

# Homophobia as a manipulative tool in Russian pro-state media

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## 1. Introduction

The constitutional referendum held in Russia in 2020 included an amendment that defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman on a constitutional level, reflecting the state's rising radical conservative ideology and posing a greater danger to the LGBTQ+ community. The referendum was also seen by oppositional media as a means for President Vladimir Putin to potentially extend his presidency until 2036. This paper will analyze the use of homophobia as a political tool in Russian media, particularly in relation to the 2020 referendum. It will examine how pro-state media has created homophobic narratives and contributed to normalizing discrimination against same-sex relations while distracting voters' attention from an amendment designed to benefit Putin. Understanding the media's role in this process can provide insight into the ongoing fight for LGBTQ+ equality in Russia, where the rights of people with "non-traditional" sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) are taken as a national threat. Considering that recent changes in Russian legislation complicated and restricted the work of Russian scholars in the field of SOGI and feminist studies, this project aims to contribute to a critical reading of the events of late Putin's regime and its ideology of "the Russian world."

## 2. Previous studies

Recent radical conservative changes to Russian legislation (see Table 1) have restricted the work of volunteers who support victims of homophobia, as well as educational, informative, and research activities on gender and sexuality, as they are viewed by officials as a threat to traditional family values. Sleptsov (2017) explains that the Russian government uses laws "to create a sense of national unity in the face of the other portrayed as the collective West" and "to divert public attention from domestic problems" (p. 156). These changes, which are fueled by the ideology of heteropatriarchy (Davydova, 2019), regulate gender and sexuality discourses, making those who deviate from traditional Russian values vulnerable to discrimination. Wilkinson (2014) notes that homophobia "functions as a Slavophile political shorthand for national identity and traditional values," while Sleptsov (2017) states that "Russian homosexuals are hostages of complicated foreign policy games between Russia and the West" (p. 145). This statement can also be applied to the LGBT+ community, as well as other marginalized groups, who suffer from the radical conservative ideology that was employed by the Kremlin in the 2000s to unite the nation in the face of economic crisis, NATO expansion, and other challenges (Stähle, 2015; Sleptsov, 2017; Davydova, 2019).

The influence of militarism on masculinity in post-Soviet Russia was investigated by Eichler (2012). The researcher notes that "President Vladimir Putin (2000-2008) aimed to restore society's faith in the military and its personnel and stressed that military service was a duty of male citizens. The Putin regime itself was made up of significant numbers of militarized men originating from the security services." Masculinity becomes militarized – the compulsory conscription system requires that masculinity be achieved through military initiation, as reflected in the common phrase "ne slujil - ne mujik" ("you are not a man if you have not served"), which was discussed in Sperling (2014). As a result, any other notions of masculinity that differ from "a soldier," such as "a deserter" and "a gay," are devalued or marginalized. The latter is also placed in the same category as pedophilia by Russian lawmakers, as seen in the law prohibiting the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships, pedophilia, and sex transition from November 24th, 2022.

Previous studies mentioned above and other notable works (e.g., Baer, 2009; Kondakov, 2011; Bluhm & Brand, 2018) create a solid base

Table 1. Homophobic legislation in Russia

Year	Content
2012	the public "law against gay propaganda among children"
2020	the constitutional referendum. Beside the controversial alteration which allowed President Putin to possibly extend his presidency for two more terms, the amendments also defined <u>wedlock as a union between a man and a woman</u> , thus preserving traditional values on constitutional level.
2022	Russian lawmakers have approved extension of <u>a ban on the promotion of "nontraditional" sexual relations to include adults</u> and outlawing the portrayal of gay relationships in books, films, the media, and the internet.

for understanding the social, historical, and political background for further investigations on the topic. However, most of these studies have focused on materials from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, leaving the 2020s unexamined. While Eichler (2012) explored militarized masculinity in the context of the Chechen Wars (1994-1996, 1999-2009) and Davydova (2019) analyzed codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity in Putin's Russia in the context of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the manipulation of homophobic discourse as a political tool in Russia of 2020s has yet to be thoroughly investigated. It is important to continue studying hegemonic discourse in Russia as it continuously evolves with changing sociopolitical conditions in the country and serves to justify or legitimize them. With this in mind, this project aims to examine the semiotics of SOGI-based discriminatory discourse in Russia during the significant event of the 2020 Constitutional referendum, specifically how sexuality and gender discourses are employed and manipulated by the Russian state in the later stages of Putin's presidency, using media as a significant propaganda tool.

### 3. Methodology and data

Applying the combined methods of critical discourse analysis (Unger et al., 2016) to the context of the video and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022), this study aims to reveal how various modes and semantic choices were employed to construct homophobic message of the video and create a false reality, where a conservative voter was in power to prohibit same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex families.

“Will you choose this kind of Russia?” – political ad campaign video for promoting constitutional amendments of 2020, produced by Federal news agency and media-group “Patriot”, which are named as pro-state “media fabric” by Russian oppositional media. The events are set in future Russia of 2025. Two women who work at orphanage are glad that a little boy, Petenka, gets adopted. The foster father greets his son and takes him outside to meet his “new mom” - the second male parent, who is portrayed with characteristics that stereotypically attributed to gay people. Moreover, the second parent brings out a dress as a gift for his foster son (Figure 1). The child gets upset (Figure 2), and two women are disgusted and helpless to change the situation. The problem stated in the video is that if marriage won't be restricted to union of a man and a woman, this will lead to children getting adopted into «non-traditional» families. The solution proposed by a narrator is to vote for amendments to avoid this kind of scenario.



Figure 1



Figure 2

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1 Manipulative nature of political ad-campaign video

On March 10, 2020, Valentina Tereshkova, Duma Deputy and the first female astronaut, legendary figure of the Soviet and post-Soviet space (Figure 3), proposed either to lift limits on presidency terms or not to take into count all prior terms of the incumbent (and previous) president at the time of amendment enforcement. President Putin kindly declined the suggestion of indefinite presidency terms but agreed with the second part of Tereshkova's proposal – only if the Russian Constitutional Court would not find any violations. The Court did not, and the amendment, that lately got widely known as “zeroing” of Putin's presidential term clocks, was added to 205 others. This amendment allows Putin to run for election in 2024 and possibly stay in power until 2036.

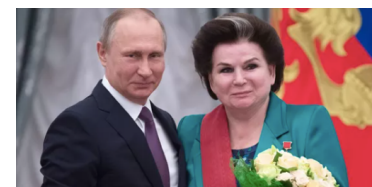


Figure 3

(photo credit: РИА Новости)

The problem here is that Russian citizens couldn't choose which amendments they support and which they do not, since national vote included one sole question: “Do you approve of the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation?”. Instead, the campaign heavily promoted amendments with populist content, such as enshrinement of social guarantees or preservation of the conservative Orthodox values. Hutcheson & McAllister (2021) stated that: “The ‘zeroing’ of Putin's term count was the most politically significant reform approved in the referendum, but it hardly featured at all in the actual campaign. The issue was buried amongst a myriad of other constitutional changes that codified social guarantees and conservative values into the country's basic law.”

Additionally, it is necessary to note that the existing legislation in Russia at the moment of amendment enforcement already prohibits adoption by same-sex married couples and mentions marriage only as a union of man and woman (see Family Code of Russian Federation from 29.12.1995 № 223-ФЗ). This fact confirms manipulative nature of the ad video, since it depicts impossible realities for Russia not only in the future, but already in the present.

## 4.2 Visual and audio modes

The structure of the video resembles a vlog (video blog), with the first female caregiver filming herself on a phone and sharing good news about Petenka (Figure 4). As the story develops, the women's happy, smiling expressions turn into disappointed and disgusted ones, which is clearly demonstrated when one of the women spits on the ground as the same-sex family takes the child away – a reaction that is likely to elicit sympathy from a conservative viewer.

The color scheme in the first part of the video is warm, with red brick-colored walls and various fabric textures, such as blankets on the beds, a sofa, a carpeted floor, and heavy curtains, creating a “home-like” atmosphere (Figure 4). However, when the characters go outside to meet the second parent, the color scheme shifts to cool blue hues (Figure 5), which, along with low saturation, creates a distant and moody atmosphere (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).



Figure 4



Figure 5

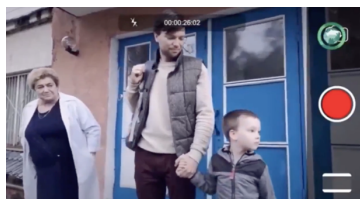


Figure 6

The appearance of the second male parent is accompanied by a comedic tune and is likely to serve as a laughing point to a conservative viewer. The second male is shown in a full body shot, dressed in a long, loose-fitting cardigan, black mittens, smoky eye makeup, and impractical white shoes (Figure 5). He does not speak and only waves with his fingers when greeting Petenka, in contrast to the first male parent, who “passes the straight dress code” and does not raise any suspicion or discontent from the women or the child with his conventionally masculine

attire of a sweater with a vest and dark pants (Figure 6). The second parent brings out a dress from the car (Figure 1) and hugs his partner at the end of the video. It can be argued that the use of a gay couple in the ad video, rather than a lesbian couple, may be strategic, as research has shown that in Russia, both men and women hold negative attitudes towards gay men (Bettinsoli et al., 2019). It is worth noting that in reality, the adoption process includes a thorough identity check of potential foster parents, so the implication that a child could unknowingly be given to a gay family is illogical.

## 4.3 Semantic choices: feminine and masculine symbolism

The semantic choice to use the image of women in the advertisement who appear to be around the age of a mother or grandmother (Figure 7) can be interpreted as a mean to appeal to the older, conservative population. Thus, the women not only serve as caregivers for the child, but also represent traditional values as they express their disgust towards the idea of an all-male foster family. This choice may also suggest that the state sees this scenario as undesirable and in need of legal measures to prevent it.



Figure 7

Additionally, the use of a boy rather than a girl to depict an orphan in the video conveys and reinforces the idea that masculinity is prioritized in Russian radical conservatism and needs to be protected from the influence of liberal values. The contrast between the all-female caregivers and the all-male foster parents also aligns with the widely accepted notion that child-rearing is a solely female duty, as the concept of primary caregivers being male is unfamiliar to conservative thought (Задворнова, 2014).

## 5. Discussion

Using van Dijk's (1993) concept of semantic macro-structures, this study suggests that there are two homophobic topics or ideas constructed in the political ad video “Will you choose this kind of Russia?": ① “same-sex family is not desirable” and ② “child's gender identity is in danger in a same-sex family,” the latter of which could also be reframed as “same-sex family poses a danger to masculinity,” reflecting the conflation of gay sexuality with being transgender in radical conservative ideology. The liberal population of Russia responded to the narratives presented in the video by launching a hashtag campaign, #YesWillChoose, on Twitter as a means of challenging the content in the harsh environment of limited freedom of speech. The video also presents the adoption of children by same-sex families as a problem but fails to address more pressing issues such as the financing of orphanages and orphan support programs or conscious family planning. It is noteworthy that Putin's regime utilizes senior women as mediators to promote their agenda to the public, with Tereshkova being 83 at the time of her proposal to extend Putin's presidency and the second female caregiver from the video (Figure 7, at the left) being much older than the other. This warrants further examination as it raises questions about the exploitation of women to serve the interests of men (Putin and the radical conservative notion of masculinity) in modern Russia. The semantic choices not employed in the video also merit consideration. For example,

the presentation of a girl receiving goalkeeper's gloves as a gift from all-female or all-male foster parents would not be as scandalous as a boy receiving a dress gift from all-male parents, whose devalued masculinity, as gay individuals, is perceived as a threat to the boy's masculinity. This ad video thus reflects the greater social unacceptability of male homosexuality and the "feminization" of males in Russian conservative society compared to a girl's emancipation.

This study shows that homophobia was used as a tactic in a political campaign to distract Russian citizens from issues with the referendum and appeal to radical conservatives. Conservative voters were led to believe that supporting a "right Russia" where same-sex marriage is banned would protect the nation's future, but this is not true due to existing laws allowing only opposite-sex marriages and banning same-sex adoption. This campaign also used homophobic propaganda to support Putin's "zeroing", and a similar tactic was used in late 2022 when a bill prohibiting the promotion of "non-traditional" relationships in media, movies, advertising, and social media was passed, citing the need to protect traditional values amid turmoil in some regions caused by partial military mobilization.

## 6. Conclusion

This research project contributes to existing studies on Russian gender and sexuality discourses by shedding light on the manipulative strategies employed by pro-state media in Russia in the 2020s. The framework used in this paper can be effectively applied to other critical media discourse analyses to identify similar manipulative tactics used by the state and media to achieve certain objectives. Further research is necessary to fully understand a larger pattern of manipulative strategies employed by the Russian state and media with the exploitation of gender and sexuality discourses.

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