

With the end of Soviet persecutions in 1991, LGBTQ+ communities have experienced a period of development even though post-Soviet societies have only partially shown greater tolerance toward sexual and gender minorities. The transnational interaction between Western activism and post-Soviet communities has led to the emergence of new feelings of gender, sexual, and national belonging. This volume presents research by experts in queer studies who study how the struggle for sexual and gender minority rights has intersected with the construction of political, social, and cultural belongings over the past three decades.

**Simone A. Bellezza** is associate professor of Modern History at the University of Naples Federico II. He specializes in Ukrainian history; his *The Shore of Expectations: A Cultural Study of the Shistdesiatnyky* (CIUS Press 2019) won the Pritsak prize. He is member of the board of Memorial Italia.

**Elena Dundovich** is professor of History of International Relations and History of Eastern Europe at the University of Pisa, where she coordinates the PhD program in Political Sciences. She specializes in the history of Stalinist persecutions and is a member of the board of Memorial Italia.

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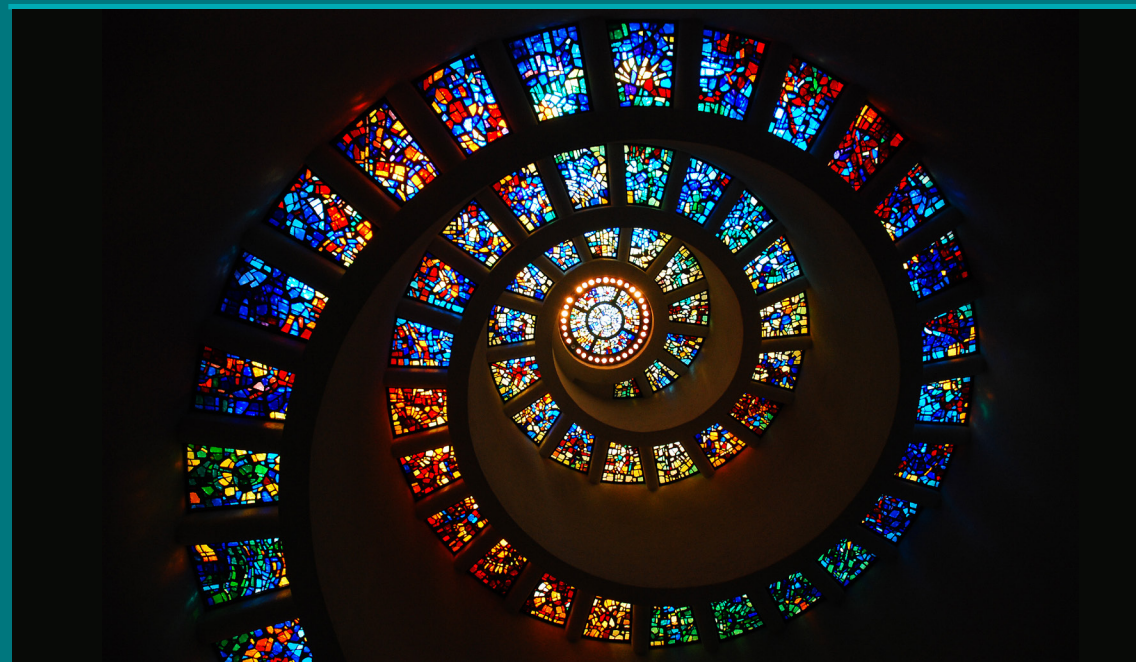
Queer Transnationalities · a cura di S.A. Bellezza e E. Dundovich

GENERE, SOGGETTIVITÀ, DIRITTI · 9

# QUEER TRANSNATIONALITIES

*Towards a History of LGBTQ+  
Rights in the Post-Soviet Space*

a cura di Simone A. Bellezza e Elena Dundovich



€ 18,00



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Queer transnationalities : towards a history of lgbtq+ rights in the post-soviet space / a cura di Simone A. Bellezza e Elena Dundovich - Pisa : Pisa university press, 2023. - (Genere, soggettività, diritti ; 9)

323.3260947 (WD)

I. Bellezza, Simone A. II. Dundovich, Elena 1. Diritti civili [e] Orientamento sessuale - Europa orientale [e] Russia

CIP a cura del Sistema bibliotecario dell'Università di Pisa



Opera sottoposta a  
peer review secondo  
il protocollo UPI

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Pisa University Press Polo editoriale  
Centro per l'innovazione e la diffusione della cultura  
Università di Pisa - Piazza Torricelli 4 - 56126 Pisa  
P. IVA 00286820501 · Codice Fiscale 80003670504  
Tel. +39 050 2212056 · Fax +39 050 2212945  
E-mail [press@unipi.it](mailto:press@unipi.it) · PEC [cidic@pec.unipi.it](mailto:cidic@pec.unipi.it)  
[www.pisauniversitypress.it](http://www.pisauniversitypress.it)

ISBN: 978-88-3339-708-5

layout grafico: [360grafica.it](http://360grafica.it)

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# Is a Homosexual (Poet) a Good Citizen? Queer Discourses in Russian Literature and New “Civic Poetry”<sup>1</sup>

MARTINA NAPOLITANO

We are children of the epoch,  
The epoch is political.  
*Wisława Szymborska*

In 1934, a British Communist party member, Harry Whyte, wrote a letter to Iosif Stalin confronting the Soviet leader with a bold question: «Can an open homosexual be considered a person fit to become a member of the Communist Party?»<sup>2</sup>. Stalin’s answer – a short note on Whyte’s filed letter – was, so to speak, equally frank: «An idiot and a degenerate». If a Communist party member was assumably the ideal Soviet citizen<sup>3</sup>, Stalin’s brief comment suggests

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<sup>1</sup> I am writing this while Russia is conducting a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the consequences of which are already under everyone’s eyes and will be greater and partially unpredictable in the near and far future. It goes without saying that any speculation on the current situation regarding human rights in Russia is subject to changes in the current and future state of affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*, London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2018, 165. Stalin’s answer is quoted here too.

<sup>3</sup> To quote a piece of literature of the time: «I’m setting up a commission on everything to do with electricity in the province, and you’re the chairman! Are you a Party member?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, not to worry. You’ll be something of an exception...Why



in very few words what kind of treatment homosexual citizens of the USSR (be they Party members or not) could expect to face in their everyday life – something Dan Healey in particular (among others)<sup>4</sup> has studied in detail.

If we now were to move forward in time and interrogate the contemporary epoch, what answer would we receive to a similar question, or – «can an open homosexual be considered a person fit to become a citizen of the Russian Federation?» Surprisingly enough, the answer is officially provided by the Russian Consti-

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aren't you a member?' 'I don't know myself,' uttered Dushin. 'Does you no good, that doesn't! Get you nowhere, that won't!' said Chunyaev. 'What's wrong with you, don't you fancy joining us building life's meaning in the midst of all matter? One of them, are you then?' 'No, I'm on the right side,' said Dushin, and felt surprised that the mass of the people and the entire Party were building universal truth, whereas he had thought that only he wanted it». Platonov A., *Bread and Reading*, tr. Geoffrey Smith, in *Index on Censorship*, 1991, 20, 8, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Apart from Healey (author of the seminal volume *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001), see also the following works, for example: Engelstein L., *Soviet Policy toward Male Homosexuality*, in *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1995, 29, 155-178; Klesh A., *Istoriya russkoi gomoseksual'nosti do i posle oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii: razlichnye podkhody i perspektivy*, in *Kak my pishem istoriyu*, eds. Garreta G., Dufaud G., Pimenova L., Moscow, ROSSPEN, 2013, 335-375. Kozlovsky V., *Argo russkoi gomoseksual'noi subkul'tury. Materialy k izucheniyu*, Benson, Chalidze, 1996; Kuntsman A., *With a Shade of Disgust: Affective Politics of Sexuality and Class in Memoirs of the Stalinist Gulag*, in *Slavic Review*, 2009, 68, 308-328; Roldugina I., *Rannesovetskaya gomoseksual'naya subkul'tura: istoriya odnoi fotografii*, in *Teatr*, 2004, 16, 188-191; *Id.*, "Pochemu my takie lyudi?" *Rannesovetskie gomoseksualy ot pervogo litsa. Novye istochniki po istorii gomoseksual'nikh identichnostei v Rossii*, in *Ab Imperio*, 2016, 2, 183-216; Rudusa R., *Forced Underground: Homosexuals in Soviet Latvia*, Riga, Mansards, 2014; Stella F., *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. Post-Socialism and Gendered Sexualities*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Bell W.T., *Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag*, in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2015, 24, 198-224; Zhuk O., *Russkie amazonki. Istoriya lesbiiskoi subkul'tury v Rossii XX veka*, Moscow, Glagol, 1998.

tution, by way of the 2020 amendments, which not only revised almost one third of the 137 articles and notoriously “reset” Vladimir Putin’s mandates to zero, but introduced unambiguous and prescriptive references regarding the Russian national social and cultural identity (language, culture, religion, historical role of the country, family, childcare)<sup>5</sup>. In particular, article 72 clearly states that *marriage* unequivocally defines «a union of a male and a female»<sup>6</sup>.

If any (good) citizen of a State is to comply with the principles enshrined in the Constitution, it goes without saying that any Russian holding a divergent opinion about what family and marriage are is to be regarded, at least, as a *bad* citizen. However, is there any chance for a homosexual or queer person to be a good citizen of Russia? In a sense, there is.

### Who is the *good citizen*?

To quote a poet, a (good) citizen is «a son worthy of his Fatherland» [*otechestva dostoinyi syn*]. In mid-19th century, Nikolai Nekrasov, recuperating the famous words of Decembrist Kondraty Ryleev «I am not a poet, I am a citizen» and developing specific traits of Pushkin’s oeuvre<sup>7</sup>, initiated a fertile line of «civic poetry» [*grazhdanskaya poeziya*] in Russian literature that still proves pro-

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<sup>5</sup> See also Di Gregorio A., *Dinamiche di contesto e caratteristiche generali della Legge di Emendamento della Costituzione della Russia del 14 marzo 2020. La riforma costituzionale russa del 2020*, in *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie: Diritti, Istituzioni e Società*, 2020, 1, 140-176.

<sup>6</sup> The Russian Constitution is available for consultation online: <https://rm.coe.int/constitution-of-the-russian-federation-en/1680a1a237> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>7</sup> Gippius V., *Nekrasov v istorii russkoi poezii XIX veka*, Moscow, Nauka, 1966, 233-234.

ductive, if simply as an evocative and powerful reference: one of the most successful satirical tv shows in the first 2010s was Dmitry Bykov and Mikhail Efremov's *Citizen Poet* [*Grazhdanin Poet*], whose title is directly indebted to Nekrasov's poem devoted to the *Poet and the Citizen* [*Poet i grazhdanin*, 1855]<sup>8</sup>.

Nekrasov's immortalizing coining of such association between poetry and its civic role reflects and evocatively summarizes an idea that other poets and scholars have suggested as a peculiar trait of Russian culture before and after he did. Yuri Lotman in particular observed that what differentiates the Russian and Western European cultures is, among other things, the societal attitude towards the work of the poet and towards that of other artists: while in Western Europe the poet is equal to the other artists, since the eighteenth century Russian culture perceives the painter, the architect, the musician and the actor as "low" professions suitable for serfs, freedmen, or foreigners; poetry is separated from the other arts, being a noble and "divine" occupation (and therefore, also unpaid). The poet, in this context, is the bearer of a higher truth [*vysshaya istina*], and his Word comes from above. However, in order to fulfill his high civic mission, the poet must also possess some special authority: if in the first half of the eighteenth century (for Mikhail Lomonosov, for instance) the inspiration for the poet's Word came from the State, in the other half of the century «the public authority of the State declines. At the same time, poetry separates from the State and transforms itself first into an active power, and then into an opposing force to the State. Poetry comes to occupy the vacant place of spiritual authority», an authority that was "humiliated" by

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<sup>8</sup> See also Turoma S., *When satire does not subvert. Citizen Poet as nostalgia for Soviet dissidence*, in *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia*, eds. Beumers B., Etkind A., Gurova O., Turoma S., London-New York, Routledge, 2018, 221-242.

Peter the Great, and whose conceptual structures were somehow indirectly transferred to poetry – hence its quasi-divine nature<sup>9</sup>.

This shift in the origin of the poet's authority creates, however, a conceptual problem with no easy solution: if poets are invested with the greatest, quasi-divine consideration in society, yet their Word is but an opposing force to the State, their work discredits and questions the official discourse and its assumptions, their voices invite the audience to critically reconsider, confute, and possibly rebel against the very State they thrive in, should they be considered *good* citizens of their country? Of course, it depends – good for whom, from what perspective, in the context of what type of country, and under the power of what ruling elite.

The renowned writer Vladimir Sorokin recently published a personal comment on the *Guardian*, in which he draws clear-cut parallels between the type of power inaugurated by Ivan the Terrible and the ones that followed it in time – something he defines as Russia's «main tragedy»:

In Russia, power is a pyramid. This pyramid was built by Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century – an ambitious, brutal tsar overrun by paranoia and a great many other vices. With the help of his personal army – the *oprichnina* – he cruelly and bloodily divided the Russian state into power and people, friend and foe, and the gap between them became the deepest of moats. [...] The occupying power had to be strong, cruel, unpredictable and incomprehensible to the people. The people should have no choice but to obey and worship it. [...] Paradoxically, the principle of Russian power hasn't even remotely changed in the last five centuries<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Lotman Yu., *Russkaya literatura poslepetrovskoi epokhi i khristianskaya traditsiya*, in *Id., O poetakh i poezii*, Sankt Peterburg, Iskustvo-SPb, 1996, 255-256.

<sup>10</sup> Sorokin V., *Vladimir Putin sits atop a crumbling pyramid of power*, in *The Guardian*, 27 February 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/27/vladimir-putin-russia-ukraine-power> (last accessed: 29.03.2022). Sorokin is famous for his dystopian novels which describe a near future full of medieval traits (in particular his dilogy, *Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006, and *Sugar Kremlin*, 2008).

Such «occupying power» not only cannot but dislike and disapprove of any opposing force (whether represented by a quasi-divine sect of poets or not), but is also keen on producing sets of prescriptive *texts* (semiotically intended) that clearly delineate the ideal good citizenship. The 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution are but the latest example of this dogmatic process.

### **What is *tradition*?**

In the last few years, the Russian legislation and the official political discourse have incorporated a growing number of expressions linked with the idea of “tradition”, yet failing to clearly define what tradition is in its essence, but rather presenting it under an unequivocally positive light. Such conceptual ambiguity has generated and fed an adaptable doctrine open to contradictions that Marlène Laruelle defines as an «explicit but blurry narrative of conservatism»<sup>11</sup>, which is based on «a few common basic ideological tenets such as anti-Westernism, antiliberalism, and ‘traditional values’»<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Laruelle M., *Putin’s Regime and the Ideological Market. A Difficult Balancing Game*, in *Carnegie*, 16 March 2017: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/16/putin-s-regime-and-ideological-market-difficult-balancing-game-pub-68250> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>12</sup> *Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin’s Russia*, eds. Bernsand N. and Törnquist-Plewa B., Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2019, 4. Indeed, while in the early 1990s Russia seemed interested in approaching the “common European home” envisioned (yet in a different context) by Mikhail Gorbachev, over time the Russian power has grown more and more skeptical towards its Western neighbor (mostly due to diplomatic failures at the international level), projecting on society a distorted idea of an alleged European decadence and immorality. According to this view, Russia sets itself apart as a champion of morality and “traditional values” (presented at times as rooted in the Christian-European tradition). This national project, which clearly and consciously distanced the Russian path from the «common European home», has however strengthened in the 2010s, while, «by the time the 2008 international

It is in this context that in 2013 the so called “gay propaganda” law was introduced: namely, it is a federal law for the purpose of protecting children from information advocating for a denial of *traditional* family values, and it prohibits the spreading of «propaganda of *non-traditional* sexual relationships» among minors. I am reluctant to explain such legislative prescriptive tendency with a supposed intrinsic normativity towards which «Russian society tends» as Brian James Baer suggests<sup>13</sup>. I rather consider the Soviet normative experience a more suitable key to understanding, as

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financial crisis hit Russia, the Russian government had no clear strategic direction» (Jonson L., *Russia: Culture, Cultural Policy, and the Swinging Pendulum of Politics*, in *Cultural and Political Imaginaries*, cit., 22). No matter how strongly the Putin and Medvedev presidencies stressed the regained unity and stability of the country, by the end of the first decade of the new millennium support for both was falling under the pressure of problems that seized a society that was still coming to terms with the disappearance of welfarism and the emergence of new and predatory power relations. From this angle, the 2000s will not go down in history as the decade that marked the end of the post-Soviet epoch: it was a transitory decade still indebted with the legacy of the collapse of the previous system, yet looking forward to making Russia «[reemerge] as an economic and military hegemon» and Russians «[be] reborn as the self-confident representatives of an established social and political order» (Platt K., *The Post-Soviet Is Over: On Reading the Ruins*, in *Republic of Letters*, 2009, 1, 2). The political response put in practice by Presidents Medvedev and Putin aimed at finding a «more ‘dynamic’ conservative approach», a «militant authoritarian conservatism» (Jonson L., *Russia*, cit., 25) that could embody the much sought for “national idea” to make Russia great again (and wipe away its post-Soviet dust once and for all). At the Valdai Discussion Club annual meeting held in 2013, Vladimir Putin underlined that it was high time that Russia found an answer to the questions «*Kto my?*» [Who are we?], «*Kem my khotim byt’?*» [Who do we want to be?]. To accomplish the task, like anywhere where a nation had to be formed from scratch, culture and, in particular, the elaboration of a single historical narrative were the best candidates in formulating a new state ideology (on this topic, see in particular Jonson L., *Russia*, cit.).

<sup>13</sup> Baer B.J., *Other Russias. Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 9.

Dan Healey maintains: «modern Russian homophobia [...] originated in the 1930s in the law and policing practices set in train by the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin»<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, it also makes sense observing that “gender politics” is directly linked to the idea of the nation-state, to its creation and modelling<sup>15</sup> (homosexuality and queerness in this context are catch-all topics subject to great and volatile metonymy, as Baer correctly points out<sup>16</sup>). As the Russian ruling elite aimed to make the country reemerge from the savage, “wild” 1990s, and from the socio-economic *cul-de-sac* it went through in its first two post-Soviet decades, the Kremlin inaugurated the crafting of a new national idea, a new suitable idea of the Russian nation. Within this semiotic policy, gender politics played

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<sup>14</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., xi.

<sup>15</sup> See Timm A.R. and Sanborn J.A., *Gender, sex and the shaping of modern Europe: a history from the French Revolution to the present day*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> «One is immediately struck by the signifying power of homosexuality in contemporary Russia, where it has been deployed in literature, cinema, and the press to discuss not only the “usual” issues such as sexual pleasure and decadence, normalcy and vice, and masculinity and femininity, but also such issues as individuality, aesthetics, spirituality, victimhood, and, yes, even Russianness. [...] homosexuality in Russia today belongs in large part to a broader, much contested discourse on democracy, liberalism, personal freedom, and modernity. [...] In Russia homosexuality almost never simply denotes same-sex desire or specific sex acts». Baer B.J., *Other Russias*, cit., 3. Moreover, the stress on the topic of homosexuality in the Russian official discourse is also used as a way to distract the electorates from socio-economic problems, to superficially justify demographic issues (low birth rates and health issues, for example), to “protect” young people while “defending morality” (in 2002 the Duma discussed a bill entitled «On the defense of morality»), and to avoid examining crucial issues related to “masculinity” and male behavior in the late Soviet and post-Soviet context (see Zdravomyslova E., Temkina A., *Krizis maskulinnosti v pozdnesovetskoi diskurse*, in *O muzhe(n)stvennosti*, ed. Ushakin S., Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002, 432-51; Yusupova M., *Masculinity, Criminality, and Russian Men*, in *Sextures*, 2015, 3, 46-61).

a role, and the fact that in the first post-Soviet years «the “first generation” of Russia’s divided gay and lesbian movement largely failed to ignite a national discussion about queer citizenship»<sup>17</sup> did not promote the emergence of a more inclusive idea of nation and citizenship.

When crafting the present idea (or ideology) of a nation, history came at hand, however misused and distorted for the intended purposes<sup>18</sup>. As a result, the very narrative of history underwent a shift – a shift developed in order to trace an inclusive yet unquestionable thousand-year Russian history that had to comprise the Soviet era, and that could work as a justification for the present time and for the government’s authoritarian policies, re-interpreted as necessary milestones on a millenary line of political “Russian-ness”<sup>19</sup>. Tradition, in this context, served as a fundamental ideological basis, fulfilling two purposes at a time: on the one hand, it justifies present tendencies in diachronic terms, while on the other, it responds to the ideological need for the spreading of a generic anti-Western sentiment (so as to say, “our tradition makes us different, and we must be proud of this difference”). However, tradition – maybe even more than history – is subject to free and controversial rewritings as well.

A seminal work in the field of queer (gay) Russian literature is the anthology *Out of the blue* edited by Kevin Moss in 1997, which shed brand new light on the homosexual theme that can be found both in the classics (from Aleksandr Pushkin to Lev Tolstoy, from Nikolai Gogol to Mikhail Kuzmin) and in contemporary works of Russian authors. Even though the editor underlines that «several

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<sup>17</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 112.

<sup>18</sup> See the already quoted work by Jonson L., *Russia*, cit.

<sup>19</sup> *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia. Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, eds. Suslov M. and Bodin P.A., London-New York, Tauris, 2020, 321.



of these selections also marginalize homosexuality by setting it in another culture (Pushkin's *Imitation of the Arabic*, Leontiev's story set in Crete) or restricting it to a childhood phase (Lermontov's cadet school, Tolstoy's *Childhood*)»<sup>20</sup>, the anthology comes with an enlightening introduction by Simon Karlinsky, which clearly refutes any assumption of a traditional (or even orthodox) homophobic sentiment in Russian society:

The Muscovite period may have been the era of the greatest visibility and tolerance for male homosexuality that the world had seen since the days of ancient Greece and Rome. During the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, foreign travelers and ambassadors, coming from countries where "sodomites" were subjected to torture, burning at the stake, and life-long incarcerations, repeatedly registered their amazement and shock at the unconcealed manifestations of homosexual behavior by Russian men of every social class. [...] Turberville visited Moscow with a diplomatic mission in 1568, the time of one of Ivan the Terrible's worst political purges. The poet was struck not by the carnage, however, but by the open homosexuality of the Russian peasants. [...]

Eastern Orthodox Christianity considered various forms of sexual deviance not as crimes, but as sins, subject to religious jurisdiction. What Eve Levin established was that in this area the main concern was not so much the sex of the participants or the organs involved, but the relative position of the partners during the sex act. The woman below and the man above was permitted as the "natural" way; reversal of this position was "unnatural" and a sin. Homosexual and lesbian contacts were thus sinful, the sin being of the same magnitude as the reversal of positions in heterosexual intercourse. It was of no concern to civil authorities and it could be expiated by going to confession, doing an assigned number of prostrations, and abstaining from meat and milk products for several months. Summing up the testimony of foreign and native observers of Muscovite Russia, the authoritative nineteenth-century historian Sergei Soloviov wrote: «Nowhere, either in the Orient or in the West, was [homosexuality] taken as lightly as in Russia»<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Moss K., *Out of the Blue. Russia's Hidden Gay Literature. An Anthology*, San Francisco, Gay Sunshine Press, 1997, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Karlinsky S., *Russia's Gay Literature and History*, in *Out of the Blue*, cit., 16, 18.

Recuperating Vasily Rozanov's theory of homosexuality as «central to Christian asceticism»<sup>22</sup>, this anthology also suggests a topic noted by Dan Healey too: the paradoxical “traditionality” of the image of the homosexual or queer person as the «suffering martyr, or as tortured soul with spiritual gifts or refinement»<sup>23</sup>.

In light of the above, the use of the epithet “traditional” (or its opposite “non-traditional”) in the current Russian political and legislative discourse not only erases an important side of its real socio-cultural tradition, but it is used to «assert that the range of sexual activity under consideration is novel, alien, and by implication not indigenously Russian»<sup>24</sup>. Being “non-traditional” or living “non-traditionally” equals being something other to (and possibly, intrinsically dangerous for) the contemporary Russian nation.

### Great artists, bad citizens?

«There is no proof of Tchaikovsky's homosexuality» [*net nikakikh dokazatel'stv gomoseksual'nosti Chaikovskogo*]: these words were pronounced by the former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky in an interview to Interfax in September 2013<sup>25</sup> (the year in which the “gay propaganda law” was introduced). Medinsky was referring to a well-known significant trait in the composer's biography<sup>26</sup>, adopting a common strategy for the Russian power that ne-

<sup>22</sup> Moss K., *Out of the Blue*, cit., 11.

<sup>23</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 113.

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Barabash E., *Net nikakikh dokazatel'stv gomoseksual'nosti Chaikovskogo*, in *Interfax*, 17 September 2013: <https://www.interfax.ru/interview/329409> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>26</sup> The world of classical music is full of such cases, however, as a recent volume has demonstrated: Ciammarughi L., *Non tocchiamo questo tasto. Musica classica e mondo queer*, Milano, Edizioni Curci, 2021.

gates the obvious and pragmatically abuses of certain specific words (Ukraine's full-scale invasion in February 2022 was accompanied by plenty of such arguments).

Tchaikovsky's case is a typical example of queer artistry in the Russian culture, and it was a «widely circulating argument»<sup>27</sup> even among homosexuals before 1917. In his volume Healey devotes an entire chapter to another renowned homosexual who – as his diary confirms – «identified with the great Russian composer [Tchaikovsky], suggesting that his own talent was inextricably linked to his sexual deviance»<sup>28</sup>: Vadim Kozin, a successful singer who was first sentenced in 1945 over a combination of charges (propaganda against Soviet power in wartime, sex offenses with minors, and sodomy), then in 1959 was arrested again for homosexuality offenses, and lived in Magadan until his death in 1994. «So what if Tchaikovsky violated hypocritical morality, but he was a good, kind-hearted, sympathetic man. The people loved him» – he wrote in his diary<sup>29</sup> – «You can't fool the people, the wise Russian people!».

Even though in Soviet times the “crime” of homosexuality (or sodomy) was used against artists mainly for politically charged cases (in order to destroy their reputation)<sup>30</sup>, authorities used many other ways to persecute queer intellectuals – writer Evgeny Kharitonov's biography (1941-1981) is telling in this sense<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 85.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Quoted *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Other famous cases are that of director Sergei Paradzhanov or poet Gennady Trifonov.

<sup>31</sup> «As an underground writer and a gay man, Kharitonov was under double pressure from the KGB and the police. In 1979 he was suspected in the murder of a gay friend and interrogated. It may have been this added pressure that led to his premature death». Moss K., *Out of the Blue*, cit., 196.

Questioning the homophobic attitude widespread in the Soviet and Russian dominant discourse, Kharitonov for his part – as Kozin did in his diary – polemically underlined the link between beauty (or art in general) and the queer person: «What you find beautiful is in part established by us, but you don't always guess this»<sup>32</sup>. His *Leaflet* (*Listovka*) ends in apocalyptic – menacing, or simply prophetic? – tones: «the more visible we are, the closer the End of the World»<sup>33</sup>. The world Kharitonov hinted at here was, presumably, that of the «stagnant morality of our Russian Soviet Fatherland»<sup>34</sup>, as he describes it in his «gay manifesto»<sup>35</sup>. However, despite his words, this world still exists today, and similarly to the Soviet system it has gradually adjusted its apparatus of laws in order to move this menacing “end” further ahead in time. Or, as Masha Gessen suggested, to see «the spectacle of history shifting abruptly into reverse»<sup>36</sup>.

Yet, today something has changed: the “second generation”<sup>37</sup> of Russian queer activists and artists has embraced a clearer stance and showed a stronger resistance to the system<sup>38</sup>, however growingly aggressive and suffocating. This generation comprises young people born mainly (but not only) between 1985 and 1995, of-

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<sup>32</sup> Kharitonov E., *Leaflet*, in *Out of the Blue*, cit., 225.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> So Dan Healey defines Kharitonov's *Leaflet*. Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 101.

<sup>36</sup> Gessen M., *My life as an out gay person in Russia*, in *The Guardian*, 15 November 2013: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/15/life-as-out-gay-russia> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>37</sup> With “first generation” I'd refer instead to queer people active in the late Soviet and post-Soviet context of the 1990s.

<sup>38</sup> From Healey analysis, it emerges that instead no clear gay or queer activism was present in the diverse panorama of dissent inside the Soviet Union. Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 94.

ten far from Moscow and Petersburg (a biographical trait that is not irrelevant)<sup>39</sup>. Some of them are still in the process of personal formation and find on the Internet the primary outlet for their expression. These young people are often well educated and trained not only in literary but also in philosophical matters, regardless of their family social background. They have assimilated the set of notions propounded by post-structuralism and deconstructive criticism in their most diverse forms (including feminism, gender and queer studies), and even if not all of them have a direct experience of life in Europe or North America, they are well acquainted with the characteristics and issues typical of the so-called Western society. This generation has witnessed and actively participated in the increasing socio-political upheavals that culminated in particular in 2011-2012 (Bolotnaya square protests being a turning point in this), which determined «a deep crisis of [the] symbolical orders» in Russian society<sup>40</sup>. From that moment onwards, the claim of one's own "politicality" in the creative act has taken on new legitimacy and value in Russian culture, marking a profound break with the declarations of apparent apoliticality expressed by the members of the avant-garde of the late Soviet era<sup>41</sup>. Such "political" claim stands

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<sup>39</sup> «Most of them were born in little towns in Siberia, the Urals, or Russia's Far East, and moved to Moscow or St. Petersburg as teenagers. They witnessed the disintegration of the Soviet social order. They watched as the ruins of Soviet-enforced modernization became intertwined with post-Soviet scenes of alienation and economic decay in provincial cities and towns built around Soviet military plants and factories, that remained unwanted and unclaimed till the new revival of the arms race». Kukulin I., *Cultural Shifts in Russia since 2010: Messianic Cynicism and Paradigms of Artistic Resistance*, in *Russian Literature*, 2018, 96-98, 244.

<sup>40</sup> *Ivi*, 222.

<sup>41</sup> «[B]ack in the 1980s, as well as during Perestroika and in the 1990s, writers who were close to non-conformist circles or influenced by them preached the superiority of literature that was independent from any kind of political or ideological position». Lipovetsky M., *The Formal is Political*, in *SEEJ*, 2016, 60, 2, 185.

in open contrast with the “cynicism” prevalent in today’s Russia, or at least to a certain “law of the strongest” propagated by official rhetoric<sup>42</sup>. The diffusion of artistic forms of resistance responds today to the need to counter an imposed normativity, the denial of multiplicity and pluralism, the denigration of marginality and weakness, while emphasizing the natural plurality of human experience and creativity.

Beyond the natural divergences among the different personalities and artistic projects, what emerges from an initial analysis is the common theme of personal or (more often) collective experience of trauma or violence that makes its way in more and less explicit forms into these works<sup>43</sup>. The current artistic and poetic interest in such a topic can be identified in several converging lines of reasoning (not necessarily in the following order): 1. the assimilation of post-structuralist and deconstructive perspectives (including notions from gender and queer studies); 2. the natural evolution of the Russian literary tradition, which has always been open to defamiliarizing points of view and to the pursuit of a higher level of *istina*, truth; 3. the reflection of crucial political and social issues; 4. the personal quest for a poetic language able to express «the ineffable level of perception»<sup>44</sup>. The main artistic ground today is poetry (that “Nekrasovian” *civic poetry* that finds now new fertile ground) – which replaced prose in the analysis of historical trauma, once its

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<sup>42</sup> See also Lipovetsky M., *Intelligentsia and cynicism: political metamorphoses of postmodernism*, in *Russian Journal of Communication*, 2018, 1, 1-18.

<sup>43</sup> See also Lvovsky S., *Distinguishing Trauma*, in *Russian Studies in Literature*, 2018, 54, 1-3, 192-220.

<sup>44</sup> Kukulin I., *Interv'yu s Il'ei Kukulinym (Besedovala Evgeniya Suslova)*, in *Palimpsest*, 2019, 3, 105.

traditional prerogative<sup>45</sup> – but also the innovative forms of dramatic art (*New Drama*)<sup>46</sup>. Finally, as Healey underlines, «this second generation [is] more committed to low-key community support and carefully targeted public interventions»<sup>47</sup>, also in regard to LGBT issues.

In this novel socio-cultural context, the introduction of the law against the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships” in 2013 had – paradoxically – a powerful reverse effect: by officially suffocating debates and limiting the production and diffusion of queer material in Russia, this legislative document turned LGBT issues into a central topic and a key axis for socio-cultural resistance, however risky and exposed to criminal charges. It is in this context that once again queerness underwent a profound metamorphical process, embracing the most diverse instances of democracy and liberalism.

### Reasserting citizenship

In a recent study, Roman has suggested that what this new generation of poets is enacting is the reversal of the apparent status of vulnerability in the current socio-political context of Russia, as they consciously transform it into a special kind of “agency”: following Judith Butler’s reconceptualization of vulnerability, Utkin states that such a «deliberate exposure to potential hate and violence –

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<sup>45</sup> Kukulin I., *Sozdat’ cheloveka, poka ty ne chelovek...*, in *Novyi mir*, 2010, 1, [http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi\\_mi/2010/1/ku11.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2010/1/ku11.html) (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>46</sup> See the already quoted Lipovetsky M., *The Formal is Political*, cit. In regard to queer theater, see also the anthology *Contemporary Queer Plays by Russian Playwrights*, ed. Klepikova T., London-New York, Bloomsbury, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Healey D., *Russian Homophobia*, cit., 8.

the act of being different – connotes agency»<sup>48</sup>. I would go further and suggest that this specific agency works in a twofold manner: on the one hand, it form- and content-wise disrupts normativity (both at the level of language and themes, e.g. questioning the use of the term “tradition” and the notion of masculinity), while on the other it redefines a cultural space that is more inclusive and diverse than the one that is top-down designed and propagandized. This agency is at once a destructive and constructive force that reasserts the “citizenship” of so far excluded socio-cultural strata and discourses within Russian life. In semiotic terms, if the Constitution is a prescriptive text that activates a hierarchical, immanent, and didactic mechanism and thus responds – in Yuri Lotman’s words – to the «Self-Other model»<sup>49</sup>, the queer addressee, although being supposedly deprived of any agency in this regard, consciously and creatively rejects this model and carves out agency for the rewriting of this and other socio-cultural prescriptive texts.

The ways queer artists enact this process vary a lot. Dmitry Kuzmin is, for example, openly assertive in his critique of the purported “traditional values” in his 2013 poem *On the day of the Russian literary congress* [*V den’ rossiiskogo literaturnogo sobraniya*]:

ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши духовные скрепы,  
 ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши традиционные ценности,  
 ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши крокодиловы слёзы  
 о самой читающей (и самой расстреливающей писателей) стране,  
 ебал я в рот и в жопу вашу «глубокую тревогу»  
 об «оскудении мысли и, как следствие, одичании душ»

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<sup>48</sup> Utkin R., *Queer Vulnerability and Russian Poetry after the ‘Gay Propaganda’ Law*, in *The Russian Review*, 2021, 80, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Lotman Yu., *Avtokommunikatsiya: “Ya” i “Drugoi” kak adresaty (O dvukh modelyakh kommunikatsii v sisteme kul’tury)*, in *Id.*, *Semiosfera*, Saint Petersburg, Iskusstvo, 2000, 164-165.



у народа, ежедневно растлеваемого официальными media,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши секции и пленарные заседания,  
ваши комитеты и комиссии, банкеты и фуршеты,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу вашу фамильную гордость,  
крыловские гуси, годные лишь на жаркое<sup>50</sup>

I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your spiritual bounds,  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your traditional values,  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your crocodile tears  
about the country that reads the most (and kills its writers the most),  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your “deep concern”  
about the “impoverishment of thought and, consequently, the degradation of the  
souls”  
of people who are molested on a daily basis by the official media,  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your sections and plenary sessions,  
your committees and commissions, banquets and receptions,  
I fuck in the mouth and in the ass your family pride,  
Krylov’s geese, fit only to be roasted

Transgender poet Friedrich Chernyshov more personally describes the attitude of people he faces in his everyday life in a poem written to publicly support artist Yulia Tsvetkova, charged in November 2019 with producing “pornography” for sharing her drawings of the female body online:

молодая женщина в метро  
заслоняет от меня своего ребенка  
не смотри говорит не смотри  
приставляет ладонь словно шору  
не смотри на него мой козленочек  
вдруг ты сам таким станешь  
все люди с цветными волосами пидоры<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted from Kuzmin’s blog: <https://dkuzmin.livejournal.com/531973.html> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

<sup>51</sup> The poem is available online: <https://feminisms.co/tsvetkova/5#3> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

a young woman in the metro  
 shields her baby from me  
 don't look she says don't look  
 she holds up her palm like a shield  
 don't look at him my little baby goat  
 you'd suddenly become like that yourself  
 all people with colored hair are faggots

Feminist poet Galina Rymbu chooses to describe a gay friend, Zhenya (whose name gives this poem its title), presenting this figure as a positive hero disrupting general assumptions (cooking borscht, for example, a “traditional” female activity) and asserting novel, more equal, and inclusive models:

И тут пришёл Женья вместе с мужем Сашей.  
 Он принёс с собой большую кастрюлю с борщом –  
 сам приготовил и захотел поделиться.

[...]

А Женья рассказывал про свой борщ,  
 как он его делал, и вообще, как он любит готовить и приглашать домой  
 гостей-активистов: выпить немного, поесть, передохнуть, очнуться.

[...]

Женья Павловский:  
 гей с левыми убеждениями,  
 бывший профсоюзный активист,  
 разнорабочий,  
 повар, строитель,  
 человек из  
 Дагестана,  
 где...

Он, сам того не зная, многим со мной поделился.  
 На самом деле,  
 всё важное в нём сошлось.  
 Открытый, витальный, красноречивый,  
 для меня именно он стал примером будущего,  
 надеждой настоящего,  
 я так и думала про него:

## ВОТ НАСТОЯЩИЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИОНЕР

не с книжным засушенным знанием  
(хотя и не без знания теории в тех местах,  
где она может быть реально полезна)  
но с силой опыта, силой самой жизни,  
которая может перевернуть любой мир,  
смахнуть любой авторитарный режим,

как пёрышко с лица,  
как ниточку с плеча друга<sup>52</sup>.

And then Zhenya came in with his husband, Sasha.  
He brought a big pot of borscht with him:  
he had cooked it himself and wanted to share it.

[...]

And Zhenya was telling about his borscht,  
how he prepared it, and in general, how he loves cooking and inviting home  
guests-activists: have a little drink, eat, take a break, wake up.

[...]

Zhenya Pavlovsky:  
a gay with leftist convictions,  
a former trade union activist,  
a handyman,  
a cook, a construction worker,  
a man from  
Dagestan,  
where...

He, without knowing it himself, shared a lot with me.  
Indeed,  
everything important came together in his figure.  
Open, vital, eloquent,  
he was, for me, an example of the future,  
the hope of the present,  
that's what I thought of him:

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<sup>52</sup> The poem is available online: <https://feminisms.co/tsvetkova/5#3> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

THIS IS A REAL REVOLUTIONARY...

not with a bookish, dried-up knowledge  
(although not lacking theoretical knowledge in areas  
where it can be really useful)  
but with the power of experience, the power of life itself,  
which can turn any world upside down,  
sweep away any authoritarian regime,

like a feather from one's face,  
like a string from a friend's shoulder.

In her *Songs about love and motherland* [*Pesni o liubvi i rodine*, 2018], Rimma Agliullina clearly states that poets have the right to «sing» their own country in something other than an imposed celebrative «anthem»:

если каждый первый мужчина этой страны  
желает мне зла

есть  
у меня  
дом?  
не каждая песня о Родине – это гимн<sup>53</sup>.

if every single man in this country  
wishes me bad

do I  
have  
a home?

not every song about the Motherland is an anthem.

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<sup>53</sup> The poem is available online: [https://45parallel.net/rimma\\_agliullina/pis-mo\\_pered\\_ischeznoveniem/](https://45parallel.net/rimma_agliullina/pis-mo_pered_ischeznoveniem/) (last accessed: 29.03.2022).

The reassertion of a legitimate citizenship for queer discourses in Russian society riskily proposed by these socio-cultural *artists*<sup>54</sup> (apart from the quoted poets, we can also recall – at least – Oksana Vasyakina, Yulia Podlubnova, Lolita Agamalova, Lida Yusupova, Elena Kostyleva, Dariya Serenko, Aleksandr Ilyanen, Ilya Danishevsky, Aleksandr Averbukh), though denied and persecuted by the official discourse, embodies a different modality of being a Russian citizen today: these artists are actively working to craft a better nation for all, in which they will simply cease to be *bad* citizens.

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<sup>54</sup> The word “artivism” was coined by artist Anton Nikolaev: Nikolaev A., *Ob artivizme, provintsii i politike*, in *Dialog iskusstv*, 2011, 5: <https://di.mmoma.ru/news?mid=2608&id=1070> (last accessed: 29.03.2022).