth, the Russian government has instituted the Russian federal law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values (colloquially known as the 'gay propaganda law') which prohibits the distribution of 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships' among minors. There is a Russian belief that exposing children to homosexuality is enough to make them queer. As Essig (2014) puts it:

Many Russians think of homosexuality as crossing borders in the same manner as tuberculosis, any exposure can corrupt the most innocent of souls and infect them with same-sex desire. (Essig, 2014)

We can draw conclusions from these three frameworks that show the ways in which the Putin regime has politicised queer identities. They have used political homophobia as a tool of domestic policy in order to advance a variety of political goals, for example forming a strong sense of (imagined) national identity that is overtly patriotic, masculine, and importantly, heterosexual. This political homophobia has also developed into politicising queer identities as a method for increasing the

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer, Intersex, Ace (Asexual/Aromantic and related identifications), plus inclusion of any non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identifications

birth rate by once again scapegoating queer people for the declining Russian population, but also aiming to limit public exposure to queerness to further repress queer identities in society.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION

It became clear that in order to answer the question this paper was researching, it was important to analyse the legacy of the history of queer people in Russia and the ways their identities are politicised today. This concept came from a theory explored in a paper about legacies of the communist era in the post-Soviet space, and the impact this has on societal and political issues in contemporary Russia. This is known as a historical determinist approach to analysis, where one can garner answers or understanding of a phenomenon through looking at its history, and builds on the idea of history being a cyclical phenomenon.²

Laurie Essig (2014) argues that Russia has had a widely different queer history than that of the West and it is this difference in historical context that has led us to the point where queer identities are negatively politicised. She notes that in order to understand the reasons for and how queer identities are politicised in today's Russia, we must look to the Russia of the past to see how this has occurred throughout the nation's history. Within Russian history there is a legacy of the state politicising queer identities, be it in the pursuit of modernisation or to prevent the spread of fascism, it was a present phenomenon and led to the oppression of queer people within Russia's various iterations.

Very early Russian attitudes to homosexuality were relatively open, with the first recorded bans on homosexuality occurring in the 17th century during the reign of Tsar Alexis Mikhailovich. During this period gay men were executed, and lesbians burnt at the stake (Kuzenkov, 2014). This ban, along with the ban on homosexuality in 1716 by Tsar Peter the Great, were in efforts of modernising and Europeanising Russia. Therefore, this could be the first instance of politicising queer identity to advance domestic political goals. In order to modernise the nation, these Tsar banned what they deemed unacceptable, creating the inequality between modern Europeanism at the time and homosexuality.

In 1917 the Tsarist era was ended with the Bolsheviks overthrowing the Russian Empire and instituting the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (precursor to the Soviet Union). This era in Russian history has been referred to as a 'brief window of tolerance' for queer communities, with the Tsarist laws criminalising homosexuality struck off of the new ruling Communist Party's Criminal Codes (Hazard, 1965).

However, it is important to remember that the societal disdain that had formed in the Tsarist era towards queer communities prevailed, and persecution was rife in Russian society in the 1910's and 20's, with gay men 'often beaten, blackmailed, or sacked from their jobs' (Khoroshilova, 2017). The community, however, began to lose its freedoms, and institutional tolerance faded with the onset of the 1930s. What is important to note here is that like today, where homosexuality itself is decriminalised, what prevails throughout is societal persecution, and this persecution is due to the entrenchment and entanglement of institutional intolerance towards queer communities.

Here when we re-evaluate that, despite its institutional legality, 16% of Russian's in 2013 said that they believe homosexuality

is acceptable in society (Kazhan, 2013) we see evidence which favours a theory of historical determinism.

Overall, the case of gay freedom within the Bolshevik period and the early years of the Russian SFSR is a key example in examining what occurs when a regime politicises queer identities, like the Tsars that banned and opposed homosexuality to advance their own political goals of modernisation; society generally tends to absorb and socialise these views towards the community.

Under Stalin, LGBT issues became subject to government censorship and repression, and in the late 1920s homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder and while still legal, was frowned upon deeply (West & Green, 1997). The Soviets recriminalized (male) homosexuality in 1933 with Article 121 to the Criminal Code, punishable by up to five years imprisonment or hard labour (Library of Congress, 1999). It is estimated that around 900 men were imprisoned under this article (Langenburg, 2017).

Another case of politicising queer identity can be seen in the reasons for Stalinist oppression of queer communities. While there is no definitive answer as to why the Soviets recriminalized homosexuality, it has been noted that Article 121 came at a time when Soviet propaganda depicted homosexuality as a sign of fascism and of Nazism. Some suspect that article 121 was in place simply as a political tool to use against dissidents or counter-revolutionaries regardless of them being queer or not, and also to put Soviet Russia solidly in opposition of the Nazis who had broken the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and betrayed Russian diplomacy (Duberman, et al., 1990). Therefore, we can see again that during the Soviet era, queer identity was co-opted by the Soviets to oppress its enemies, making homosexuals the scapegoat of the fascist problem in Europe at the time. This also had an impact on the societal view of homosexuals as they were being portrayed as enemies of the state and compared to fascists.

Throughout the rest of the life of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, homosexuality remained illegal. It wouldn't be for 20 years after the death of Stalin that the government censorship would relax regarding gay lives and queer communities. Duberman (1990) argues that the first call for the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the repeal of Article 121 came with the publication of the 'Textbook of Soviet Criminal Law'.

Sexuality became an acceptable topic of conversation during the period of glasnost under the premiership of Mikhail Gorbachev. Glasnost was a cornerstone policy of this premiership. From the Russian word meaning openness, glasnost was an attempt to liberalise society and allow open discussion and criticism of the state. However, in the case of the liberalisation of attitudes towards queer people, we can still see evidence of politicising their identities. In the case of Gorbachev, it was in an effort to liberalise and Westernise the Russian state he allowed discussion of sexuality in order to appear more Western.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and in April 1993, the Yeltsin regime decriminalised homosexuality, but the Russian government did not have any interest in legislating for LGBT rights (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2000). The total number of men victim to Article 121 is unknown but is estimated to be around 1000 men a year from 1933 till 1991 (Langenburg, 2017).

² For the discussion of this idea in its original context please see De Waal et al. (2013). *The Stalin Puzzle: Deciphering Post-*

The Tsars used queer identities as an enemy of modernity, and this led to an initial entrenchment of societal disdain toward queer communities. Despite the brief window of tolerance during the years following the Russian Revolutions of 1917, the Soviet's soon put an end to the institutional freedoms afforded to queer communities. The Soviet effort to equate queer identities with fascism is another example of politicisation of sexual minorities and continued and deepened societal homophobia. The Khrushchev and Gorbachev era saw small increments of liberalisation, with Gorbachev politicising queer identities once again through glasnost in order to appear more Western and liberal.

METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

openDemocracy Russia have published an extensive body of literature as part of a series titled 'Queer Russia'. This includes a selection of material including writings based on the lived experiences of queer people, interviews and news from within Russia about the lives and experiences of queer people living under the Putin regime. This project will focus on three articles from openDemocracy and examine them within the historical and theoretical context already set forth.

Two of these articles are opinion pieces from within Russia, outlining the experience and views of queer people surrounding how their identities are viewed and treated by the state and society. These two opinions are triangulated with an interview with a young gay Russian man who gives his own views on the nexus of identity and politics.

The interview used was conducted over the Russian social media outlet VKontakte. Bode (2013) speaks in favour of conducting research over social media in the post-Soviet space, allowing a degree of transparency and access to the views and opinions of counter-cultural and underground movements that are not possible through old media. However, issues regarding sampling do arise due to the quasi-anonymity afforded to us by social media, allowing people to express views they otherwise would not, face to face. This could however serve to enhance this research due to attitudes towards the subject matter in Russia.

Ethically, this study is controversial. Due to the illegal nature of any material promoting homosexuality the production of the data utilised by this paper puts the writers and respondents at risk, and the author is grateful that they were able to produce such illuminating work. In the research of this paper, there was no element of personal risk due to utilising already existing primary data, though there is a documented struggle for queer academics studying queer culture in the post-Soviet space. It was important to maintain an element of reflexivity when constructing this paper, making sure to triangulate data within a framework of history and theory. For researchers it can be difficult to approach research objectively as their own thoughts and agendas influence the 'doing' of research, merely by virtue of being a part of the social world that is being studied (Johnson, 2009). This is particularly relevant for queer academics studying queer issues, as they can often find ourselves relating the experience of other queer people to that of their own and for that reason it is important to situate the findings of this paper within a framework specific to that of the post-Soviet space.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first article examined is titled 'You have to start improving yourself to improve Russia' by Kirill Guskov, dated 15th June 2016. This article is an interview with a young gay Russian man who expresses his views on gay rights in Russia and the

discrimination he has faced. This article was a keen insight into real lived experience of queer lives and shows the way in which queer identities have become politicised. The respondent was a 19-year-old man, who despite identifying as gay, expressed some juxtaposing political views that are intrinsically conflictual with his queer identification. The first aspect of this piece to analyse was the author's method of capturing data: 'We chatted on Russian social network VKontakte — unfortunately, they refused to meet in person.' (Guskov, 2016)

This is of note as it can be extrapolated that these men already live in fear of their identity and their opinions regarding gay rights, illustrating the danger of living as queer in Russia. In response to the question: 'Some people say that the government and church have been waging a war against our rights and liberties. Has this process affected you?' Respondent, Roman aged 19, answered: 'I believe the state has the right to choose how society will develop. And normally, what the state does corresponds to the will of the people.'

This response correlates to Anderson's view of imagined communities and shows that national identity develops through the actions of political leadership (Dryzek, 2006). Moreover, it also exemplifies the explanation for the rise of political homophobia in the region. Roman states that he believes the state's action corresponds to the will of the people. This is something Sleptcov (2018) accounts for within his analysis, arguing that the desire of the Russian public for a leadership which promoted an imagined Russian identity that was masculine, and implicitly heterosexual, is what led to the rejection of homosexuality by Putin as overtly non-Russian. Roman's response demonstrates how this has politicised the lives of queer people. Roman's other responses also warranted analysis. It was noteworthy that the ongoing politicisation of queer people has led to many of them holding political views which directly threaten their identities as queer people. This is illustrated with his answer to the question: 'It is logical to hold president Putin and his government to account. Do you support the government led by Vladimir Putin?' To which he answered: 'I can't help but support Putin. I just do not see a better candidate.... Russians need a strong leader who will guide and teach them'. This backs up the theory of political homophobia: queer people are being politicised and 'othered' by Putin as being weak and in need of guidance.

The second article which was examined was an opinion piece from openDemocracy titled 'Do Russians give a damn about homosexuality?' by Alexander Kondakov dated 20th June 2013. This article explores the opinions of the general Russian public towards homosexuality and whether or not these opinions are influenced by the politicisation of homosexuality by the government (Kondakov, 2013). This piece raised some key points in how the Putin government's politicisation of homosexuals has affected public opinions and attitudes. Kondakov points out that that surveying the general Russian public was an ineffective way to gauge the level of tolerance towards homosexuality within society as 'it is clear that the answers given by respondents depend heavily on how questions are framed.' And that it is more likely that the majority of Russians have no opinion on gay matters. Perhaps what was most interesting was his explanation for why Russians largely express no opinion:

Research shows that even gay people themselves have difficulty talking about their sexuality; the silence and secrecy surrounding it for so long means that Russian has never developed a gay vocabulary. (Kondakov, 2013)

Queer identities have been repressed for so long that Russian society has transcended intolerance and is no longer concerned

with homosexuality, this links to the concept of imagined communities, as Putin has influenced the imagined Russian identity to be heterosexual innately, homosexuality is now a non-topic for Russian society.

Another point Kondakov (2013) raises illustrates the absurdity of the reasons in which the Putin regimes has politicised queer identities. He writes:

‘There is also no negative correlation between homosexuality and Russia’s shrinking population – on the contrary, the recognition of same-sex marriage would increase the country’s birth rate, since people in stable, recognised relationships are more likely to have babies, and same-sex couples are not short of ideas about how to make them.’ (Kondakov, 2013)

This links to the politicisation of queer identities as a way to advance the Putin regimes goal of resolving the demographic crisis, though Kondakov points out how flawed this was on the part of Putin. It was interesting to read this rejection of homophobia as being aggressive in nature, instead the long-term politicisation of homosexuality and its removal of the Russian identity has removed it from the thoughts of most Russians, who are now unconcerned with queer rights and lives.

The third article examined was: ‘Putting Russia’s homophobic violence on the map’ by Alexander Kondakov (2017). It was an opinion piece about homophobic violence in Russia, and the way in which the government influences this and, in ways, promotes it. To this end he argues that in the institution of the gay propaganda law, while Vladimir Putin declared outright that violence against queer people was ‘unacceptable’, the promotion of gay ‘propaganda’ was unacceptable too. However, this did not lead to calm from both hetero- and homosexuals. Kondakov argues that:

that a legislature which restricts the distribution of information about homosexuality for the sake of petty prejudice has itself committed an act of aggression. By doing this, the authorities gave a green light from on high to beat us while we’re down. (Kondakov, 2017)

He argues that through the politicisation of queer identity through the gay propaganda law, queer people are now prone to violence and this violence is essentially government-sanctioned. This is another form of politicisation of queer identity as queer people are now left unable to celebrate queerness due to them being silenced for fear of violence. Further to this, the suggestion that LGBT people in Russia be treated humanely has been:

rejected by local politicians, who believe that any public-spirited activism by definition serves shady foreign interests. They refuse to see that those suffering in this story are Russian citizens — fellow citizens, who are being unjustly brutalised and victimised. (Kondakov, 2017)

This links to the politicisation of queer identities by removing them from the Russian identity and conflating Russianness with heterosexuality, as queer people are not being recognised as fellow Russians; they are a separate entity, the political scapegoat, or the other.

These three articles present interesting manifestations of the frameworks within which the politicisation of queer people occurs in today’s Russia. The views of 19-year-old Roman worryingly illustrate the entrenchment of homophobia in the Russian identity. The rise of government sanctioned violence and othering of queer people as a result of the gay propaganda law is articulated through Kondakov’s (2017) article. Kondakov (2013) also outlines the lack of queer vocabulary the Russian public have, which has reduced the visibility of queer people in Russia. It is clear to see that politicisation of queer people has creating a shocking divide in Russian society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion the politicisation of queer people occurs in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons in Putin’s Russia. This politicisation has had a dangerous impact on the lives of queer people in Russia who now live in a climate of insecurity, at risk of violence and persecution from both state and society.

One reason queer people are politicised in Russia is to encourage Russian national unity around a singular identity of strength, masculinity, and greatness. This was achieved by the enactment of a programme of political homophobia by the Putin regime which included introducing discourse of masculinity and patriotism in the national identity, and creating an identity that was innately heterosexual and resulted in the othering of homosexuals in Russia. As hypothesised by Anderson (Anderson, 1991), this successfully created a strong, imagined identity influenced by the discourse and actions of the nation’s political leaders (Dryzek, 2006). The reason this took place was due to public demand for a strong leadership who rejected ‘foreign pollution’ (Essig, 2014) and was willing to reinstate Russia as a strong, sovereign and independent state.

We can see the impact of this within the data analysed within, especially with regards to the lack of concern shown by the Russian public towards queer issues, and the ‘lack of vocabulary’ of Russians when it comes to LGBT rights (Kondakov, 2013). This is now a deeply entrenched attitude as we can see in the case of queer 19-year-old Roman’s views (Guskov, 2016).

Moreover, queer people have been politicised because of Russia’s growing demographic crisis, and its experience of a decline in both birth rate and population. Vladimir Putin said that his attitude towards sexual minorities was linked to the country’s greatest problem: the demographic crisis. This shows in the 2013 iteration of the Russian Family Policy, which restricted the rights and freedoms of queer people and politicises them by scapegoating them as the cause of a declining population. The data analysed rejects this, with Kondakov (2013) pointing out the absurdity of this scapegoating, but ultimately realising that this is intrinsically linked to the homophobia used by the Putin regime to strengthen its legitimacy and advance its political goals (Sleptcov, 2018).

Through the assessment and evaluation of both historical and theoretical reasonings as to why queer identities have become politicised by the Putin regime, this paper highlights the continued struggle for equity among sexual minorities in the post-Soviet space

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