

# Framing Censored 'LGBT Propaganda' in Russian Media:

## A Comparative Study

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### 1. Introduction

This paper aims to explore how media outlets in Russia construct the representation of LGBT in the country's media landscape and manipulate it, comparing the approaches of pro-government and independent sources during the informational war that took place after Putin's announcement of the Russian invasion into Ukraine in February 2022. Afterward, Vladimir Putin enacted legislation that imposed stricter limitations on any public display of LGBT-related content and behavior on December 5th, 2022. This extension broadens the scope beyond children's protection to encompass adults as well. Furthermore, on November 30, 2023, the Russian Supreme Court declared the "international LGBT movement" an extremist organization, leading to several raids on allegedly affiliated facilities. These changes in legislation have received international criticism and signal a further shift in the Russian state's ideological rhetoric to more radical and repressive, warranting a close examination of its implications. Comparing how LGBT is used in the propaganda of politically polar media outlets can contribute to a deeper comprehension of frames through which the same matter can be presented to media consumers.

### 2. Previous Studies

Previous studies emphasize the necessity of examining LGBT-related narratives in Russian media as one of the key narratives in the ideology of the current Russian government. Putin's regime actively promotes traditional family values as its core principles, which oppose LGBT advocacy of the collective West and portray it as a threat to Russian society (Stähle, 2015; Sleptsov, 2017; Davydova, 2019). It can be seen as an opposition of two ideologies - heteronationalism (Gosine, 2009) and homonationalism (Puar, 2007).

*Homonationalism* is considered to be a part of the political ideologies of the U.S. and Israel, which manifests in building its exceptionalism on "gay-friendly" rhetoric and condemning infringement of LGBT rights outside of the state's border to serve nationalistic interests (Puar, 2007). However, at the same time, it does not mean that the state which adheres to gay-friendly rhetoric is free from heteronormativity. In contrast to the homonationalistic inclination displayed by most of the NATO states, Putin's government chose to build Russian exceptionalism on *heteronationalism*. Gosine (2009:99) describes heteronationalism as "a production of patriarchal power that collapses gender with sex and inscribes male and female bodies with fixed functionalities," thus institutionalizing heterosexism and patriarchy as the state policies. He also states that "nations must always be heterosexualized to ensure the reproduction of citizens, just as they may also be racialized and gendered to ensure the construction of national boundaries and bodies" (Gosine 2009; 98).

The notions of homonationalism and heteronationalism in the opposition between the collective West and Putin's Russia have been discussed in extensive literature (Baer, 2009; Bluhm & Brand, 2018; Sleptcov, 2018; Davydova, 2019) as well as in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which have been recently gaining scholarly attention (Plakhotnik, 2022; Ploesteanu & Suci, 2023; Seleznova, 2023; Shevtsova, 2023). However, there are a few works done on how the rhetoric of heteronationalism and homonationalism is reflected within the Russian media space.

This paper aims to fill this gap in knowledge by addressing the question of how polar media outlets in the Russian media space employ homonationalistic and heteronationalistic rhetoric in their representation of LGBT. Comparing differential approaches of polar media sources will enable us to gain an understanding of the complexities surrounding the depiction of LGBT and the broader socio-political dynamics within Russia's media environment.

### 3. Data and Research Methods

The study built its data corpus, setting the prominent discursive event of prohibition of the LGBT movement on December 5, 2022, as a starting point and using materials from two polar media outlets – the major state-affiliated “RIA Novosti” and independent “Meduza,” which ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the rating of the most cited internet resources in November 2023 (Медиалогия, 2023) despite the heavy governmental censorship. The data set encompasses the period from December 5, 2022, to September 30, 2023. 354 and 120 publications containing the keyword “LGBT” were retrieved from the websites of “RIA Novosti” and “Meduza,” respectively, totaling 474 entries. After initial analysis of the data sources, the keyword “LGBT” was selected as it proved to return most of the articles related to the topic of interest - LGBT representation. The data was retrieved using the WebScraper extension on Chrome browser and manually checked afterward by the author.

This paper uses a framework based on methods of critical discourse studies (Jäger & Maier 2009, 2016) and multimodal discourse analysis (Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022) to examine how independent and pro-government media in Russia define and represent censored LGBT-related narratives after the enactment of the law prohibiting it in December 2023. The analysis framework consists of structural analysis (identification of discourse strands, their frequency, and characteristics), detailed analysis of typical discourse fragments (headlines and images), rhetorical means, and content.

## 4. Findings

The results show that both “RIA Novosti” and “Meduza” frame LGBT-related discourse fragments in Russia differently, reflecting the political leanings of each media outlet. Here, I will discuss findings on the example of one discursive strand about the spokesperson for Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces and transgender woman Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, which was present in both media outlets. Albeit the coverage was unequal due to the distinctions in each agency's interests, the texts containing this discursive strand effectively portray particularities of framing LGBT propaganda in polar media organizations.

### 4.1 Seeking heteronormativity in others

**Structure:** “RIA Novosti” posted 36 disparaging publications on Sarah Ashton-Cirillo from 2023.08.02 to 2023.09.30, with a maximum of publications shared on one day being 11. Such extensive coverage of Sarah Ashton-Cirillo was ignited after she posted a video where she said that “propagandists will all be hunted down” and “served justice” by next week.

**Surface of the text:** The Ukrainian national flag is in the background, and her uniform shows her alliance with the Ukrainian state. Related publications use dark, unfiltered photographs from press conferences (Figure 1).

Furthermore, 24 out of 36 headlines of the articles about Ashton-Cirillo create a strong association with the violence and threats: “Murder declared: Kyiv regime announces high-profile terrorist attack” (Figure 1), “Investigative Committee to check threats by AFU representative to Russian journalists” (“СК проверит угрозы представителя ВСУ в адрес российских журналистов”) etc.

**Rhetorical means:** To promote nationalistic and traditional values, she was referred to as the “pet transgender of the Armed Forces of Ukraine” (“ручной трансгендер Вооруженных сил ВСУ”). RIA Novosti quoted derogatory allegories from various Russian politicians and public figures who use Ashton-Cirillo in their hate speech:

“Украинский терроризм постепенно деградирует, принимая все более уродливое лицо. Причем в буквальном смысле - угрозы с придыханием источает теперь американский транс, который еще совсем недавно был мужиком, да еще и карточным шулером. . . Лицо ВСУ как никогда красноречиво. В виде извращенца – сатаны.”

“Ukrainian terrorism is gradually degenerating, taking on an increasingly ugly face. And in the literal sense - threats are now exuded breathily by an American trans, who not so long ago was a man and even a card cheat... The face of the Ukrainian armed forces is more eloquent than ever. In the form of a perverted Satan.”

First Deputy Chairman of the Duma Defense Committee Alexei Zhuravlev, as quoted in “The State Duma called the representative of the Ukrainian armed forces a pervert-Satan,” RIA Novosti from 2023.09.14

Объявлено убийство: киевский режим анонсировал громкий теракт

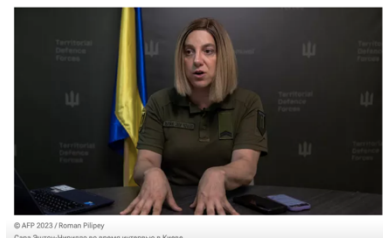


Figure 1 Sarah Ashton-Cirillo in RIA Novosti

Here, Sarah Ashton-Cirillo is referred to as an “ugly face,” “an American trans,” and “a perverted Satan” to discredit the Ukrainian state. Additionally, there is a tendency in the usage of “transgender” as a noun in Russian in the headlines: “an American transgender” (“американский трансгендер”), “a transgender from the U.S.” (“трансгендер из Штатов”), “if the counteroffensive is like this, then so are the transgenders” (“какое контраступление такие и трансгендеры”). Using “transgender” as a noun has a negative connotation in Russian as it can dehumanize a person and instead create an association with a separate biological species (Huhtala, 2021). In addition, Putin is known for confusing the noun “transgender” with such a noun as “transformer” in his public speeches.

**Content:** “RIA Novosti” actively engages in portraying Ukraine as a homonationalistic state, seeking heteronormativity in the U.S., creating associations of LGBT with violence and Russophobia. This is also achieved by quoting transphobic public figures from the U.S., such as journalist and TV host Greg Gutfeld (“Who is this clown?: WSU spokesman sparked fury in the U.S.”) and Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Green with Ohio Republican Senator James Vance (“Congresswoman criticized AFU spokeswoman for threatening journalists”). These quotes create an image of solidarity of Others – public figures from the U.S. – with Russian policies regarding traditional family values. Ironically, the official state media contributes to the increased visibility of LGBT content in the Russian informational space by frequently publishing related news, nearly three times more often than independent “Meduza” during the same period.

#### 4.2 Establishing homonormativity within

**Structure:** On the other hand, independent media “Meduza” focuses on reporting infringement of LGBT+ rights and incorporating marginalized voices of individuals with “non-traditional” sexual orientation and gender identity. This creates homonormativity within the media discourse of the outlet, which clearly distances itself from the state-affiliated media by aligning with more liberal and progressive values of the opposition.

In contrast with 36 publications of “RIA Novosti,” “Meduza” published only one post regarding Ashton-Cirillo. It contained excerpts from her interview with “Ukrainskaya Pravda,” allowing a reader to get insights into Cirillo's thoughts from alternative sources.

**Surface of the text:** The stark difference in coverage is also seen in the visual mode of communication, namely, the choice of images used in publications. “Meduza” also uses a photograph of Ashton-Cirillo from the same venue with the Ukrainian flag on the background and military uniform; however, this photograph is bright, close-up, and shows Sarah Ashton-Cirillo smiling.

**Rhetorical means:** In contrast with “RIA Novosti,” “Meduza” uses the adjective “*transgendernaya*” instead of “*a transgender*” as a noun when introducing Sarah Ashton-Cirillo to their audience. The same political correctness in the language surrounding LGBT-related content was seen before when “Meduza” covered a rare instance of a transwoman entering the political stage in Russia: “Yulia Alyoshina from Altai Krai is Russia's first *transgender female* politician” (“Юлия Алешина из Алтайского края — первая в России *трансгендерная женщина-политик*”).

**Content:** Overall, it can be said that “Meduza” focuses on keeping a record of the state's anti-LGBT actions, raising the visibility of queer people in Russia, and sharing their opinion to create homonationalistic agenda of the opposition. Instances that result in extensive coverage in the state-affiliated “RIA Novosti” such as Sarah Ashton-Cirillo's controversial remark, do not gain attention in “Meduza,” which chooses to address the matter by quoting the Ukrainian side in a single publication.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper focused on the media coverage of LGBT-related news in two polar media outlets in Russia after the restrictions on the public display of LGBT propaganda were imposed on December 5, 2022. The study aimed to gain an understanding of how notions of heteronationalism and homonationalism are reflected in the Russian media space and how they are used in the political interests of each news agency.

The findings suggest that while the independent media outlet constantly promotes homonationalistic values to differentiate its

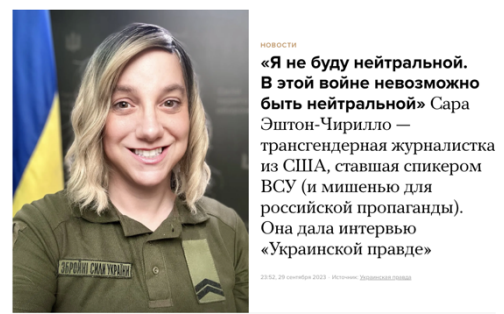


Figure 2 Sarah Ashton-Cirillo in Meduza

values from the current conservative government policy, the pro-government media “RIA Novosti” switches between posing the state as heteronationalistic and seeking heteronationalism in their political enemies. It can be said that pro-government “RIA Novosti” uses LGBT-related content to represent the Others – Ukraine and the collective West – in a negative light while also highlighting anti-LGBT sentiments in these nations. Establishing shared heteronormativity as a justification strategy, the state-affiliated media seeks to construct a frame of “secretly admired” Russia. On the other hand, independent “Meduza” establishes a progressive, humanistic frame and employs a homonationalistic agenda as a differentiative tool from the state and the state-affiliated media.

The study's findings contribute to understanding patterns of manipulation employed by the Russian state and independent media on the example of LGBT representation in media. This paper offers a direction for future research to document and examine the language used during the ongoing informational war centered around Russia and Ukraine. For instance, observing the changes in the media coverage after the prohibition of LGBT movement in Russia on November 30, 2023, will further facilitate a deeper comprehension of how LGBT-related rhetoric is involved in the construction of the modern state's exceptionalism.

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