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Putin's Dirty Little Secret: HIV/AIDS in the Russian Federation

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Research Reflection

I have been a student in the Russian Flagship Program at UCLA for almost four years. Although I am a Russian Language and Literature major, the Russian Flagship Program is much more than a major. The goal of the program is to produce American students with both linguistic and cultural competency. Students of the Flagship Program, in other words, do not simply study the Russian language. On the contrary, we also study Russian culture, literature, and politics. Flagship students are expected to get as much exposure to Russians and Russian culture as possible. Thus we meet weekly with Russian international students, Skype with students living in Moscow, spend a summer studying abroad, and a spend capstone year in a Russian speaking country.

At the end of my junior year, while preparing for my summer study abroad, I realized that in order to get a Russian visa, I had to prove that I was HIV negative. Curious about this particular restriction, I asked the Russian international student whom I was assigned to, Alyona, about the HIV/AIDS situation in Russia. Strangely enough, Alyona responded that there was no HIV/AIDS “situation” in Russia. As far as she knew, the visa restriction was a protective measure to keep HIV/AIDS, the notorious Western gay disease, from crossing Russia’s uncontaminated borders. Having asked more Russian natives about the supposedly nonexistent epidemic, I realized that Alyona wasn’t the only Russian who maintained that her country was HIV free. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, however, Russia is one of the only countries in the world whose HIV/AIDS epidemic, the largest one in the region, is still growing. Fascinated by these conflicting accounts, I decided to write my senior thesis on HIV/AIDS in Russia.

The information from the CDC was valuable, as well as the information I found using UCLA's library website and simply searching the stacks of YRL. Unfortunately, however, I was having an extremely difficult time finding any Russian sources, especially Russian sources whose authors admitted that HIV/AIDS even existed in the Russian Federation. I was also inexperienced when it came to using UCLA's library resources and was anxious about finding enough sources, especially considering the fact that one of the requirements was to find Russian sources.

I quickly realized, however, that UCLA is home to many knowledgeable and experienced librarians who, to my great relief, were able to rescue me from the black hole that is Russian HIV/AIDS research. Margarita Nafpaktitis, UCLA's librarian for Slavic & East European Studies and Linguistics, was absolutely instrumental to the development of my thesis. When I first spoke to her, I had no Russian-language sources, no idea how to find any, and had a very vague idea of what I was even going to write about. I also told her that I was in a particularly difficult situation because I needed to find Russian sources about a disease that supposedly didn't even exist in Russia. Margarita was unfazed.

First, she helped me narrow what I was searching for. Instead of searching "HIV/AIDS in Russia," for example, she suggested that I search using a combination of keywords that were related to Russia's HIV/AIDS epidemic and the politics behind its cover up, such as homosexuality and drug use. This not only helped me find valuable UCLA library sources, but also helped me narrow down the focus of my thesis, which eventually turned into the association of HIV/AIDS in Russia with homosexuality. Thus, thanks to Margarita, I was not only able to find useful and relevant material, but I was also able to discover why researching such a topic was difficult in the first place.

Margarita also directed me to specific sites that I wouldn't have been able to find on my own. She helped me find a site, for example, that had transcripts from one of Putin's interviews about Russia's Gay Propaganda Law, a transcript that proved to be extremely useful. Overall, UCLA's library resources, especially UCLA's librarians, not only improved the way that I research, but also helped me create an original paper that I hope will shed light on a public health crisis that Russian politicians unconscionably continue to conceal.

Putin's Dirty Little Secret: HIV/AIDS in the Russian Federation

Introduction

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Russia's HIV/AIDS levels are disastrous. Representatives of the CDC wrote in 2013 that "The HIV epidemic in Eastern Europe has increased more than any regional epidemic since 2001, and Russia's epidemic is the largest in the region with more than 900,000 persons estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS."¹ To put that in a global context, according to information gathered from the CDC, the Russian Federal AIDS Center, and UNAIDS, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia grew by 41% between 2002 and 2012, while the HIV/AIDS epidemics in the United States, India, and South Africa all fell considerably: the U.S.'s fell by 10%, South Africa's epidemic fell by 36% and India's by 43%.² Russia's epidemic, in other words is one of the world's only HIV/AIDS epidemics that is still growing.

Considering the alarming state of affairs in Russia regarding HIV/AIDS, it is shocking at best and unconscionable at worst that Putin and his administration have done so little to curb the spread of this deadly disease. Despite the fact that in 2007, for example, the Russian government announced that it would increase the amount of funding that it allocated to fighting HIV/AIDS, only 3.6% of those funds (\$15.4 million) was spent on HIV/AIDS prevention, which is undoubtedly one of the most crucial elements of controlling an epidemic.³ The HIV/AIDS epidemic, of course, is notoriously difficult to manage. It is highly stigmatized in many countries

¹ "CDC in Russia," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.

² Hayato Watanabe, "Russia's Anti-Gay Law: Fueling an AIDS Crisis," *World Policy Institute*.

³ Tinaz Pavri and Thomas Rotnem, *Understanding Emerging Epidemics: Social and Political Approaches*, 53

and is an evolutionary masterpiece, attacking the very machinery that is responsible for fighting off disease in the human body. It is thus understandable why the Russian government might have a difficult time controlling the epidemic. What is not understandable, however, is the Russian government's weak, if not completely nonexistent attempts to rid its country of what could soon turn into a pandemic. In 2007, for example, a year that could have been a turning point in Russia's HIV/AIDS crisis due to the increase in federal funds dedicated to fighting the epidemic, there were "no large-scale HIV-prevention programs in existence."⁴

The more recent updates on the situation in Russia are far from reassuring. According to UNAIDS's 2013 Global Report, even though 820,000 people in Russia were eligible to receive antiretroviral treatment for HIV/AIDS, 10% were denied the health services necessary to manage the disease. The authors of the report also state that Russia is on a list of thirty countries, including Uganda, South Sudan, and South Africa in which HIV/AIDS sufferers are routinely denied access to antiretroviral treatments by their governments.⁵ In fact, according to a chart published by the World Health Organization in 2009, while over 80% of people in Rwanda who were eligible to receive antiretroviral therapy were receiving it, only 20% of people eligible to receive antiretroviral therapy were receiving it in Russia.⁶ Not much has been written about why there is such a large gap between those who need treatment in Russia and those who are receiving it. Some suggest it might have to do with expensive antiretroviral therapy and the fact that Russia does not produce its own generic antiretroviral drugs.⁷ Overall, however, it seems that Putin and his administration, instead working to solve this massive public health crisis, are actively encouraging the spread of the virus.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Theo M Milonopoulos, "Op-ed: Vladimir Putin's AIDS Crisis," *Here Media Inc.*

⁶ "HIV/AIDS," *The Economist*.

⁷ "HIV & AIDS in Russia, Eastern Europe & Central Asia," *avert.org*.

The question that these statistics generate, of course, is why Putin and his administration refuse to address the HIV/AIDS crisis that threatens the lives of so many of their citizens. The answer, interestingly enough, seems to lie in the stigma that accompanies HIV/AIDS in Russia, particularly the stigma that associates HIV/AIDS with homosexuality. As Lerita Coleman Brown put it, “From a sociological perspective, economic, psychological, and social benefits of stigma sustain it. Stigmas will disappear when we no longer need to legitimize social exclusion and segregation.”⁸ Stigma, in other words, does not exist simply to exist. On the contrary, stigma serves a social, political, or economic purpose. The stigma associated with HIV/AIDS in Russia, particularly its associations with homosexuality, serves a political purpose to Putin, as it allows him to garner domestic popularity by protecting Russia from the diseased, dangerous, and foreign LGBT community.

There have been numerous articles and studies published about the state of the HIV/AIDS crisis in Russia. Most of the publishers of these texts, however, are Western, like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The World Bank, The World Health Organization, and other independent Western authors. A few recent studies have been published about the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS in Russia, most of which come to the conclusion that “stigma forms a major driver of Russia’s epidemic.”⁹ There are a few works, also published by Western authors, about the politics of HIV/AIDS in Russia and Russia’s HIV/AIDS legislation, the most recent of which is Ulla Pape’s “The Politics of HIV and AIDS in Russia.”¹⁰ There has also been a fair amount published on the topic of homosexuality in Russia and in the Soviet Union, although the great majority of these works do not come from Russia and are not written by

⁸ Lerita Coleman Brown, *The Disability Studies Reader*, 157

⁹ Ulla Pape, *The Politics of HIV/AIDS in Russia*, 93

¹⁰ Ibid

Russian authors. Masha Gessen, however, who is a Russian émigré, writes frequently on the topic of homosexuality in Russia, although she is no longer a resident of the country. Although there is some material available about the association of HIV/AIDS with homosexuality in Russia, very little has been written specifically about why that association is valuable to Putin and why he seeks to sustain it.

The Need to Create an Enemy

Although the 2014 Winter Olympic Games were an exhibition of Russia's economic and political might, her cultural prowess, and her supposed global dominance, the opening ceremony that left one Olympic ring accidentally unopened hinted at the possibility that not all was well in the Motherland. Indeed, with the war raging in Eastern Ukraine, the economic sanctions placed on Russia by the seething Western powers, falling oil prices, and the collapsing value of the ruble, an unopened Olympic ring is the least of Russia's current problems. What Putin cannot afford, however, is for the Russian people to become too aware of these problems. If they did, Putin would inevitably be the person to blame, and his surprisingly high domestic approval ratings would undoubtedly fall.

In order to prevent this from happening, Putin needed to create, or perhaps maintain, an artificial enemy from which he could defend his citizens. Author Garry Kasparov seems to understand this phenomenon as a common political tactic used in authoritarian regimes:

“Another shared characteristic of authoritarian regimes is how they respond to that lack of a positive agenda by creating enemies against which they can bravely protect the citizenry. These enemies, internal and external, are also inevitably to blame for many of the nation's ills, but scapegoating is not an essential element. Fear mongering and hatred are good enough to start, and when backed by a massive propaganda campaign, they can be effective in distracting people from the real problems of the economy, security, and lack of a voice in the face of oppression”.¹¹

¹¹ Masha Gessen, Joseph Huff-Hannon and Garry Kasparov, *Gay Propaganda*, 11.

In order to distract his people, in other words, from the real economic, social, and political disasters facing Russia, Putin needed to identify an enemy other than himself.

The LGBT Community as Russia's Enemy

The LGBT community has served as Russia and the Soviet Union's enemy for an extraordinarily long time. In the early years of the USSR, homosexuality, a phenomenon too evil to exist in the romanticized Soviet Union, was simply omitted from all records: "Many scholars and observers have noted the near total invisibility of homosexuality in Soviet-era popular and academic discourse. In the early 1930s...homosexuals were not simply prosecuted; they were rendered invisible."¹² Homosexuals in the Soviet Union, in other words, were so sick and wrong that they couldn't have even existed in an idealized socialist society. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the attempted introduction of democratic principles, however, many expected to see a gay rights movement develop in Russia. But according to journalist Elizabeth Wolfe, in 1997, this was not the case: "no movement exists and opinions are divided over whether it should, or could."¹³ The lack of any concrete LGBT activist movement after the fall of the Soviet Union illustrates that Russia was a particularly hostile place for members of the LGBT community and that fear of homosexual visibility was an integral part of Russian identity and culture. And although this kind of homophobia may seem backwards, it unfortunately still exists in Russia. According to the Russian LGBT Network, for example, LGBT individuals in Russia

¹² Narcisz Fejes and Andrea P. Balogh, *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*, 37

¹³ *Ibid*, 38

in 2010 were only tolerated if they did not “make themselves known.”¹⁴ Russia can thus be seen as an especially unkind and unwelcoming place for members of the LGBT community.

It is also important to note the heteronormative linguistic structure of the Russian language. The word for “to get married,” for example, is gender specific. If you are a woman, to get married is *выйти замуж*, which literally means, “to stand behind a husband.” If you are a man, to get married is *жениться*, the root of which is *жена*, which means “wife.” Getting married as a man, in other words, translates into something along the lines of “to wife yourself.” Getting married is thus not only gender specific to the subject of the verb, but heteronormative: a woman marries a man and a man marries a woman. Unlike English, in other words, the Russian language doesn’t even leave the linguistic possibility of same-sex marriage. Perhaps this is why the authors of *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures* refer to “the essential incompatibility of homosexuality and Russian national identity.”¹⁵ Homosexuality, after all, doesn’t seem to be possible within the bounds of the Russian language. It is also interesting to note that the Russian word for straight, i.e. not gay, is *натурал* which is a cognate of the English word “natural.” Homosexuals, in other words, are engrained in the Russian language and therefore collective Russian mentality as inherently unnatural. Thus homophobia is not simply a historical as well as contemporary phenomenon of Russian culture, but also an intrinsic part of the Russian language.

Although anti-LGBT sentiment was present in Russia for a long time, Putin’s rise to power was accompanied by a newly invigorated wave of homophobia. Masha Gessen, a gay activist who grew up in Russia but recently moved to the United States, has written extensively on the anti-LGBT environment that Putin and his administration have been fostering. In a blog, Gessen writes,

¹⁴ Ibid, 39

¹⁵ Ibid, 45

“To mobilize his shrinking constituency, Putin needed a war, so he declared one. But to fight a war, you need not only to identify an enemy, you must also paint that enemy as both dangerous and less than human. Patriarch Cyrill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, has proclaimed that the international trend toward legalizing same-sex marriage is a sign of the coming apocalypse; that sort of rhetoric establishes imminent danger. In an April 2012 video that has recently gone viral, the deputy head of the Kremlin's propaganda machine screams that when gay men die in car accidents, their hearts should be burned or buried deep underground, lest they be transplanted into a human being. This establishes that we are less than human.”¹⁶

The LGBT community, in other words, has been a longstanding enemy to Russia. Putin, having grown up in Soviet Russia, understood that, but was also aware that in 2011, his approval ratings were on a steady decline.¹⁷ To prove to his citizens that he was a strong and effective leader and to distract them from his actual domestic failures, he amped up his administration's anti-LGBT rhetoric, forcing activists like Masha Gessen to flee to the West, else they be demonized and identified as a sign of Russia's impending doom.

Homosexuality and HIV/AIDS

Based on the magnitude of the anti-LGBT rhetoric that Masha Gessen described, it makes sense for Russians to associate homosexuality with disease. According to Patriarch Cyrill, the LGBT community represents a very real threat to Russia and the world at large, much like an epidemic, and if their hearts should not be used for the purposes of transplantation, there is surely something physiologically impaired and infectious about them. This kind of dialogue, however, only strengthens the pre-existing associations between homosexuality and disease, especially HIV/AIDS. Because “the first official case of HIV [in the Soviet Union] was allegedly the result of bisexual practices on the part of a military translator working in Africa,”¹⁸ HIV/AIDS in Russia was automatically associated with untraditional sexual practices from the beginnings of

¹⁶ Masha Gessen, "When Putin Declared War on Gay Families, It Was Time for Mine to Leave Russia," *The Slate Group*.

¹⁷ Mark Adomanis, "After Nosediving In 2011 Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating is (Mostly) Holding Steady," *Forbes*.

¹⁸ Tinaz Pavri and Thomas Rotnem, *Understanding Emerging Epidemics: Social and Political Approaches*, 49

its emergence. Putin and his administration's rhetoric only serves to strengthen the idea that HIV/AIDS is inherently a "gay disease." Overall, the combination of such historical misconceptions and the environment that Putin is fostering has created a catastrophic situation for Russia's LGBT population as well as Russia's HIV positive population.

The association of homosexuality with HIV/AIDS, for example, is rampant in the minds of Russia's medical professionals, especially Russia's nurses. Russian nurses are taught over a period of three years, and part of their curriculum is to learn about infectious diseases, one of them being HIV/AIDS.¹⁹ A study conducted in 2014, however, illustrates that the education nurses get about HIV/AIDS does not prevent them from maintaining the culturally engrained mindset that homosexuals are diseased. The authors of the study found, for example, that "Only 22% of the students felt comfortable being in contact with a homosexual person, as they would with a heterosexual" and that "Almost 30% felt that their attitude toward homosexuals had become more negative since the beginning of the HIV and AIDS crisis."²⁰

The authors of the study also found that 11% of the nursing students surveyed thought that all homosexuals had HIV, while 17% did not know. Almost 30% of the surveyed nurses, in other words, had unscientific and bigoted ideas about the relationship between homosexuality and disease. Furthermore, according to the study, "Previous research has shown that in nursing schools students know of intravenous drug use as being a main route for acquiring HIV but often believe that all homosexuals have HIV because it is a risk-laden way for potential HIV acquisition."²¹ So even though nurses are taught scientifically factual information, their cultural values still play a frightening role in their perception of homosexuals and HIV/AIDS. As the

¹⁹ Tarja Suominen et al., "Russian Nursing Students' Knowledge Level and Attitudes in the Context of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) – a Descriptive Study," *BMC Nursing*.

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

authors of the study state, in Eastern Europe “nurses and nursing students increasingly care for people infected with HIV, people with AIDS and people who are at risk of contracting HIV. Nurses should therefore be knowledgeable about HIV infection and AIDS in order to provide proper care for people living with HIV/AIDS.”²² Cultural norms, in other words, and the Putin administration’s increasingly poisonous rhetoric about homosexuals seem to produce a dangerously misinformed medical community charged with the enormous task of ridding Russia of one the most deadly and rampant diseases in the country. As long as Russian citizens, however, whether or not they are medical professionals, associate homosexuality with disease, the LGBT community continues to look like a very real and very dangerous threat to Russia, a threat that Putin’s success as a leader depends on. In fact, the homosexual threat becomes even more effective and terrifying when it has made its way into the minds of Russia’s medical professionals, because doctors and nurses are the people whom regular Russian citizens can depend on for reliable and factual information about illness. If educated nurses believe homosexuals are inherently diseased, in other words, it must be true. Thus the fact that the stigma associating homosexuality with HIV/AIDS has made its way into Russia’s medical community is not only shocking, but useful to Putin.

Although Putin himself never directly says in a speech or interview that all homosexuals have HIV/AIDS, he discusses homosexuality in a way that makes it exceptionally clear that they are dangerous and diseased, leaving his citizens to make the obvious connection between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. In an interview transcript available through the Kremlin’s website, for example, Putin is asked a question about Russia’s new Gay Propaganda Law, which

²² Ibid

bans the distribution of gay material to minors. When asked to describe what the law is really about, Putin answers,

“Вы внимательно прочитайте закон и посмотрите как он называется. А закон называется: «О запрете пропаганды педофилии и гомосексуализма». Закон о запрете педофилии, пропаганды педофилии и гомосексуализма. В некоторых странах, в том числе в Европе, публично обсуждается...возможность легализации педофилии...Пусть они делают, что хотят, но у Народов Российской Федерации, у русского народа есть свой культурный код, своя традиция.”²³

“You can carefully read and look over the law yourself. But the law is about the ban of pedophilic and gay propaganda. Again, a law about the ban of pedophilia, pedophilic and gay propaganda. In a few countries, including those in Europe, the possibility of legalizing pedophilia is being publicly discussed...They can do what they want, but in the Russian Federation we have our own cultural code, our own traditions.”²⁴

Putin, in other words, does not say that homosexuals are sick. He does, however, put them in the same category as pedophiles, leading to the obvious conclusion that like pedophiles, homosexuals are inherently dangerous, sick, and threatening to Russia’s vulnerable children.

In response to the same question, Putin continues by saying,

“Моя личная позиция заключается в том, что общество должно побережь своих детей хотя бы для того, чтобы иметь возможность размножаться...мы добились того, чего у нас давно не было...казалось, что нам никогда не преодолеть ту абсолютную страшную ситуацию, в которой мы оказались, с демографическим кризисом.”²⁵

“My personal opinion is that society must take care of its children, at least to ensure the possibility of reproduction...We have achieved what we never thought we would...We thought we would never overcome the absolutely terrifying situation that we were in regarding the demographic crisis.”²⁶

Again, Putin does not directly discuss disease in the context of homosexuality. He does, however, articulate that Russia’s demographic problem is something that he is extremely concerned about and something that somehow relates to his ban on gay propaganda.

Homosexuals, in other words, are not only dangerous to Russia’s children, but are also somehow responsible for Russia’s declining birthrate. Again, Putin will not directly say that all homosexuals have HIV/AIDS, but by associating them with pedophiles and the decay of

²³ Vladimir Putin, “Интервью с российскими и иностранными СМИ,” *kremlin.ru*.

²⁴ Translated by Annie Sundelson

²⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Интервью с российскими и иностранными СМИ,” *kremlin.ru*.

²⁶ Translated by Annie Sundelson

Russia's population, he makes it pretty easy for Russian citizens to make the unspoken but omnipresent mental connection between homosexuality, danger, and disease.

The association between homosexuality and disease is something that also haunts Russia's homosexual community. In *Gay Propaganda*, a compilation of interviews and love stories from Russia's LGBT community, there is a poignant interview, transcribed by Ekaterina Dementieva, of an HIV positive man named Sergei. In the interview, Sergei says, "Я сам прежде очень плохо поступил с одним человеком. Мы дружили, общались, он приезжали ко мне в деревню. Он мне однажды позвонили и сказал: «У мена вот плюс». И я тогда сказал: «Сочувствую». Но сам тут же удалил из телефона его контакты и больше с ним не связывался."²⁷ Translated into English, Sergei says, "I did something very bad to someone once. We were friends, and lovers. He'd come visit me in the country. One day he called and said, 'I'm positive.' And I said, 'I'm sorry to hear that.' After that, I deleted him from my phone and never got in touch with him again."²⁸ The story of Sergei ending contact with his long time lover and friend because of his HIV status is clearly representative of Sergei's understandable yet painful desire to separate himself from the notion that homosexuality is inherently linked with sickness and disease. If Sergei could be homosexual but healthy, perhaps he could prove to himself that homosexuality isn't itself a disease. Thus Sergei wasn't simply battling with his own notions of homosexuality and shame, but with the implications that Putin and Russian culture placed on homosexuality by making it conceptually inseparable from illness.

Unfortunately, Sergei later finds out that he is also HIV positive. In an interesting and rather sad turn of events, he decides to tell a friend about his recent diagnosis: "У меня был

²⁷ Masha Gessen, Joseph Huff-Hannon and Garry Kasparov, *Propaganda gomoseksualizma v rossi*, 61.

²⁸ Masha Gessen, Joseph Huff-Hannon and Garry Kasparov, *Gay Propaganda*, 58

хороший друг, натурал бирюлевский. А я возьми и скажи ему: «У меня ВИЧ». И больше он не проявлялся. Сказал я это назло врагам, а получается, что назло себе.”²⁹ In English, Sergei says, “I had a good friend, a straight guy from Birulievo. Then I went and told him I had HIV and I haven’t heard from him since. I said this to spite my enemies but it turned out it was to spite myself.”³⁰ Sergei, in other words, having found out about his HIV status, tries to convince himself that telling the news to his straight friend was a form of protection against people who would soon become his enemies. Later, however, he admits that he was doing it simply to hurt himself. Sergei’s decision to tell his friend, then, seems to have been a form of self inflicted punishment for being gay. Before his diagnosis, Sergei thought he could prove that being gay didn’t necessarily mean being sick. But once he was diagnosed, the longstanding piece of Russian culture that links homosexuality with illness was, in Sergei’s mind, proven correct, resulting in the self-loathing and punishment that Sergei then subjected himself to. Sergei’s story clearly illustrates that the idea that homosexuality is linked with disease is so engrained in Russian culture that it effects not only the educated medical community, but also the LGBT community itself. Thus a bigoted, mistaken perception of homosexuality is not only confirmed by HIV/AIDS nurses, but by the very community that such a perception aims to hurt.

Interestingly enough, a study on HIV/AIDS and stress was recently published in the 2015 issue of “Aging and Mental Health.” In the conclusion, the authors of the study write, “interventions that build personal capacity, coping-skills, and social support may contribute to better management of HIV/AIDS and increase HRQoL” where HRQoL refers to physical,

²⁹ Masha Gessen, Joseph Huff-Hannon and Garry Kasparov, *Propaganda gomoseksualizma v rossi*, 61.

³⁰ Masha Gessen, Joseph Huff-Hannon and Garry Kasparov, *Gay Propaganda*, 58

emotional, and functional/global well-being of a patient.³¹ The fact that Putin and his administration are doing very little to curb the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia, in other words, doesn't constitute the only threat to the well being of people suffering from HIV/AIDS in Russia. The fact that there is such strong cultural and political stigma facing homosexuality and HIV/AIDS means that people like Sergei, upon discovering their HIV status, lose any form of social support that, according to this study, could help with the management of the disease. Thus Putin's inaction has consequences for people living with HIV/AIDS in Russia that are more wide spread than may initially be assumed. This isn't detrimental to Putin, however, because the more alienated, sick, self-loathing homosexuals that exist in Russia, the more enemies he has to defend his citizens from.

Homosexuality and the West

Although Putin's performance of saving his citizens from the diseased and dangerous homosexual population seems like it would be effective in drumming up domestic support, Putin has made it even more effective by linking homosexuality and HIV/AIDS with the West. In his introduction to *Gay Propaganda*, Garry Kasparov continues to discuss Putin's need to create an enemy by writing, "The best enemies are those against whom historical conflicts can be resuscitated. For a KGB man like Putin and his clique, it's been most natural to drum up anti-Americanism, preying on Cold War memories."³² Considering Russia's participation in the 2008 war in Georgia, the eerily similar crisis in Ukraine, Obama's economic sanctions on Russia, growing anti-Russian sentiment in America, as well as the general discontent of western powers with the annexation of Crimea, Cold War tensions are still alive and well. In fact, according to a

³¹ X. Fang et al., "Resilience, stress, and life quality in older adults living with HIV/AIDS," *US National Library of Medicine*.

³² Masha Gessen, Joseph Huff-Hannon and Garry Kasparov, *Gay Propaganda*, 11.

survey conducted by the Levada Center in June 2014, “71% of Russians view the United States as ‘badly’ or ‘very badly’—the highest in more than 20 years, with more positive attitudes registered during the Soviet era.”³³ According to the authors of *Queer Visibility in Post-Socialist Cultures*, “The mythical opposition between Russian and the West has acquired new currency, and now it predominates over economic, social, or historical differentiations.”³⁴ Resurrecting old Cold War sentiments, in other words, would not only be easy for Putin but extremely effective in garnering domestic support.

The task of painting homosexuals, especially homosexuals infected HIV/AIDS, as unfortunate consequences of contact with the West didn’t prove to be too difficult for Putin, who simply had to strengthen associations that were already present. As historian Dan Healey put it, “late Soviet Russia was a place without homosexuality.”³⁵ Because homosexuality supposedly didn’t exist (or was simply rendered invisible) in the Soviet Union, the increased visibility of the LGBT community after the fall of the Soviet Union, which, in reality, was a result of decreased censorship and an introduction of democratic principles, was seen as a result of increased contact with the West. According to Russian émigré writer and activist Yaroslav Mugotin, “According to Soviet propaganda, which is still very real, there weren’t any homosexuals in Russian and Soviet history: homosexuality is a ‘foreign disease.’”³⁶ As writer Valentin Rasputin put it in 1997, homosexuality “was imported into Russia from abroad.”³⁷

³³ Anna Arutunyan, “Anti-American sentiment growing in Russia,” *USA Today*.

³⁴ Narcisz Fejes and Andrea P. Balogh, *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*, 48.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 37

³⁶ *Ibid*, 38

³⁷ *Ibid*

The idea that homosexuality was a foreign agent imported into Russia from the West, in other words, was clearly not new to Russia. All Putin had to do was resurrect and strengthen pre-existing associations. Masha Gessen, in her blog, explains just how Putin accomplished this task:

“Here’s how it all came about: When more than 100,000 Russians came out to protest rigged elections in December 2011, Vladimir Putin looked at them and saw the enemy. In Putin’s mind, anyone who opposes his rule opposes Russia itself. So the protesters must have been foreigners, or, if not, they had to be The Other. Early on, he accused then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of having personally inspired the protests. A few months later, this idea of The Other turned into the laws on foreign agents and espionage and into the ban on American adoptions—and eventually into the law on ‘homosexual propaganda,’ for no one represents Western influence and otherness better than gays and lesbians.”³⁸

By identifying an outside threat to Russia, by drumming up longstanding anti-American sentiment, and by creating a series of laws to protect his citizens against that threat, one of which dealt with the threat of homosexuality, Putin was able to solidify and strengthen pre-existing associations between homosexuality, fear, and the West.

Putin’s Gay Propaganda Law itself also establishes the connection between homosexuality and the West. According to the law, the dissemination of “homosexual propaganda” is now a crime that comes with a fine of up to 5,000 rubles.³⁹ If the person distributing the gay propaganda to minors is a foreigner, however, the punishment is much higher: “fines of up to 100,000 rubles, 15 days in detention and deportation.”⁴⁰ According to Michael Bohm,

“Judging by comments made by the law’s most-fervent supporters, Duma deputies believe that Russia’s LGBT ‘phenomenon’ is a morally noxious virus that the West has infected Russia with—together with prostitution, pornography, drug abuse and unhealthy fast-food chains. Thus...the law must impose harsher penalties on foreigners from the West because they are the chief provocateurs behind the gay propaganda campaign. They are the ones who are plotting to weaken Russia by corrupting its traditional values, exacerbating its demographic problem and increasing its number of AIDS cases.”⁴¹

³⁸ Masha Gessen, "When Putin Declared War on Gay Families, It Was Time for Mine to Leave Russia," *The Slate Group*.

³⁹ Michael Bohm, "The Roots of Russia’s Homophobia," *The Moscow Times*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴¹ *Ibid*

Thus written into the law itself are associations between homosexuality, danger, and the West.

HIV/AIDS and the West

The Russian idea that homosexuals are foreign or Western agents is also strengthened by the fact that HIV/AIDS was historically considered a Western disease. When HIV/AIDS first appeared in the Soviet Union, for example, Soviet officials refused to address the issue because they “denied the existence of ‘Western’ social problems.”⁴² When reports of HIV/AIDS infections finally showed up in the press, “such reports highlighted that these infections were either the result of contact with Westerners or the ‘depraved’ practices of prostitutes and IDUs,”⁴³ where IDUs are intravenous drug users. In 1987, according to an article published from the U.S. Department of State’s *Foreign Affairs Note*, representatives of the Soviet government went so far as to claim that the AIDS virus had been “manufactured” by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Pentagon.⁴⁴ To add scientific proof to this preposterous claim, “the Soviet government had an East German biophysicist, Jacob Segal, issue a report arguing that the AIDS virus had been synthesized from two existing viruses, VISNA and HTLV-1.”⁴⁵ It was not difficult, in other words, for Putin and his administration to make the link between homosexuality and the West, since the link between HIV/AIDS, the notorious gay disease, and the West had long ago been established.

It is also interesting to note that Russians are strangely unaware and seemingly unconcerned with the current health crisis in their country. According to a survey conducted by Theodore P. Gerber and Sarah E. Mendelson in 2005, “Russian society ranked the burgeoning

⁴² Murray Feshbach, *HIV/AIDS in Russia and Eurasia Vol. 1*, 13.

⁴³ Tinaz Pavri and Thomas Rotnem, *Understanding Emerging Epidemics: Social and Political Approaches*, 49

⁴⁴ Murray Feshbach, *HIV/AIDS in Russia and Eurasia Vol. 1*, 14.

⁴⁵ Ibid

problem of HIV/AIDS as a much less important issue than a number of other societal ills...and, according to the authors, successive surveys demonstrate that concern with HIV/AIDS in Russia is not increasing, but *decreasing* among the population.”⁴⁶ The HIV/AIDS epidemic, in other words, is so strongly associated by Russians with Otherness, with the West, and with homosexuality, that it doesn’t seem like a pressing issue. To Russians affected by the current dialogue surrounding HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, and Western influence, the disease can’t be a pressing issue because it could never touch them. The disease of the enemy can only ever touch the enemy.

Russia’s visa regulations further strengthen the misconception that HIV/AIDS is a foreign or Western disease that needs to be actively kept beyond Russia’s borders. According to the Global Database on HIV specific travel and residence restrictions, “a negative HIV test result is required for long terms stays (more than three months).”⁴⁷ Additionally, according to the site, “Foreign nationals found to be HIV positive are expelled.”⁴⁸ Russia’s visa restrictions have clear implications to both Russian citizens and foreigners: HIV/AIDS is a disease that originated outside of Russia and which continues to pose an outside threat. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that Russia’s HIV/AIDS epidemic is one of the only HIV/AIDS epidemics in the world that is still growing.

HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis (TB)

Although the Russian government’s failure to curb Russia’s current HIV/AIDS crisis is catastrophic for Russia’s HIV/AIDS sufferers, it also has wider epidemiological implications.

⁴⁶ Tinaz Pavri and Thomas Rotnem, *Understanding Emerging Epidemics: Social and Political Approaches*, 51

⁴⁷ “Russia—Regulations on Entry, Stay, and Residence for PLHIV,” *The Global Database on HIV-specific Travel & Residence Restrictions*.

⁴⁸ Ibid

According to the authors of a 2001 report on Russia's battle with tuberculosis, "...the incidence of MDR TB has continued to increase, as has infection with HIV and coinfection with HIV and TB,"⁴⁹ where MDR TB refers to multidrug-resistant tuberculosis. Russia's HIV/AIDS crisis, in other words, is also accompanied by a tuberculosis crisis, specifically a drug-resistant and thus more dangerous form of tuberculosis. And although rising levels of MDR TB infection poses a public health threat on its own, that threat is exacerbated by Russia's HIV/AIDS crisis.

According to the CDC, there are two forms of tuberculosis: an active form and a latent one. Those with the latent form do not feel sick and cannot spread the disease to others. Those with the active form, however, exhibit symptoms and can spread the disease by simply coughing or sneezing in the vicinity of a healthy person.⁵⁰ Furthermore, "Because HIV weakens the immune system, people with latent TB infection and HIV infection are at very high risk of developing active TB disease."⁵¹ Russia's HIV/AIDS crisis, in other words, is actively contributing to Russia's tuberculosis crisis by increasing the number of people who have the active form of the disease and thus increasing the number of possible infections. Putin's refusal to solve one epidemic because of its "beneficial" associations with the West and with homosexuality is thus an indirect refusal to solve a completely unrelated but nevertheless extremely dangerous other epidemic.

Looking Forward

Like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis is a highly stigmatized disease. According to the authors of an *Oxford Journals* article, physicians who participated in a study regarding their perceived barriers to tuberculosis care in the Samara Oblast "suggested that the association of the disease

⁴⁹ "The New Profile of Drug-Resistant Tuberculosis in Russia: A Global and Local Perspective: Summary of a Joint Workshop," *National Academy of Sciences*.

⁵⁰ "TB and HIV Coinfection," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*.

⁵¹ *Ibid*

with homelessness, crime and imprisonment, alcohol abuse and other forms of socially unacceptable behavior irrationally magnifies the perceived threat to public health and leads to further marginalization and social exclusion of those marked by the disease.”⁵² The difference between the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the tuberculosis epidemic, however, is that physicians and other medical professionals treating patients with tuberculosis, like the ones who participated in the *Oxford Journals* study, seem to be able to identify the stigma associated with tuberculosis as a problematic and unreasonable barrier to tuberculosis care.

The nurses in the HIV/AIDS study discussed earlier, on the other hand, seem to be personally effected by the stigma (and the misinformation that such stigma generates) surrounding HIV/AIDS. 34% of the respondents in the nursing study, for example, were unsure about whether HIV could be transmitted through “casual contact.”⁵³ As the authors of the study explain, “...we need to emphasize this point, because if nursing students think that a person can contract HIV by casual contact, for example in nursing care, then students could fear contracting HIV/AIDS whilst carrying out their daily nursing activities.”⁵⁴ Thus the social stigma that surrounds HIV/AIDS, which in turn leads to irrational fear and misinformation about contraction, is unfortunately engrained in the minds of Russia’s HIV/AIDS health professionals. The Russian physicians who treat tuberculosis patients, however, seem not only unaffected by tuberculosis sigma but also angered by it. As one physician put it, “Since 2001, there is a law on mandatory treatment for patients with open forms of TB. The police should assist us in bringing

⁵² Boika Dimitrova et al., “Health service providers’ perceptions of barriers to tuberculosis care in Russia,” *Oxford Journals*.

⁵³ Tarja Suominen et al., “Russian Nursing Students’ Knowledge Level and Attitudes in the Context of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) – a Descriptive Study,” *BMC Nursing*.

⁵⁴ Ibid

the patients to treatment. The patients do not come to us for years!”⁵⁵ The stigma that leaves patients unwilling to seek diagnosis or treatment for tuberculosis, in other words, seems to be something that is being actively fought against by medical professionals, the police, and government officials. Tuberculosis, then, unlike HIV/AIDS, seems to be a disease that government and health workers actively want to contain, regardless of the stigma associated with it.

The most effective way of solving both TB and HIV/AIDS in Russia would most likely lie within HIV/AIDS treatment itself, since HIV is the disease responsible for the rising number of cases of the active form of tuberculosis. As Bertrand Audoin put it, “Unfortunately political leaders in many parts of the world are the true drivers of the stigma against gays. But it is those very leaders who have a historic opportunity not only to end such discrimination but to make a major dent in one of the world’s most lethal pandemics in their own backyards.”⁵⁶ Although Putin does have an opportunity to rescue thousands of his citizens from both HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, the domestic support he garners from the associations of HIV/AIDS with homosexuality and West might be too valuable to live without.

A new study, however, might offer a glimpse of hope. A study done in February 2014 testing the combined treatment of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis showed that patients with HIV and TB being treated for both diseases simultaneously had a better chance of survival than those being treated for each disease separately.⁵⁷ If Russia’s government officials and health care workers are serious about curbing the tuberculosis crisis in Russia, which is rampant in Russia’s

⁵⁵ Boika Dimitrova et al., “Health service providers’ perceptions of barriers to tuberculosis care in Russia,” *Oxford Journals*.

⁵⁶ Bertrand Audoin, “The AIDS Epidemic Can be Ended,” *The New York Times*.

⁵⁷ N. Padayatchi et al., “Improved survival in multidrug-resistant tuberculosis patients receiving integrated tuberculosis and antiretroviral treatment in the SAPIt Trial.” *The International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease*.

HIV positive population, combining HIV and TB treatment may be what is most effective in the fight against tuberculosis. It is highly doubtful that Putin will do anything in the near future for Russia's LGBT community or directly for those suffering from HIV/AIDS. If he sincerely wants to mitigate the tuberculosis epidemic in his country, however, and he goes about it in the most scientifically effective manner, it may indirectly help curb Russia's HIV/AIDS crisis.

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