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The Media Relations of the Russian LGBT-Movement after the Ban of “Gay Propaganda”: Discursive Opportunities and Constrains

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Abstract

Homosexuality had long been silenced in the Russian political arena and mainstream media (Kondakov 2013), and thus, queer activists worked in a very limited public space. The situation had changed after the ban of so-called “gay propaganda” and the simultaneous campaign for “traditional values” in Russia (Wilkinson 2014). The rise of discussion around homosexuality, initiated by the Russian political elites, can be viewed as a discursive opportunity for queer activism (Persson 2015; Pronkina 2016). The current study examined the media relations of the Russian LGBT groups since the adoption of the “gay-propaganda” law. The predictions about discursive opportunities for the Russian LGBT movement were made with reliance to the Koopmans' (2004) theory and Seal's (2013) study of the feminist political protest in Russia. The mass survey of activists (N=132) was conducted for revealing the media strategies and claims of the Russian LGBT movement. It was found that the branch of politically mobilised LGBT activists tried to utilise the discursive opportunities for their protest in spite of the “gay-propaganda” ban in Russia. The rest of the activists followed conservative media strategies avoiding excessive publicity.

Keywords: social movement studies, Russian LGBT-movement, discursive opportunities, protest mediation, LGBT activism, media relations, queer visibility.

1. Introduction

The ban of “the propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” drew attention to the violation of human rights in Russia as the law legitimised the arrests of LGBT public activists and penalties for the advocacy in the media (Johnson 2015). The new legislation was accompanied by the campaign for traditional family values that was launched by the conservative Russian politicians (Wilkinson 2014). According to the opinion polls, this campaign immensely influenced the public opinion in Russia as a negative attitude towards LGBTQI people grew by 15 % between 2013 and 2015 (Seckin 2015: 152). However, the Russian queer activism did not disappear under the oppressive legislation. On the contrary, more and more participants were involved in the annual street rally for LGBTQI rights in St Petersburg (Lukinmaa 2016: 50). The organisers claimed that the record number of participants had been reached in 2015, which perhaps led to a tighter policing and arrests in 2016 (Radio Liberty 2016). As street protests became more dangerous, other forms of LGBT activism were developing in Russia, including cyberactivism, hacktivism, protest art and semi-public events such as local queer festivals (Seckin 2015: 147, Lukinmaa 2016: 60).

The new regulation of NGOs contributed to the realignment and politicisation of the Russian LGBT movement. Since 2012, Russian NGOs were labelled “foreign agents” and, thereby, equated to political actors if they received any foreign funding (Johnson 2015). Several NGOs, which had been engaged in the HIV services and LGBT rights advocacy in Russia, were disbanded as they could not support themselves without the donations of foreign sponsors (Human Rights Watch 2016). At the same time, new politically mobilised groups emerged in reaction to the oppression of the Russian LGBT movement (Lapina 2014). The rising political awareness in the LGBT community was confirmed by Soboleva and Bakhmetjev (2015), who examined the responses of the community to the discriminatory policies in Russia. Presently, it is possible to speak of two branches within the Russian LGBT movement: the one adhering to the human rights advocacy, and the other allied with the liberal political opposition and acting as protesters (Lapina 2014).

The current study examined the media strategies of both branches. The predictions about activists' discursive strategies for contesting the homophobic frames of the Russian elites were derived from the theory of discursive opportunity structure (Koopmans 2004).

Discursive opportunities for LGBT movement in Russia

A discursive opportunity is defined as “the aspects of the public discourse that determine a message's chances of diffusion in the public sphere” (Koopmans & Olzak 2004: 202). The researchers argued that a social movement can benefit of or get damaged by the discursive structures when this movement have become visible in the mass media. The idea was not revolutionary, as a number of researchers investigated the role of mass media in the evolution of social movements. However, this theory is useful for interpreting the protest dynamics under “consonant” or “dissonant” media coverage, which can explain the success or failure of a movement (Koopmans 2004).

Fejes & Balogh (2013) discovered the common features in the development of feminist and queer movements in the context of post-socialist cultures in Eastern Europe. Russia also shared its cultural legacy with the post-socialist societies, where “homosexuality was deeply implicated in a cultural contest with the West” (Baer 2016: 4). However, the LGBT activists from the new EU member states of Eastern Europe experienced the support of the supranational legislation, which respected the civil rights of minorities. Russian LGBT groups had to work in the absence of such legislation and, in these latter days, under a tightening political pressure. Prevalent negative attitudes towards homosexuality and queerness in Russia were shaped by specific historical preconditions. Thus, the phenomenon of homosexuality was highly stigmatised and politicised in the Soviet society. Healey (2001: 257) explained that early Soviet leaders constructed the heteronormative myth of “alternative modernity” in order to separate their country from “a decaying West and a depraved East.”

The prosecution of homosexuals in the USSR began in 1930s, when the Soviet Commissar for Justice condemned homosexuality as a “product of a moral decay in the exploiting classes” (Kon 2003: 80). The short anti-homosexual campaign in the Soviet press in 1930s was followed by half a century of silencing (Kon 2003). According to Baer (2016), these preconditions made homosexuality a convenient symbol of the Western cultural imperialism in post-soviet Russia. “The almost complete invisibility of homosexuality in the Soviet society [...] has made any discursive deployment of homosexuality there today appear to be [...] an un-Soviet gesture”, argued Baer (2016: 6). Moreover, Kondakov (2013) noticed that the argument of equality, which had been successfully advanced by Western LGBT activists, was unconvincing in such an intransigent and unequal society as Russian.

Reporting the ban of “gay propaganda”, Russian media constructed narratives associated with conservatism, orthodox morality, and contestation with the West (Pronkina, 2016). Persson (2015: 271) identified three ways, in which Russian mainstream media framed the LGBT movement: 1) a threat to the nation's survival, 2) an attempt to “impose the minority's sex-radical norms onto the majority”, and 3) a symptom of the Western moral decay. Still, Persson (2015) argued that dominant narratives could break down when they were contested by LGBT activists. Wilkinson (2014) also noticed that there is a room for the expression of Russian queer activists in independent media. Thus, Wilkinson (2014: 271) lately found that Russian liberal opposition and independent journalists contested the frames of the Russian political elites with the sympathetic coverage of the LGBT movement and personal stories.

The study is aimed to reveal whether Russian LGBT activists recognised the public debates on the “gay propaganda” as a discursive opportunity for their protest and how they organise their media relations after the adoption of the anti-propaganda law. It was assumed that there are at least two distinct media strategies developed by politically mobilised and apolitical branches within the LGBT movement (Lapina 2014). Three following hypotheses are to be tested in the current study:

H1. The Russian LGBT movement faced with the greater attention of journalists after the ban of “gay propaganda” in Russia.

H2. The politically active branch of the movement focused on public activism and sought to establish the contacts with both oppositional and mainstream media.

H3. The apolitical branch of the Russian LGBT movement focused on internal communications and avoided contacts with the mainstream media.

2. Method and Material

The method of a mass survey was used in the study. The online survey was spread among Russian LGBT activists with the assistance of 'Gay Russia' (Moscow) 'Coming Out' (St Petersburg), the 'Alliance of heterosexuals and LGBT for equality', hereinafter referred as 'the Alliance' (St Petersburg), and the 'Russian LGBT network', which unites 11 regional LGBT organisations. In the preparatory stage, three leaders of LGBT groups and the politician, who supports the movement, were interviewed in order to refine the survey. The interviewees Alexey Sergeev ('The Alliance'), Polina Andriyanova ('Coming Out'), Stetlana Zakharova ('The LBGT network') and Edward Murzin (the 'Parnas' party) participated in approx. 1-hour-long interviews and gave their detailed answers to the questions, which were later included in the survey.

The experts' commentary allowed for adding the plausible suggestions in open-ended questions, thus enhancing the validity and completion rate of the survey. 132 out of 137 returned questionnaires were complete and filled in by the target group of respondents. The survey demographics adequately represented the members of the Russian LGBT movement with 33 % of participants coming from Moscow, 19 % from St Petersburg and another 48 % from 17 other Russian cities. It was also revealed that 87 % of respondents belonged to LGBTQI community themselves, while 5 % had LGBTQI family members and 8 % joined without having personal or family connections with the community. The distribution by gender, age and the roles within the LBGT movement are presented below in Table 1. Lukinmaa (2015) pointed at the issues of self-identification in Russian LGBT groups, where members often did not see themselves as activists, even if participated in public events. Instead of referring to activism, the survey included the descriptions of various roles in the movement.

Table 1. The distribution by age, gender and roles in the LBGT movement

Gender Identity	Share, %	Age Group	Share, %	Participation in the Russian LGBT movement	Share, %
Male	40	17 y.o. and younger	6	Leaders, coordinators of LGBT groups	15
Female	42	18-25 y.o.	38	Members of LGBT groups, initiatives	18
Transgender	3	26-35 y.o.	41	Volunteers in LGBT groups, initiatives	20
Non-binary identity	14	36-45 y.o.	8	Members not involved with any group, but participating in LBGT events	29
Other	1	45-55 y.o.	7	Movement supporters	13
		56 y.o. and older	3	Members with undecided roles	5

The survey consisted of 25 questions, including 5 demographic questions, 13 closed questions with a Likert scale and 7 open-ended questions with suggested answers and the option to add original answers. The translated copy of questionnaire in English is available at GoogleDrive (2016). The validity of the questionnaire was enhanced through the preparatory interviews with the leaders of the movement. The question on the foundational claims of the LGBT activists revealed the respondents' preference for political or apolitical advocacy claims. Later the requirements of 'politically-inclined' and 'advocacy-inclined' activists were matched with their media strategies using the Pearson's R-coefficient. The activists' openness to media was measured by their selection of current and potential media partners (Q8-11), while the attitudes towards closed events, selective PR and the degree of concern for the "gay-propaganda" law were captured in Q7 and Q21 respectively. The responses to open-ended questions were coded manually in Excell spreadsheets.

Reliability tests were conducted to ensure the robustness of the analysis. First, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for test items with a Likert scale. The alpha coefficients of the test items ranged between 0.75 and 0.85, which exceeded the minimum acceptable level of 0.7 (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). Second, the analysis of the dummy variables of age and region was used to compare the significance of correlations. The multicollinearity between three independent

variables was also ruled out as it was confirmed there were no meaningful relationships between respondents' age and city with their (a)political protest claims.

3. Findings

In regard of the first hypothesis, it was found that the majority of respondents experienced the greater journalists' attention to their activism and private lives after the ban of "gay-propaganda". Particularly, 38 % of respondents agreed and 33 % strongly agreed that the media coverage of the LGBT movement increased, while only 8 % disagreed, 5 % strongly disagreed and remained 16 % noted no changes. The answers about journalists' interest to the private stories were similar: 17 % strongly agreed; 44 % agreed, 23 % noted no changes, 23 % disagreed and remained 3 % strongly disagreed. Some respondents had to partly (50 %) or completely (20 %) change their media strategies, whereas only 15 % followed the same strategy after the law adoption and the rest 16 % had not yet formulated such a strategy. Altogether, this evidence demonstrated that Russian LGBT groups faced with the greater publicity after the ban of "gay propaganda". Therefore, Hypothesis 1 can be accepted.

However, the reactions of LGBT groups to media attention differed noticeably. Table 2 shows the relationship between the branches of the LGBT movement and their communication strategies, as well as the results for the dummy variables. All correlations were calculated through the Pearson's R-coefficient, and the absolute values smaller than 0.1 were considered to be non-significant (N.s.). The activists' openness to all media had a strong negative correlation (-0.74) with the preference for apolitical advocacy and a moderate positive correlation (0.68) – with the preference for political activism. The advocacy orientation moderately correlated with the choice of closed events and the cooperation with a friendly press pool, while the political mobilisation had a moderate negative relationship with the same dependent variable.

The presented results allowed the researcher to partly accept H2 and H3 since the predicted relationships were identified, although not always as a strong correlation. As it was expected, the tests of the dummy variables were statistically insignificant in the majority of cases. However, an important result was registered when testing the impact of a location on the media preference. The periphery location had a weak negative correlation with the preference for global media that can be explained by the issue of connectivity. It is likely that activists from Moscow and St. Petersburg were better connected with foreign media than regional activists were.

Table 2. The Relationship Between Activists' Profile and Their Media Strategies

Variables	N	Openness to all media	Preference to global media	Preference to local media	Preference for closed events and a press pool	Tendency to 'neglect' the propaganda law
Advocacy claims (X)	78	-0.74	0.33	-0.22	0.68	-0.36
Political claims (Y)	54	0.68	-0.26	0.39	-0.51	0.59
Age (A)	132	N.s.	N.s.	-0.22	0.11	N.s.
Periphery location (P)	64	N.s.	-0.44	0.47	N.s.	N.s.

4. Limitations and Discussion

The notable limitation of the study is that the key calculations were made in two data arrays X and Y, both of which contained less than 100 units. Therefore, the study offers only preliminary conclusions about a causal relationship between the activists' claims and their media strategies. A broader survey with the Russian LGBT activists should be conducted in order to confirm these preliminary results. The accuracy of conclusions can be also improved by introducing 10-step scales for capturing the self-state importance of protesters' claims. The research also inherited common disadvantages of a mono-method quantitative study such as researcher's imposition and validity issues, which were partly removed through the preliminary interviews. The promising direction for future research on Russian LGBT activism is a mixed-method study combining the qualitative analysis of mediated claims with a survey.

Recognising these limitations, it is still possible to argue that the current general predictions about the discursive strategies of LGBT activists in Russia were valid. Few LGBT activists indeed seemed to view the outbreak of the public debates about sexuality as a discursive opportunity for advancing their demands. This viewpoint could have been inspired by the example of Pussy Riot, who successfully confronted the negative framing of their protest by Russian political elites and mainstream media (Seal 2013). Surprisingly, the public support for Pussy Riot had grown during the accusatory campaign in Russian mainstream media, and 12 % less people found the activists guilty of a disorderly conduct in the end of the trial (FOM 2012). This case proved that an aggressive campaign in state-controlled media may be inefficient if protesters manage to win the sympathy of independent Russian media and opinion leaders as well as to provoke the resonance in global news outlets and social media.

The media openness of political LGBT groups is reflected in the nature of their public activism, which became more symbolic and intentionally staged for the media coverage. Thus, Alexey Sergeev from the 'Alliance' explained in the interview that the group's recent street actions were aimed at drawing attention of both liberal and mainstream media in Russia. In 2016, the Alliance organised street actions with such images as a rainbow coffin, a homophobic operetta and the public readings of the Constitution in a kneeling position, which referred both to praying and (sexual) domination. The conducted survey registered the preferences for public events and cooperation with different media that were expressed by politically mobilised LGBT activists. This branch within the Russian LGBT movement also seemed to downplay the influence of the "gay-propaganda" law on the actual media coverage.

On the contrary, the other group of LGBT activists switched to a conservative media strategy, which was characterised by the higher preference for closed events and greater selectivity in the choice of media partners. In terms of demands, this group focused on human rights advocacy (e.g. equality and non-discrimination) and made no political claims. Polina Andriyanova from "Coming Out" explained that the group saw the fight for abolishing the propaganda law as unrealistic and preferred to work with internal communications in the LGBTQI community. The public actions of apolitical LGBT groups tended to be less "flashy" and took such forms as protest art (e.g. films, photography, art festivals, etc.), cyberactivism and semi-public community events. The respondents, who expressed only human rights advocacy claims, looked for positive media coverage in friendly Russian or foreign media.

5. Conclusion

The dilemma faced by Russian LGBT activists after the "gay-propaganda" ban pointed at the ambiguity of media resonance as a discursive opportunity. Discussing the rise of the right-wing populism, Koopmans and Muis (2009) argued that only consonant, or supportive, coverage can contribute to the success of a previously marginalised movement. However, these conclusions were made in the context of the democratic political system, which was characterised by media pluralism and high trust in media. These predictions may be not confirmed in the conditions of a neo-authoritarian regime associated with media censorship and, consequently, low trust in media. In 2015, only 29% of Russians trusted state-owned TV channels (Deloitte 2015) and, therefore, their perception of social movements became less predictable.

Due to widespread media skepticism, the seemingly marginal social movements, which receive dissonant coverage in the Russian mainstream media, may still gain the public support. The expressly negative coverage of Pussy Riot in Russian state-owned media could have contributed to the sympathy to their protest, which was reflected in the opinion polls (Seal 2013; FOM 2012). Similarly, the 'demonisation' of the LGBT movement in Russian mainstream media resulted in the support from some opposition politicians and independent media (Wilkinson 2014). Edward Murzin, a candidate at the 2016 Duma Elections, explained in the interview that he had publicly supported the LGBTQI community out of civil solidarity with the oppressed minority, even through the issue of LGBT rights had not been on his party's main agenda. The further analysis of the mediation of the Russian LGBT activism and public responses to it can contribute to the understanding of discursive opportunities in undemocratic societies with a mixed media system.

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