

### **Russian Occidentalism: Gayropa and Russia's Traditional Values**

In *Orientalism* Edward Said asserts that “the Orient has helped define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image.” (1-2) European culture gains identity “by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.” (3) The Oriental is “irrational, depraved, childlike, ‘different,’ thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal.’” (40) Westerners are “rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion,” while Arab-Orientals are none of these. (49) The Orient is more of a Western fantasy than any real geographical place, and Orientalism tells us more about the West and its values than about the imagined Orient.

Scholars of Eastern Europe and the Balkans have expanded on Said's work to describe how Europe also projected Orientalist fantasies onto these territories. Larry Wolff writes in *Inventing Eastern Europe* that “it was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment.” (Wolff 1994: 4) Vesna Goldsworthy describes Western literary fantasies of the Balkans from Byron to Rebecca West in *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*; and Maria Todorova and Maria Bakić-Hayden also describe how the imagined Balkans contrast to an imagined Europe. (Goldsworthy 1998, Todorova 1997, Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, Bakić-Hayden 1995)

For Said's Orientalists, the Orient cannot represent itself, therefore the West represents it. (1978: 20) Yet the Orient, or at least the countries of Said's “Orient” do speak. Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit have described Orientalism's mirror image, Occidentalism, as a corresponding discourse about the West as perceived by non-Western cultures. (Buruma and Margalit 2004) Though they focus primarily on Islamic and Asian anti-Westernism, Buruma and Margalit trace some Occidentalist ideas back to the writings of Russian Slavophiles in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This paper focuses on current Russian Occidentalist discourses about Europe.

What is the genealogy and etiology of new Russian Occidentalist discourses? Are they equally rooted in Slavophile ideology? If, as Larry Wolff argues, Enlightenment projections about Eastern Europe reveal more about Western Europe itself than about any real geographical Eastern Europe, what do these Russian images of the West reveal about Russian “traditional values” and “spiritual bonds”? How do Europe and the West function as a sort of surrogate or underground self for Russia?

This preliminary analysis will be based on Russian Occidentalist discourses from a variety of sources: TV programs, both propagandistic “documentaries” like *Sodom* by Arkady Mamontov and the talk shows on Russian TV's Channel 1 on which they are presented; academic writings by sociologist Alexander Dugin, political scientist Aleksei Mukhin, and the “ambassador of the World Congress of Families at the United Nations,” Alexei Komov; official programmatic statements from organizations like Project Network – Putin's youth movement, and from the Ministry of Culture.

The picture that emerges of the new opposition between Russia and the West harks back to the Slavophile/Westernizer debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but with some features of the Communist-era opposition to Western Capitalism and materialism. Western individualism, deplored both by Slavophiles as hostile to the Russians' communal life and by Communists as leading to alienation and loneliness, features prominently, as does a Western lust for change and novelty, as opposed to tradition and spirituality. What strikes me as new in the mix, however, is the prominence sexuality and homosexuality in this Occidental discourse. Europe is Gayropa (Европа/Гейропа); European values are now Eurogayan values (европейские / еврогейские) – Religious protesters at Moscow's latest banned gay pride demonstration on 30 May held signs that read "No to Eurogayan Values" (Kireev 2015) The centrality of sexuality to Russia's imaginary Europe was very clear through the Ukraine conflict. In yet another play on language, Ukraine's entry into Europe was imagined as being through anal sex: в Европу через жопу To Europe through the ass.

Lest I be accused of exaggerating the centrality of sexual values in Russia's definition of itself, let me point to the rubric on "Principles" on the website of Project Network, the successor of the pro-Putin Nashi youth movement. The first principle, the Moral Principle, begins with the words "We are against same-sex marriages. Single-sex families produce single-sex children." (Project 2014) Leaving aside the curious logic of that term, why should it be that this is the first principle and the first line to define Russian morality? Russian morality is defined in terms of what it is not, and that is Europe.

The Ministry of Culture sums up its definition of Russia as follows: "Russia must be viewed as a unique and distinctive civilization that cannot be reduced to either 'the West' (Europe) or 'the East.' The short form of this position is the thesis 'Russia is not Europe.'" (Ministry 2014) Because if Russia *is* Europe (or the West), or if it is not a distinctive civilization, then, as the Westernizers knew in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it would have to be measured by the same yardstick as Western Europe and found wanting. It would need to catch up, both economically and in its respect for "universal human rights." Hence the appeal of the Eurasianist movement, led by Alexander Dugin, which opposes the unipolar world (North America and Western Europe, with the dominance of the US economy and military) with the Eurasian sphere, to be led from Moscow and embracing a different set of values and standards. (Dugin 2014)

The characteristics of the West, as described by Russian Occidentalists can be summed up as follows:

The West is characterized by materialism and "thingism" (вещизм), while Russia relies on its spiritual bonds (духовные скрепы) – a vague term that no-one can exactly define, but it's clearly a modern version of the old Romantic and Neo-Platonist material/spiritual or body/soul divide.

The West values "aggressive" individualism (with people demanding rights for whatever the individual wants or chooses), while Russia relies on collective identity.

The West promotes multiculturalism and tolerance, while Russia proclaims these are foreign and hostile to Russian culture, where moral values are based on the common values of the majority.

The West is characterized by a love of novelty, of change for the sake of change to the point of chaos and Apocalypse – a word used frequently in Russian rhetoric about the West, while Russia values stability and respect for its own history.

The West is teeming with sexual license, homosexuality, pedophilia, zoophilia, while Russia respects only the traditional (heterosexual) family.

In practice all of these Occidental values intersect in one way or another with homosexuality. The West's materialism is so extreme that even children have become a commodity: as Mamontov's video *Sodom* shows, gay men in the West buy test-tube babies or exploit surrogate mothers or pay to adopt children either to have sex with them or to turn them into homosexuals. (Mamontov 2014) In the TV talk show debate presenting the video, Irina Bergseth specifically says that people in the West treat children as commodities. (Mamontov 2015)

The aggressive individual becomes the aggressive gay radical, who aims to trample on the rights of families (taking their children or teaching them to be gay in school) and to force the gay lifestyle on everyone, because everyone can be potentially converted. Bergseth, who heads the organization Russian Mothers, may be little known in the West, but she is quite visible in Russia, particularly on Russian TV. She claims that her Norwegian husband is a pedophile, and that the Norwegian social services took away her child and gave the boy to her husband, who trained him to be raped by groups of men, sometimes while the boy wore a Putin mask. Norwegian authorities say they denied her custody because she is mentally unstable. I'll let you judge. Bergseth also claims that whenever laws to protect animals or children are proposed in Europe, a hundred thousand protesters come out to ensure that the rights of zoophiles and pedophiles are not infringed. Zoos in Western Europe are not zoos, but zoo-bordellos, where men have sex with animals, which is perfectly legal across Europe. Bergseth's story highlights the threat to Russian families from the concept of juvenile justice or child welfare services, in which a state can intervene in the internal life of a Russian family to prevent abuse, but really the purpose is destruction of the family or removal of a child to be handed over to gay couples. Any state interference in the patriarchal family even within Russia is seen as a potential move towards destruction of the family. Hence the Russian Orthodox Church came out in March of this year against introducing the concept of domestic abuse or child abuse within the family. (Patriarchal Commission 2015)

Western multiculturalism and tolerance (sometimes rendered as tolerasty, to rhyme with pederasty) are also deplored mostly when they refer to sexual morality. Point 6 of the 12-point Ministry of Culture proposal advises rejection of the principles of multiculturalism and tolerance. It cites a speech in which Putin refers to Russia's long tradition of collective organic life with other cultures, as opposed to "so-called tolerance, sexless and infertile." (Ministry 2014) Racial, national, and religious intolerance are deplored, but there is no problem with "intolerance of social phenomena that are alien and dangerous to Russian society and its values." Though sexual orientation and homosexuality are never mentioned, it is quite clear what Putin and others mean by "sexless and infertile tolerance of phenomena alien and dangerous to Russian society."

The love of novelty and change is often presented in Russian discourse as a major factor in gay identification. Adolescents become gay because it's a novelty or because it's fashionable. The extreme results of this search for novelty, though, are hinted at in the film *Sodom*: Western elites plan to create new people by mixing the genetic material

from several individuals – thus both eliminating the traditional family and creating a new kind of being, perhaps with no memory. (Mamontov 2014) Aleksei Komov says that the next step will be a demand for the rights of cyborgs and robots, giving up human identity altogether. (Mamontov 2015) For him this is a Manichean struggle not between the Russia and the West, but between Good and Evil. After all, Saul Alinsky, who had a huge influence on both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, dedicated his *Rules for Radicals* to Lucifer!

Russians' fears about homosexuality are predicated on what Sedgwick calls the universalizing construction of homosexuality, homosexuality as something that potentially affects everyone, in that anyone can turn gay; it is a psychological illness, and a highly contagious one, hence the necessity to prevent everyone becoming gay by restricting propaganda of homosexuality in the form of parades, pedagogy, and parenting. Russian children are pure, innocent, and naturally heterosexual. If any turn gay it is only because they have been seduced or recruited through propaganda. Homosexuals are called in Russian "homosexualists," because they have adopted the ideology of homosexuality, not because it is anything innate or immutable. Sociologist Alexander Kondakov has coined the term "heterosexualism" to describe instead Russia's ideology of compulsive heterosexuality. (Kondakov 2015) Russians again and again express a fear that if homosexualism is not stopped, it will spread to all. In honor of the 17 May Day against Homophobia, a Russian Duma delegate and general in the police force, Alexander Gurov, wrote about an encounter with a gay Italian parliamentarian delegate who criticized Russia's policies. For Gurov, allowing gay pride was tantamount to psychological rape: "Don't you understand that you are in actuality trying to force me to have sex with a man?" (Gurov, 2015) In an interview with out Irish politician David Norris, RT host Oksana Boyko kept referring to "homonormativity" in the West. (Boyko 2014) It was clear from the discussion that what she meant would have been surprising to Lisa Duggan, who coined the term: for Boyko it meant – or at least suggested ominously – making homosexuality, rather than heterosexuality, the norm. Aleksei Poliakov on the TV debate echoes this fear: "Homosexuality has always existed as an elective deviation, but when one's chosen path is aggressively forced on others as the norm or the super-norm, civilization disappears." (Mamontov 2015)

These fears of "homonormativity" are always linked to demographic anxieties. Instead of discussing declining life expectancy and lowering birth rates among Russians, the focus is on homosexuality. As one of the participants of the TV debate put it, homosexuality is a denial of children, and can you imagine a world without children? (Mamontov 2015) Political scientist Alexei Mukhin, in his long essay on "Homo Politicus," points out that companies that supported marriage equality in the US (Microsoft, Google, Starbucks, Amazon) also finance international efforts to lower the birth rate, including family planning, forced abortions, and forced sterilization in Russia. (Mukhin 2013: 26) Western support for LGBT Russians is part of that international effort. Mukhin concludes his paper with a scenario that describes the threat, as Russians see it. The scenario moves from the first phase – recognition of tolerance for LGBT people, through the second – equal rights for LGBT and heterosexuals, to the third – recognition of gay domination. (64) According to Mukhin, since there is some backlash against LGBT people in the West, they may be looking to Russia as a potential safe harbor, in case they have to emigrate to avoid confrontation with the heterosexual majority.

An incident that came to light in October of last year shows how Russia's Occidental discourse works. Russia canceled the US Future Leaders Exchange for high school students because, as the Russian press and officials said, a Russian teen was illegally adopted by a US gay couple. According to Children's Ombudsman Pavel Astakhov, the boy was seduced by an older gay couple, who then adopted him against all international laws. Because how could a Russian 16 year old be gay, unless he was seduced by an American couple? He came from a respectable family, and his mother is alive. Astakhov said "the boy was living with them, and gradually there developed – how can I put it carefully – close friendly relations." (Astakhov 2014) Itar-Tass reported that the student met with his Russian mother in the presence of local lawyers to tell her he was seeking asylum. "As far as the embassy knows, these lawyers themselves observe a non-traditional sexual orientation," the agency wrote. (Luhn 2014) There were rumors the couple had offered to pay for the boy's education at Harvard. Money, seduction, and a pure Russian teen snatched from his loving normal family and handed over to a gay couple! Masha Gessen picks apart almost every point in this story: the boy was gay when he came to the US and had been bullied in Russia; he was placed with a straight couple; he met the gay couple at a local gay center; when he requested asylum on the grounds of sexuality, he asked to be placed with the couple, who were certified foster parents (there was no adoption); the lawyers at the meeting were straight, etc. (Gessen 2014) But for Russians, the Occidental narrative of money for tuition and sexual seduction was more persuasive.

Russia's Occidentalism paints a picture of Europe and the West unrecognizable to Europeans and Westerners. While there are religious conservatives and anti-gay groups in the West who may make the same kind of claims as those found in the Russian narrative, they are in the minority, and they are increasingly opposed – at least as concerns homosexuality – by political and scholarly consensus. In Russia these Occidental discourses are dominant, and it is the counter-narrative that is forbidden by the Russian laws against propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientation. They are also central to the new positioning of Russia on the world stage as an alternative to the unipolar universe dominated by the US and the EU.

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