QUEERING IMAGES OF RUSSIA IN SWEDEN

DISCURSIVE HEGEMONY AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC ARTICULATIONS 1991–2019

KIRILL POLKOV

SÖDERTÖRN DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS

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For my mother Elena

Abstract
This study examines the role of non-normative sexuality in the construction of national images. It focuses on how non-normative sexuality affects and is affected by Swedish constructions of the image of Russia and, by extension, Sweden's self-image. Employing queer, feminist, and postcolonial theories, and methodologically grounded in poststructuralist discourse-theoretical analysis with a queer sensibility, the dissertation explores what images of Russia are constructed, negotiated, and circulated in Swedish discourse.

The material includes mass media, examples from popular culture, art, and the club scene spanning the period 1991–2019. The analysis draws on texts and images in the five largest Swedish dailies: *Aftonbladet, Dagens Nyheter, Göteborgs-Posten, Svenska Dagbladet, Expressen*; video performances "Propaganda!" by Måns Zelmerlöw and "Folkkär" by Kamferdrops feat. Frej Larsson; visual arts projects, *State of Mind* by Axel Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg and *At the Time of the Third Reading* by Axel Karlsson Rixon; and *Baba Bomba Diskoteka*, a series of club events held in Stockholm by a group of Russian-speaking friends.

Analyzing the uses of non-normative sexuality across the material, the study focuses on aspects of space, temporality, and emotion. The study challenges the representational model of LGBTQ visibility by destabilizing the relationships between representation, visibility, and recognition of LGBTQ people, arguing for alternative conceptualizations of LGBTQ politics. The thesis finds that sexuality plays a central role in shaping both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses on Russia in Sweden. In the Swedish hegemonic discourse on Russia, Russian LGBTQ individuals are cast into subject positions circumscribed by normative expectations of intelligibility and visibility, while Russia is constructed as backward and homophobic. This perpetuates Swedish sexual exceptionalism, reinforcing notions of responsibility and progress while oversimplifying the complexity of Russian LGBTQ lives. Counter-hegemonic discourses prefigure alternative imaginaries of space, temporality, and emotion. Echoing queer, feminist, and postcolonial sensibilities these articulations disrupt binary understandings of geopolitical difference and offer alternative perspectives on Russian non-normative sexuality, thereby contributing to a reconfiguration of the image of Russia.

The conclusion underscores the dual role of non-normative sexuality in shaping national images, as a tool to reinforce a binary global order and as a crucial site for the emergence of social and political possibilities. The thesis seeks to complicate the representational model of visibility, challenging the ideas of Russia as ethnically and sexually homogenous and Sweden as sexu-

ally exceptional, stressing the need for queerly plural visions of sexualities and nations.

Keywords: Russia, Sweden, non-normative sexuality, queer theory, national image, hybridity, temporality, Swedish sexual exceptionalism, homonationalism, visibility, discourse, LGBT

Abstract

Titel: *Att queera bilden av Ryssland i Sverige: Diskursiv hegemoni och mothegemoniska artikulationer 1991–2019*

Avhandlingen undersöker betydelsen av icke-normativ sexualitet i skapandet av nationella bilder. Fokus riktas mot hur icke-normativ sexualitet påverkar svenska konstruktioner av Rysslandsbilden och den svenska självbilden. Med hjälp av queer-, feministisk- och postkolonial teori, samt en diskursteoretisk analys med queer sensibilitet som metod, utforskar avhandlingen vilka bilder av icke-normativ sexualitet och Ryssland som konstrueras, förhandlas och cirkuleras i svensk diskurs.

Materialet består av artiklar från dagstidningar och kvällspress, exempel från populärkultur, konstprojekt och en klubb. Det sträcker sig över perioden 1991–2019. Analysen i det första analyskapitlet baseras på texter från de fem största svenska tidningarna: *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Göteborgs-Posten*, *Svenska Dagbladet* och *Expressen*. I kapitel två analyseras bilder från samma tidningar samt Youtube-videorna ”Propaganda!” av Måns Zelmerlöw och ”Folkkär” av Kamferdrops feat. Frej Larsson. Analyskapitel tre baseras på konstprojekt av svenska konstnärer: *State of Mind* av Axel Karlsson Rixon och Anna Viola Hallberg samt *Vid tiden för den tredje läsningen* av Axel Karlsson Rixon. I det fjärde kapitlet analyseras *Baba Bomba Diskoteka*, en serie klubbevenemang som ägde rum i Stockholm mellan 2017 och 2019, som arrangerades av en grupp rysktalande vänner.

I analysen av materialet fokuserar avhandlingen på hur rumslighet, temporalitet och känslor spelar roll i konstruktionen av nationella bilder. Studien utmanar den rådande modellen av hbtq-synlighet (*the representational model of visibility*) genom att destabilisera förhållandet mellan representation, synlighet och erkännande. Vikten av alternativa konceptualiseringar av hbtq-politik framhävs. Avhandlingen finner att icke-normativ sexualitet spelar en central roll i formandet av både hegemoniska och mothegemoniska diskurser om Ryssland i Sverige. Inom den svenska hegemoniska diskursen om Ryssland placeras ryska hbtq-individer i subjektspositioner begränsade av normativa förväntningar på att vara förståeliga och synliga på samma sätt som hbtq-personer i Sverige, vilket förenklar komplexiteten av ryska hbtq-personers liv. Ryssland porträtteras som bakåtsträvande och homofobiskt och Sverige som moraliskt ansvarsfullt och framgångsrik gällande hbtq-rättigheter, vilket förstärker diskursen om svensk sexuell exceptionalism. Den mothegemoniska diskursen bidrar med alternativa perspektiv på rumslighet, temporalitet och känslor. Dessa artikula-

tioner, förankrade i queer, feministisk och postkolonial medvetenhet, utmanar binära förståelser av geo- och sexualpolitisk skillnad och föreslår alternativa synsätt på rysk icke-normativ sexualitet och hbtq-personers liv, vilket leder till att av bilden av Ryssland formas om.

Analysens slutsats betonar den icke-normativa sexualitetens dubbla roll i formandet av nationella bilder. Å ena sidan förstärker den en binär global geo- och sexualpolitisk ordning och å andra sidan blir den en väsentlig plats för att formulera andra sociala och politiska möjligheter. Avhandlingen argumenterar för att komplicera modellen av hbtq-synlighet, ifrågasätta idéerna om Ryssland som etniskt och sexuellt homogent och Sverige som sexuellt exceptionellt, samt poängterar behovet av queer mångfald (*queerly plural*) i föreställningar om sexualitet och nation.

Nyckelord: Ryssland, Sverige, icke-normativ sexualitet, queerteori, nationell bild, hybriditet, temporalitet, svensk sexuell exceptionalism, homonationalism, synlighet, diskurs, hbtq

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Stockholm
February 2024

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Russian names have been transliterated using The American Library Association and Library of Congress (ALA-LC) guidelines, omitting diacritic symbols.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Swedish and Russian are mine.

Introduction

In December 2022, a new law passed in Russia banning propaganda of "non-traditional sexual relations," gender reassignment, and pedophilia among Russians of all ages.[1] Before the legislation came into force, only "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" among minors had been banned in Russia in accordance with the infamous "gay propaganda" law adopted in 2013. The new law goes much further, imposing fines and restrictions for "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations and (or) preferences, change of sex [*sic*]" among Russians of all ages on the Internet and in media, advertising, literature, and cinema. Reactions to the updated Russian "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" law in Swedish newspapers were relatively contained. Several short columns matter-of-factly recorded the events, but no editorials or analytical articles were published in the immediate aftermath. This lack of attention to questions of sexuality is surprising given an earlier history of reporting on Russia's "gay propaganda" law in 2013. Yet, it can be justified when placed among the events that have unfolded in Russia since the beginning of 2022.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched an invasion and occupied parts of Ukraine in a major escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, which began in 2014. Sexual politics has been made salient on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides of the conflict. In April 2022, Kirill, the patriarch of Moscow and head of the Russian Orthodox Church, came out in vocal support of the invasion. In his sermon published online, he states that because the people of Donbas are inimical to the values offered today by those who claim world power (implying the West), they refuse to pass "a simple yet horrifying" test of loyalty to that very powerful world—"to hold a gay parade." As foreign policy commentators were quick to point out, Patriarch Kirill mobilized political homophobia to justify the full-scale invasion (di Giovanni 2022).

When reporting on Ukraine, journalists in Western media attest to the salience of progressive sexual politics in the country. They highlight the role of Ukrainian "gay soldiers who fight Russia and for their rights" (*The Economist* 2023). A case in point is an editorial in the Swedish daily

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[1] For more information about the revised law, see *Meduza* (2022).

newspaper *Dagens Nyheter,* published on August 6, 2022 ("Ledare: Ukrainska enhörningar leder vägen" 2022). Writing about Ukrainian LGBTQ soldiers who attach patches with the unicorn symbol to their military uniforms to mark their presence in the troops, the article highlights the commitment of Ukrainian President Zelensky to gender and sexual equality, commissioning the Prime Minister to investigate the possibility of legal same-sex partnerships to accord homosexual soldiers the same rights as heterosexuals. The editorial concludes by suggesting that

> [in] this particular war […] Ukraine has chosen a side, and now clearly wants to be a modern, Western democracy. In stark contrast to Russia, such a country has LGBTQ rights. That makes it even more important to win the war, so that the rights of all Ukrainians are not lost.

The columnist in *Dagens Nyheter* reiterates the discourse of LGBTQ[2] rights as the geopolitical polarization of "the West and the rest." It ties "LGBTQ rights" to civilization, being "a modern, Western democracy." To gender studies scholars, this recognizably echoes what queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2007; 2013a) notes in her scathing exploration of *homonationalism* – the ways in which LGBTQ rights have become a yardstick against which states are judged.

The 2022 law and the invasion of Ukraine, justified with civilizational arguments, clearly position Russia in opposition to "the West." As such, it also marks another development in contemporary Russia's history of sexual politics that started during the late 1980s, with *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and in 1993 the decriminalization of same-sex sexual acts (Buyantueva 2018). Parallel to these developments in Russia, which have promoted national "moral" sovereignty (Wilkinson 2014) at the expense of sexual and gender minorities, the past thirty years have seen a reshaping of the global geopolitical landscape and a polarization of attitudes

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[2] In this dissertation, I use the abbreviation LGBT for consistency. The LGBT people is used to refer to Russian gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans* people in the Swedish discourse on Russia. Where relevant, I specify whether the representations center on specific groups of people. Other ways of referring to sexual identity and gender variance, such as QIA+, queer, intersex, asexual and others, are used only when mentioned in the material or quotes. My use of LGBT, without Q, in the abbreviation also reflects the difficulty Puar has identified in setting up "delineations between assimilated gay or lesbian identities and ever-so-vigilant-and-resistant queer identities" (Puar 2007, 46), which is further complicated because ideas of assimilation and resistance take different forms in Russia compared to some Western contexts. I use the term "LGBT rights" to reflect its common use in the literature (Edenborg 2020a; Buyantueva 2018). My thoughts on using queer theory and against applying "queer" as a descriptive identity category are further explicated in the previous research section "Queer research on/in Russia" on pages 59–64.

surrounding sexuality and LGBT rights, visibility, and recognition on local, regional, and global levels (Altman and Symons 2016; 2018; Rao 2020; Weber 2016; Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; Amar 2013).

This dissertation problematizes these binaries and histories, underpinned largely by the impression of global observers (*The Economist* 2014), exemplified by the editorial above, that Russia is a homophobic country and Sweden, part of Europe/the West[3] is a champion of LGBT rights. It does so by looking at how non-normative sexuality has impacted the ways Russia has been imagined – as a space and place that occupies a specific temporal position and evokes emotions in outside observers – in Sweden. The study, located in a Swedish context, surveys thirty years of interpretations of the development of sexual politics in Russia in Swedish news media, as well as in examples from popular culture, art, and club events.

That LGBT rights are worsening in Russia and yet at the same time are improving in Europe fits neatly with a previous history of Russia's abuses of LGBT rights. Media commentary on Russia's treatment of LGBT people in the 2000s focused on issues of visibility in the form of pride events. In 2013, the Swedish media erupted in outrage over the "gay propaganda" law[4] and stories of harassment of Russian LGBT people in the state that has embraced "traditional values" (Wilkinson 2014). As part of its conservative turn since 2012 (Laruelle 2013), Russia has assumed the role of a protector of "traditional sexual relationships," as an alternative to Western values. In contrast, in Sweden, a self-defined feminist government was formed in 2014 and an outspoken feminist foreign policy was adopted (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2020). Gender and sexuality thus feature prominently in both nations' images.

In Swedish official discourse, Russia, spearheading the promotion of traditional values, has been portrayed as a security threat to Swedish "gender exceptionalism," which encompasses the closely related and mutually constitutive articulations of gender and sexuality (Agius and Edenborg 2019, 58).

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[3] I take the "West/East" division to be highly problematic. "The West" and "the East" are used here to refer to discursively imagined and mutually constituted regions, rather than based on my own decision whether or not Russia belongs to the West.

[4] The full name is The Russian Federal law 135-FZ "For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values." It imposes administrative sanctions on anyone spreading information "[aimed] at causing minors to form non-traditional sexual predispositions, notions of attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relationships, distorted ideas about the equal social value of traditional and non-traditional sexual relationships, or imposing information about non-traditional sexual relationships which raises interest in such relationships" among minors. (*Federal Law No. 135-FZ of June 29, 2013*)

Issues of gender and sexuality are mobilized to draw symbolic boundaries between Sweden and Russia. An example of how LGBT rights functioned in conjunction with Swedish politics is the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) advertisement campaigns.[5] The advert circulated during Stockholm Pride 2017 featured a picture of army boots with rainbow-colored shoelaces and the text: "Your right to live how you want, as who you want and with whom you want – is our task to defend." While the promotional campaign does not mention who exactly poses a threat to Swedish LGBT rights, when interviewed, one SAF official named Sweden's historical antagonists, among them Russia (Strand and Kehl 2019, 306). Agius and Edenborg (2019, 59) suggest that it is hardly surprising that Russia, Sweden's traditional geopolitical foe, is an implicit point of reference. Long perceived as an aggressive and uncivilized Other, Russia has been, in recent years, increasingly associated with anti-gay politics.

One way to move beyond polarization is by attending to the ways Swedish representations have placed Russian LGBT people in discursive positions determined by both Western LGBT ideals and state violence and exclusion exercised by Russia. One may wonder *why* a rethinking of binaries is necessary. The reason is not in order to write an apology for the Russian state. From the queer, feminist, and postcolonial theoretical perspective this dissertation will develop, taking seriously the ways Russian non-normative sexuality has been represented before and during state homophobia, expressed by prohibition of visibility and state violence, presents an opportunity to formulate an alternative to the liberal model of LGBT rights. This model has been widely critiqued,[6] not least because its mechanisms are failing in Russia, which, having cut itself off from the instruments of international law, such as the ECHR and Council of Europe, is resistant to international political pressure.[7]

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[5] Compare to similar campaigns: 2018 "We Don't Always March Straight," 2019 "In Defense of Love," 2020 "Our Strength Consists of Differences," 2021 "A Flag Worth Defending," all full-page ads in *Svenska Dagbladet*. (Kehl 2022)

[6] West/Eurocentrism of the human rights framework has been pointed out by scholars working on non-Western contexts (Grewal 1999). A similar critique of gay and lesbian rights as a Western phenomenon and a sign of 'the modern' that others, especially the Muslim Other, must play catch-up to emulate has also been established (Puar 2006; Haritaworn 2012; Rastegar 2013; Weber 2016).

[7] Compared to other former state socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, "Russia exemplifies a state in which the political opportunity structure is largely unaffected by international pressures. If, after all, Russia can withstand an international embargo for annexing Crimea, it is too much to expect pressure from the European Parliament to shield domestic LGBT activists" (O'Dwyer 2018, 228). Further, as Wilkinson (2014) points out, the attempts of Russian activists to muster international support for LGBT rights by calling for international support and pressure (especially

In this dissertation, I ask what happens if we look beyond the immediacy of the "gay propaganda" law and the use of homophobia to justify military aggression. Views regarding gender and sexuality were reshaped in Russia with the decentralization of repressive political power and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some foreigners' views of Russian same-sex sexuality reflected these changes (Baer 2011).[8] I am interested in how the image of Russia in Sweden has been affected by these discursive shifts in Russian media and culture. By paying attention to historically contextualized analyses of LGBT people's lives, and which does so by not reducing them to positions of passive suffering, I highlight the ways of being LGBT and the spaces of resistance that cannot easily be understood from a position which takes for granted "being out and proud" as the general normative model.

This study focuses on these two national contexts, a choice motivated by two aspects: (i) The Swedish (and not some other European, such as Dutch, Norwegian etc.) context will be in focus because Sweden has branded itself, historically and in the present, as "progressive" (Jezierska and Towns 2018). Moreover, concerning gender and sexuality, Russia as a protector of "traditional values" and Sweden with its feminist foreign policy (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2020), arguably a norm entrepreneur concerning feminist concerns (Rosén Sundström and Elgström 2020) and LGBT rights (Rainer 2022), represent two "opposing but consistent positions" (Agius and Edenborg 2019, 57). (ii) Sweden and Russia have a long history of mutual image construction, given the countries' geographical proximity and Russia's centrality to Sweden's self-image (Kan 1996).

Aim and research questions

Inspired by queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory, the *aim* of this dissertation is to understand how ideas of non-normative sexuality affect and are affected by the formation of national images in discourses on and representations of Russia in Sweden.

Research question: How does non-normative sexuality figure in Swedish constructions of the image of Russia and, by extension, of the Swedish self-image?

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from the EU) were met with a lack of public support that gradually developed into direct resistance (Wilkinson 2014, 375 n10). For developments since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and throughout 2022, see Drzemczewski and Lawson (2022).

[8] For a critique of some of these approaches revealing their blindness to structural patriarchy and sexism in Russian society, see my discussion in "Queer research on/in Russia" in the Previous research section.

This research question is answered by analyzing different types of material with the help of the following sub-questions:

1. What kind of images of Russia and Russian non-normative sexuality are constructed, negotiated, and circulated in Swedish news media, popular culture, art, and club events?
2. How are space, temporality, and emotion portrayed in the images of Russian non-normative sexuality and Russia in the Swedish context?

To answer these questions, I draw on four types of material: mass media, and examples from popular culture, art, and the club scene. I analyze, respectively, the textual and visual discourse in the five largest Swedish daily newspapers: *Aftonbladet, Dagens Nyheter, Göteborgs-Posten, Svenska Dagbladet, Expressen*; representations in video performances "Propaganda!" by Måns Zelmerlöw and "*Folkkär*" ("Beloved by People") by Kamferdrops feat. Frej Larsson; visual arts projects by Swedish artists: *State of Mind* by Axel Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg and *At the Time of the Third Reading* by Axel Karlsson Rixon; and *Baba Bomba Diskoteka*, a series of club events held in Stockholm by a group of Russian-speaking friends.

The selection of these four types of material is driven by their ability, together, to illustrate the diversity of instances where non-normative sexuality plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of Russia within the Swedish context. The material was selected to allow for a contrast between Swedish hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses on Russia. Examples of counter-hegemonic discourse were purposefully chosen because of their relevance to the research questions, exemplifying distinctive uses of space, temporality, and emotion to create images of Russian non-normative sexuality. Apart from the club events, all other material is mentioned in the media discourses analyzed, albeit briefly, thereby highlighting the ways these articulations participate in discursive struggles within mainstream media. The YouTube videos originate and circulate in the Swedish context, coinciding with moments when Swedish media attention is directed toward Russia. I approach these examples as locally specific representations that were produced for domestic audiences, unlike images of Russia and other countries at sports or cultural megaevents, such as the Olympic Games or Eurovision. The analyses I provide of these thus contribute to a better understanding of how an image of Russia is articulated in specifically the Swedish, rather than a more general Western, context. The choice of the art projects is motivated by my aim to inquire into how representing Russian LGBT people in projects exhibited in institutional art spaces may challenge the unquestioned presup-

positions of LGBT progress. By contrast, the choice to analyze club events sheds light on how counter-hegemonic contestations operate in everyday practices. Taken together, the diverse material provides insight into both hegemonic discourse and practices of resistance that use ideas about non-normative sexuality to articulate national images.

The rest of this introductory chapter will contextualize the polarization of sexuality in histories of East/West European boundary-making, the perception of Russia in Sweden, and Sweden's image and its outward projections. From here, I will outline my argument across the analytical chapters, introduce the theoretical framework for the study, position my study in previous research, and describe the material and design of the study.

Background: sexuality, nations, and boundary drawing

It is important to situate the sexual polarization operative between the cases of Sweden and Russia in a historical context of Western Europe's identity construction. Across Europe, there has been a long-standing division, involving a hierarchical mental mapping of East and West. Research in history, international relations, and political science has shown that these differences have constructed Eastern Europe (Wolff 1994; Neumann 1999) and Russia in particular (Neumann 1999; Malia 1999) as its Other. Explorations of the Self/Other nexus (Neumann 1999, 5) show theoretically that the process of boundary drawing can take place in relation to any contingent element. This dissertation takes as its starting point the idea that sexual politics has become one of the salient elements on which constructions of Self/Other pivot in international relations. I am interested in the ways sexuality is implicated in establishing the Self/Other binary and how it can be destabilized. To this end, I take inspiration from a range of critical post-structuralist theories, queer, feminist, and postcolonial. My attention to articulations of difference in the cultural, rather than the institutional political space, is underpinned by the increased importance of culturalist understandings of difference between East and West.

A short recapitulation of this process of binary construction of East/West is in order. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, as Teresa Kulawik (2020) writes, Eastern Europe's discursive position has changed "from the Second World to the second Other of Europe" (5). Thus, Eastern Europe and the Balkans were placed between the Occident and Orient. In the geopolitical imaginary, Kulawik argues, these spaces functioned not as Europe's Other in terms of binary qualitative alterity, but instead as an incomplete Self vis-à-vis Western

Europe, that is, Eastern Europe and the Balkans are seen as quantitatively inferior.[9] For Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the dissolution of the Second World and the hard-won "return to Europe" implied, at the same time, a return of the culturalized differences in the race for "Europeanness," whereby the Iron Curtain was replaced with the "Velvet Curtain of Culture" (10).[10] This meant, in a certain sense, a restoration of earlier civilization maps and Orientalist imaginaries. Historian Larry Wolff argues that "it was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the 18th century" (4). Eastern Europe, as a culturally constructed unity, was identified as economically and culturally backward and situated between the enlightened, developed West and a barbarous, backward East (Wolff 1994, 8). The invention of Eastern Europe allowed the West to imagine the alterity between the West and the East along a scale of development, which provided the West with "its first model of underdevelopment, a concept that we now apply all over the globe" (9). This process, as Boatcă (2015, 209ff.) shows, went in line with Samuel Huntington's widely critiqued "clash of civilizations" thesis that implied the demarcation of the European continent along the line separating Western Christianity from Islam and Orthodox Christianity. In other words, after the Cold War competition between the two "dreamworlds" in Europe was over (Scott-Smith, Segal, and Romijn 2012; Buck-Morss 2002), the mental imaginaries returned to a state similar to 18th-century divisions, which emphasized the Eastern difference of the then-Russian empire. As Neumann predicted, the question after the end of the Cold War has become not "whether the East will be used in the forging of new European identities but how this is being done" (Neumann 1999, 207). Gender and sexuality have come to play the role of boundary signifiers. This process was paralleled by the disappearance of the second world and its histories of gender equality (Kulawik 2020) and sexuality (Szulc 2018) from Western scholarship.

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[9] The concept of *geopolitical imaginary*, which is used here to analyze European boundary drawing, is in line with Edward Said's work on *Orientalism* that has shown how ideas about (distant) countries constitute a horizon of *imaginative geographies*. Said ([1978] 2003) has demonstrated how both "scholarship and imaginative writing" (2003, 23), literature, art, and mass media produce ideas of Self and Other that cement unequal distribution of power, using imaginative geographies and images of "Otherness" to reify constitutive distinctions between *us* and *them*, especially concerning the Muslim Other. On this account, imaginative geographies are fictional realities or performative representations of spaces that produce the effect that they name (Saunders 2016, 72).

[10] The term Central and Eastern Europe (henceforth CEE) will be used to refer to postsocialist countries.

This dissertation is situated in relation to a tradition of this research on national identity construction. Yet it does not assume that the images and notions of Russia in Sweden are necessarily a carbon copy of those seen in the West or Western Europe, given Sweden's relatively close relations with Russia. As a brief review of historical literature will show, the relevance of gender and sexuality for the construction of the image of Russia in Sweden has been only marginally explored in existing research. I begin by explicating the concept of national images and will continue by situating the project against a background of literature that deals with images of Russia in the Swedish context in a broader sense, and furthermore highlight studies that focus on gender and sexuality.

Studying national images

My formulation of research questions and choice of material and methods have been equally inspired by an interest in sexuality and nation. This interest is also shared by those working within the fields of popular geopolitics and popular culture in world politics (PCWP) research. These fields posit that cultural artifacts are productive of discursive formations and (geo)political imaginations, which shape world politics and international relations (Grayson 2018, 41). These geopolitical imaginations in turn reflect and constitute popular culture, affecting the ways it is produced, circulated, and consumed (49). In line with approaches within this research field, the *image* in this study is understood to appear as a result of discursive representation. Uses of the word "image" in "national image" are not restricted to visual representations. *National image* is "a fluid, constructed view of a nation that exists on both the domestic and foreign levels" (Saunders 2016, 13). It should also be understood as a "multidimensional construct" that exists in a variety of forms and whose sources include discursive, material, and affective elements, taking graphic, perceptual, mental, and verbal/textual forms (13). These ideas about nations exist in a range of forms and function as "a synecdoche for vast, complex, and ultimately unknowable (yet still imaginable) congeries of places, things, peoples, experiences, and ideas" (15). Saunders further notes that, like any practice of representation, mental mapping of space and place is affective, situated, embodied, and partial, and is fundamentally marked by topographies of power and knowledge. Depending on the genre of representation, imaginaries cut across a number of divides such as factual and fictional, visual and written (17).

What is "Russia" and what is "Sweden"? I take the concept of *national image* to refer to the general impression that people in Sweden have of Russia

and Sweden. All these spaces, where constructions of Russia and Sweden are performed, can be subsumed under the heading *Sweden* or *Swedish context*. In line with my methodological approach, *Swedish context* can more precisely be understood to include both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. Thus, by *Sweden* I mean not only the Swedish state and state actors, but a broad array of people and sites, including individuals who produce media, popular culture and art, as well as those who engage with culture in everyday practices.

The image of Russia in the Swedish context

Studies of perceptions of Russia in Sweden have revolved around politics, especially its foreign, military, and moral dimensions. Tarkiainen (1974) writes that the Russian menace/Russian threat (Swedish: *rysskräck*) has played a significant role in the perception of Russia from the end of the 1500s, intensifying during the late 1600s in response to Russia's attempt to increase its military influence in the Baltic Sea region (Tarkiainen 1974, 59). Burgman (2001) demonstrates how this belief has endured for centuries in a variety of forms. From the beginning of the 17th century, increasing importance was attached to Russia's cultural image, and "pagan" (Tarkiainen 1974, 26) was replaced with "barbaric," in a move made to stress Sweden's belonging to and Russia's exclusion from "civilized Europe." This reflects what Wolff (1994, 5) has identified as a shift during the Enlightenment where Europe went from being divided along a South-North line to an East-West axis. The Russians' proclivity for drinking, a lax attitude toward sexuality, infidelity, and homosexuality in particular was emphasized, coupled with the fact that Russia was more authoritarian and centralized than Sweden (Tarkiainen 1974, 27).

Writing about the early 20th century, Martin Ericsson summarizes that "there has been a long tradition of hostile notions of 'Russians', where Russia as a state and nation has been portrayed as an aggressive security threat and as one of Sweden's military 'hereditary enemies,' and where Russians as a people have been portrayed as cruel, undisciplined, barbarous *(råa)* and 'Asian'" (2016, 131 my translation). This found expression and confirmation in a variety of forms, from diplomatic reports, Swedish silent films during the 1920s (Gustafsson 2007, 271–78), and election posters in 1928 and 1936.[11]

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[11] These were produced for the 1928 Swedish general election by the right-wing National Youth League of Sweden. A series of posters portraying Cossacks threatening Swedish women and warning against Bolshevism overtaking Sweden – with claims such as "Whoever votes for the Labor Party votes for Moscow" – alleged links between the Workers' Party (a temporarily alliance between the Social Democrats and the Swedish Communist party) and the Soviet Bolsheviks. Additionally, in

Echoing this, Kristian Gerner (2000, 34) shows how Russia has been imagined in Sweden not only as a "foreign Other" and "the closest metaphysical threat," but also as a future utopia (*framtidsland*) (Gerner 2000, 34). Håkanson (2012, 36) suggests that the construction of Russia as a threat was not to assert the Swedish elites' influence over the Russian Other, but because notions of Russia have been useful in internal political battles. Thus, the exercise of power was directed inward, not outward. Gunnar Åselius (1994) has argued that during the late 19th century the image of Russia as an external enemy became more prominent, supplementing the image of the internal threats to the Swedish ruling elites (417). With the defeat of the Russian empire in 1905, Russia was no longer a military threat for "a modern, highly developed industrial country like Sweden" (Blomqvist 2002b, 22). The threat instead became ideological. From the perspective of economic history, Swedish immigration to, and Sweden's economic activity within, the Russian empire from mid-19th century until the October Revolution of 1917 was understood as a civilizing mission through the economic expansion of new markets and cultural development, exporting "moral capital" (Carlbäck 2014, 59). In the 1920s, the nascent Soviet Union was dubbed the "Asian menace" by social-democratic politicians, yet at various periods it also had a utopic function in the Swedish imaginary (Blomqvist 2002a). The Bolshevist ideology, characterized by violence, dictatorship, civil war, and misery, became a point of comparison for visions of Sweden as a country defined by and through social-democratic peaceful practices, democratic struggle, and success (Blomqvist 2002b, 33).

In some respects, however, the early twentieth century modernizing politics of governing gender relations and sexuality in Russia and the Scandinavian countries are remarkably aligned (Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich 2022, 8). Thus, certain developments, such as gender equality during the interwar period in the Soviet Union, were considered as examples to be followed by the Swedish labor movement (Carlbäck 2002) and in the Swedish communist press (Brink Pinto 2008, 141–43). The period after WW2 was marked, in the words of historian Marie Cronqvist, by an "updated fear of Russia" where the older ideas about Russians were woven together with the perceived threat from communism (cited in Ericsson 2016, 132).

Russia has also been presented as a "student" of Sweden throughout history, from Peter I to Yeltsin's Russia (Gerner 2000, 34). In the early 1990s,

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1936, the Right produced a poster depicting a red octopus, symbolizing the threats of the Soviet Union and communism; the outcome of voting for the social democrats (*Svenska Dagbladet* 2014).

with Swedish cooperation on cultural and gender equality initiatives, Russia was presented as a "student," catching up with the more skillful Nordic partners, which clearly ignored the history of gender equality work in the Soviet Union (Gradskova 2017, 261–62). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has continued to be considered a "significant Other" in Swedish political discourse (Rodin 2010).

While existing historical research in Sweden has demonstrated the persistence of threat images, the importance of sexuality for the construction of the image of Russia has been overlooked. Analyses of portrayals of Russian women in Swedish media (Sarsenov and Leontieva 2003) testify to the prominence of sexuality in representations of Russian women that focused on prostitution and intercultural marriages, similar portrayals of which were also prominent in Norway (Jacobsen and Skilbrei 2010; Sverdljuk 2009) and Finland (Mattson 2016, 129ff.). Swedish cultural production followed media discourse. The release in 2002 of the crime drama *Lilya 4-ever* (Swedish: *Lilja 4-ever*), which focused on human trafficking and sexual slavery, reflected the ways Russian women were seen in Sweden (Stenport 2014). These representations centered on Russian/post-Soviet women as prostitutes, often as victims lacking agency, and thus as threats to established Swedish morality; sex trafficking was portrayed as the result of and a symbol for the failure of state socialism (Suchland 2013).[12] Such representations should thus be seen as symbolizing the cultural and economic change that the countries and societies in the Baltic Sea region have undergone after the collapse of communism. Research has also shown that Russian femininity has been constructed as hierarchically lower than Swedish in everyday life due to being understood as excessive (Lönn 2018), failing to embody the ideal of white respectable femininity (Krivonos and Diatlova 2020). These images of the postsocialist Russian-speaking woman dovetailed with the passing of anti-prostitution legislation in Sweden and anxieties about how sexual morality of other countries might affect it (Kulick 2005, 222). *Lilya 4-ever* was received as a statement of social realism and adopted by Swedish authorities as an anti-prostitution policy implementation tool, subsequently mobilized as a mouthpiece for international interventions against trafficking (Stenport 2014, 36).

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[12] Constructions of sex workers as both lacking agency and as immoral and deviant have been identified as key expressions of abolitionist feminist discourse that dovetails with state efforts to control sex workers (Levy and Jakobsson 2013, 338). For an outsider analysis of how Sweden's position as a moral leader in gender equality is constructed, see Mattson (2016, 77–96). For an example of a perspective different from the image of women as passive victims that has dominated Swedish public debate, see, e.g., Lindqvist and Lindqvist (2008).

The Sex Purchase Law adopted in Sweden in 1998, Kulick (2003) argues, is an instance where championing gender rights intersected with the moral position of Sweden internationally, not least in relation to the "East"/Russia. Swedish attitudes toward "prostitution" are related to anxiety regarding Sweden's position as a newly accepted member state in the EU. The Swedish fears of an "influx of Russian and Estonian women" (206) as prostitutes became a site for imagining and negotiating European boundaries. The Swedish position, which drew on a history of neutrality, internationalism, and moral righteousness (209–210), assumed that other "less enlightened" EU member countries would consider Sweden a role model, which in turn would help strengthen its international standing. This case provides an entry point into my discussion of how this national exceptionalism affected Sweden's image of Russia in relation to LGBT rights. My analysis specifically in Chapter 1, of the construction of Russian non-normative sexuality in Swedish media, takes as its starting point the history of Sweden's multifaceted exceptionalism. The next section outlines how neutrality, internationalism, and righteousness are connected to Sweden's place in the world more broadly.

Sweden's multifaceted exceptionalism

In addition to Russia occupying a significant place, as the Other, in the self-understanding of Sweden, it is also underpinned by the idea that Sweden is an exceptional nation. The idea of Swedish national exceptionalism extends across the domains of politics, economics, and culture, and encompasses the particularities of the Swedish welfare state,[13] its gender politics, its migration regime, as well as its international politics (Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2015, 250).[14] This notion builds on an understanding of Sweden as "the epitome of excellency [*sic*] and modernity" that can be traced back to the 1930s (Musiał 1998, 22). What preceded the formulation and packaging of this idea of Swedishness, and Sweden's self-image as progressive, is a presumption of uniqueness, often in pre-scientific understandings of Swedes as descendants

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[13] The Swedish model also refers to the Swedish model of industrial relations based on the collective bargaining system involving the main parties in the labor market, employers and trade unions (Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2015, 252).

[14] Recent research (Larsen, Moss, and Skjelsbæk 2021; Byrkjeflot et al. 2021) has highlighted the commonalities among the Nordic countries and individual national models. Because my material is collected in a Swedish context, my focus is on Sweden rather than on the Nordic region or Scandinavia. Although certain similarities can be identified in the ways Nordic or Scandinavian countries approach questions of gender and sexuality (Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich 2022; Larsen, Moss, and Skjelsbæk 2021), research has also highlighted national specificities (U. Dahl 2011; Jezierska and Towns 2021).

of hyperboreans, a mythical people who lived in the far northern part of the world. Tracing the origins of the myth to the 17th century when Sweden was one of the great European powers, cultural geographer Katarina Schough (2008) writes that the 20th century, not least, became "the century of the peaceful and cultured hyperborean" (19). Sweden presented itself as peaceful, scientific, and modern, and in this way precisely as a "moral superpower" and world conscience, simultaneously participating as an observer in European colonization practice and two world wars, superior to both the victims and the aggressive colonizers (19).

Throughout the 20th century, Sweden has been variously framed as the social laboratory, the middle way, and the model to be emulated (Marklund 2009). Kazimierz Musiał (1998) shows how the circulation and constant interaction between xeno- (foreign ideas about Sweden) and autostereotypes (Swedish generalizations about Sweden) constructed Sweden as the embodiment of progress both domestically and internationally. Marquis Childs' *Sweden, the Middle Way*, published in the US in 1936, solidified the image of Sweden as having found a compromise between market economy and socialism, positing that the Swedish approach to welfare was a successful socialist policy with a growing capitalist sector (Marklund 2009, 268–72). Post WWII, its external image in connection with an image of speedy modernization led directly to branding Sweden as an "avant-garde" nation and as a *model* to be followed (Musiał 1998, 30-31; see also Marklund 2009, 278). Carl Marklund (2017) highlights Sweden's pivotal role in defining the Nordic welfare state, which was often internationally referred to as the "Swedish" model due to the perceived success of the Swedish economy.

A crucial facet of the exceptionalism discourse, connected to Sweden's international image expressed in its foreign policy, is the concept of Swedish moral exceptionalism. The idea of Sweden as a "moral superpower," reflecting its politics in the mid-1960s and the late 1980s (A.-S. Dahl 2006, 896) was born out of the Swedish government's social-democratic policy in pursuit of a "third way," between the capitalist democracy in the US and the communist dictatorship in the Soviet Union (908). Neutral Sweden has represented itself as an actor with a moral obligation to advocate the plight of weak actors and small states ([Dahl] Nilsson 1991). Its self-proclaimed moral superiority has been closely tied to its foreign aid practices (Lumsdaine 1993). In addition to its neutrality, the persistent image of the Nordic countries as untainted by Europe's colonial past (Mulinari et al. 2009), articulating an idea of its own "racial innocence" (Fur 2016; Mier-Cruz 2022), has allowed the Nordics to present themselves as well-suited mediators and

critics in political debates over global inequalities (Bjereld 1995), and champions of minority rights (Ipsen and Fur 2009, 10). The idea of Nordic exceptionalism, as disconnected from European colonialism, has enabled the association of Sweden, as one of these countries, with peace, rationality, and progress (Jensen and Loftsdóttir 2022, 84). In the 1980s, this led the Swedish journalist Arne Ruth to note the specificity of Swedish nationalism. As a consequence of Sweden's historical decline as a major regional power since the early 18th century, Sweden lacked the sense of traditional heritage and a tradition of national romanticizing that underpinned many other nationalisms. This decline has caused Sweden to depict itself as "humanitarian" rather than "heroic." Thus, Ruth concludes, for Sweden, internationalism functioned as a form of "ersatz patriotism" (Ruth 1984, 68).

Gender equality exceptionalism is another form that Swedish exceptionalism took in the 1990s. In the 1970s and early 1980s, gender equality became a distinct policy area. Equality efforts were related to labor market issues, including policies to encourage women to become earners and men to become carers; equal social rights for women; and the establishment of a ministerial post and equality agencies. In 1994, the strategy of gender mainstreaming (*jämställdhetsintegrering*) was adopted, outlining national goals for gender equality as the collective responsibility of the Swedish government (Bergqvist, Blandy, and Sainsbury 2007, 227–231). Ann Towns (2002, 162) shows that the gender equality aspect was incorporated into previous Swedish representations as a "model" state with "moral obligations" to the international community and a "modern" state. Since the mid-1990s, international improvements in gender equality have routinely been referred to in state publications "as a considerable success for Sweden", and gender equality has been represented as a "Swedish question" (Towns 2002, 162). This label as the champion of gender equality has particularly been used to propel the self-image since Sweden was given an award as the most gender-equal state at the Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (163).

Ideas of gender equality (*jämställdhet*) enjoy support across left-right divisions in Swedish politics. The politics of gender equality have been criticized by feminist scholars (Martinsson, Griffin, and Giritli Nygren 2016; Tollin 2011). Ulrika Dahl identifies gender equality as being central to maintaining heteronormativity. "The late modern Swedish saga of the original couple, the man and the woman [...] A vision of the transformed, but still romantic love between free women and secure men who overcome all obstacles and where no power arrangements exist. Gender equality is at the same time a goal, an ideal, and a norm" (U. Dahl 2005, 49). While being cen-

tral to maintaining heteronormativity, because gender equality politics is rooted in consensus rather than being the subject of political struggle, Tollin (2011, 168ff.) argues that discourses of gender equality have a depoliticizing effect on feminist concerns, favoring the increasingly neoliberal state-centered solutions over others and separating "gender" from other categories of oppression and areas of politics, such as social, economic, and labor politics. Additionally, by singling out gender as a distinct area of policy intervention, the politics of gender equality in Sweden ends up lacking perspectives on class, race, or sexuality. In a right-wing political climate, with the dismantling of social welfare since the 1990s and the de-democratization of society, the politics of gender equality (*jämställdhet*) contribute to the outmaneuvering of the socialist alternative (169).

In 2014, Sweden became the first country in the world to declare a feminist foreign policy (FFP) (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2020), a policy label that was discontinued in 2022. As an assessment report indicates (Towns, Bjarnegård, and Jezierska 2023, 16–17), "feminism" was used as a new way to present what had hitherto been referred to as "gender equality." The label had tangible effects on Swedish foreign policy, serving to signal strong ambitions for gender equality and enhance international leadership, unifying policies under a single umbrella term. It also created tensions with gender-conservative forces and did not possess the revolutionary impetus of feminism, which was often replaced as a term with the more palatable notion of "gender equality" (16). Moreover, questions concerning sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and LGBT rights were absent from feminist foreign policy. These topics have been pursued directly by SIDA, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and in the work carried out by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, acting as a norm entrepreneur in pushing for LGBTI diplomacy through norm diffusion (Rainer 2022).

In addition to gender equality, ideas of sex liberalism have also affected the Swedish self-image and its projections outward. There is a long history of a narrative of Sweden as a tolerant and equal society and, while there certainly has been a long and partly successful struggle in Sweden for the rights of same-sex couples, the idea of Sweden as already tolerant predates these reforms (Andersson, 2017). Sweden is often described as a sex-positive and sex-liberal nation. This idea of Sweden as a free-minded and sexually progressive nation has been an integral part of the narrative of the Swedish welfare state (Sundén 2023b). For example, sex education developed as part of the 1930s sex reform movement, and in 1955 Sweden was the first country in the world to introduce compulsory public sex education

in schools as part of a larger social democratic project (Lennerhed 1994, 34–36, cited in Sundén 2023b).

The ideas of Swedish sexual liberalism acquired a clear international dimension when in 1955 *Time* magazine published the article "Sin & Sweden," which remarked on unrestrained sexual freedom in the country and posited Swedish sexuality as a matter of wide-reaching international interest (Hale 2003). This was in part due to the circulation of films such as Ingmar Bergman's *Summer with Monika* (*Sommaren med Monika*, 1953) and Arne Mattsson's *One Summer of Happiness* (*Hon dansade en sommar*, 1951), which presented the American public with images of young, nude bodies and premarital sex. This development helped shape an image of Sweden as a nation with little regard for sexual mores. Swedish authorities have been reluctant to confirm or disprove the myth of Swedish sin, seeing it as a contributor to a (desired) national self-image of radical progressiveness and exceptionalism, which could also be exported as proof of Swedish and more broadly Nordic spontaneity, authenticity, and the joy of life (Glover and Marklund 2009, 493ff., 509). Domestically, the Swedish sin was incorporated in the 1960s by a promotion of "sexual democracy," accentuating sex as modern, rational, and above all, equal (Glover & Marklund 2009). Thus, as Jenny Sundén argues, extending Kulick's (2005, 210) argument, the alleged Swedish sin is however hardly sinful at all. The films portrayed sex as natural, good, and healthy, not decadent or perverse. This did not prevent sexual minorities from being pushed to the social margins (Rydström and Tjeder 2021). The Swedish model of good sex is entwined with histories of social democracy and gender equality, making it challenging to reconcile with sexual practices based on power hierarchies, no matter how consensual (Sundén 2023b, 81). While some relations and expressions that differ from heteronormativity have achieved acceptance in Swedish society, other sexual practices that do not conform to ideas of good sex, are still on the margins of the Swedish hetero- and even homonorm (Sundén 2023a; E. Bengtsson 2022; C. Andersson and Carlström 2022; Carlström 2016). Swedish homonormativity has been described as going "hand in hand with a more general domestication and control of other forms of same sex sexuality" (Ambjörnsson 2006, 95, cited in Liinason 2017, 6). The idea of sexual liberalism, once a building block of the welfare state, as well as homonormativity, are thus firmly connected to the image of Sweden at home and abroad. As such, they constitute and constrain the field of sexual practices, identities, and expressions.

Sweden's exceptionalism continues to thrive in the form of the "Progressive Sweden" brand that incorporates "gender equality" (Larsen, Moss, and Skjelsbæk 2021) and LGBT exceptionalism (Jezierska and Towns 2018), of which the latter is sometimes presented on a "timeline of achievement."[15] Björklund & Lindqvist (2016, xiii) highlight that the legislative progress on LGBT issues has enforced the imaginaries of progressive Sweden, not least owing to the well-integrated homosexual couple, "a symbol for the majority's tolerance" (Rydström 2011, 21) worthy of public respect and even protection by the Swedish Armed Forces (Strand and Kehl 2019). The commonly accepted narrative is that Sweden, along with the other Nordic countries (cf. U. Dahl 2011), is a pioneer of LGBT rights. Such a progress narrative conveys a truth that fits well into the national image of Sweden as one of the most democratic and emancipated in the world (Edenheim 2005, 11). I will now shortly present some historical research in order to highlight the sexual exceptionalism's contingency and historical amnesia and thus set the stage for my analysis of the image of Russia in the Swedish context since the 1990s.

State regulation of same-sex sexual acts can be traced to Charles IX's sodomy ban in 1608 (Rydström 2003, 30). From the inclusion in the Penal Code of 1864 under the name "fornication against nature," until its decriminalization in 1944, same-sex sexual acts were banned in Sweden. During 1864–1944 Sweden was among the few European countries where the ban included women (37). Although in the 1930s Sweden saw rapid modernization and social development, homosexuality remained within medical and criminological frameworks (159–60). The debate across Swedish society finally led to the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1944. This legislative change can hardly be seen as liberalization (187), as punishment became harsher for sex with minors, where castration was instituted as punishment for offenders. Moreover, the 1950s inaugurated an intense atmosphere of homophobia. In contrast to the USA, where attitudes to homosexuals were entwined with foreign politics during the era of the Lavender Scare (Johnson

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[15] The government-run website Sweden.se (2022) mentions a number of legal instruments under the heading "LGBTQI progress in Sweden – some milestones," starting with "1944 – Homosexual relations are legalized" to "2019 – Stronger legal protection against hate crimes for trans people through inclusion in the Freedom of the Press Act." Also found on Swedish government's website: https://www.government.se/articles/2018/07/chronological-overview-of-lgbt-persons-rights-in-sweden/

2004),[16] in Sweden, homosexuality was primarily a domestic issue.[17] Two high-profile investigations, the *Kejne Affair*, looking into accusations against homosexuals in church and government, and the *Haijby Affair*, alleging that King Gustaf V had a lover that he had paid to avoid blackmail, reflected the ways homophobia permeated politics.

Although Sweden's largest LGBT rights organization, RFSL, was founded in 1950 as a homophile society, it took almost two decades until this organization gained political visibility (Norrhem, Rydström, and Winkvist 2008, 136–37).[18] A culture of homophobia would last until the 1970s. Lesbians created networks and came to be more visible by voicing opposition to the discourse pursued by gay men that dominated the debates on same-sex marriage (137). Gay men and lesbians were not the only ones to criticize the institution of marriage. Between 1973 and 1986, for example, the Swedish Left Communist Party submitted 11 different proposals regarding communal housing and communal living to the parliament. In 1979, *Socialstyrelsen* (The National Board of Health and Welfare) removed homosexuality from its official list of mental illnesses.

The AIDS epidemic arrived in Sweden in 1982, affecting mostly gay men throughout the 1980s. The response was characterized by a lack of coordination between the gay male movement and the state, which preferred harsh legislative measures, such as *Bastuklubbslagen* (the Bathhouse Law), which closed all Swedish gay saunas, as well as the stipulations of forced disclosure under *Smittskyddslagen* (the Infectious Diseases Law) (2008, 154–55). Compulsory hospitalizations, the impossibility of anonymous testing, and a punitive approach to addiction made the Swedish approach one of the most drastic in the industrialized world (Baldwin 2005). The Swedish political debate has been characterized by silence about AIDS until very recently (Warburton 2014, 14), yet the epidemic is an exemplar of how the Swedish state powerfully controlled bodies and sex (Warburton 2016, 12). The AIDS crisis gave a sense of urgency to the project of gay rights and

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[16] Gay men and lesbians were said to be national security risks and communist sympathizers, which led to the call to remove them from state employment; a panicked discourse presented "sissies" as "Stalin's atom bomb to destroy America" (Sherry 2007, 30).

[17] Some of the reverberations of the Cold War suspicious toward homosexuals and communists were felt in Sweden with the coming out of a known diplomat Sverker Åström at the age of 87 in 2003. Åström was a member of the Swedish delegation to Moscow during WWII, classified as a secret homosexual and possibly a communist spy by the Swedish Security Service (*SÄPO*) (Gindt 2010).

[18] The Swedish Association for Sexual Equality, Swedish: *Riksförbundet för sexuellt likaberättigande*, currently called The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights (Swedish: *Riksförbundet för homosexuellas, bisexuellas, transpersoners och queeras rättigheter*).

provided a new legitimacy to gay rights organizations (Rydström 2011, 67), creating a background for the adoption, in 1988, of the Law on Homosexual Cohabitation (2011, 50–51). The next step, not at all evident from the vantage point of the later 1980s, was the registered partnership. While before 1989, there was no consensus in the Swedish gay and lesbian movements (54), the adoption of a partnership law in Denmark resulted later in the passing of the Law on Registered Partnership in June 1994, and which came into force in 1995 (55–57). The Swedish *Riksdag* took another 8 years to allow adoption by same-sex couples in 2003 and to vote in favor of a gender-neutral marriage law in 2009 (157). It is also in 2009 that the National Board of Health and Welfare ceased to classify transvestism as an illness, while in 2013 the mandatory sterilization requirement in the Legal Gender Recognition Act was abolished.

As this recapitulation has shown, the narrative of Sweden as a "secular, gender-equal and LGBTQI-tolerant nation, […] often considered a political role model for the rest of the world" (Alm et al. 2021, 2) is based on discursive exclusions and omissions. First, despite the progress in LGBT issues, the sexual field remains highly circumscribed with a chasm between acceptable and unacceptable forms of sex and sexuality (Kulick 2005; Sundén 2023a; Liinason 2017). Second, this progress in LGBT rights runs parallel to persisting discrimination against and exclusions of ethnic Others, Muslim and Black (Towns 2002; Kehl 2020a; Alm et al. 2021). Third, there is silence, or, more pointedly, cultural and historical amnesia, about certain aspects of the national past, i.e., the dark side of the *folkhem*, such as the eugenics project (Björkman and Widmalm 2010; Broberg and Tydén 2005), the handling of the AIDS epidemic (Baldwin 2005; Bredström 2005; Warburton 2016), as well as resource extraction in the North of Sweden (Fur 2006). This imaginary of an idealized past not only creates an image of a progressive Sweden across time. It also shores up a melancholic longing for a homogenous, white, and progressive society of the past (Lundström and Hübinette 2020). Although the (idea of) Swedish exceptionalism has been challenged on several counts (Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2015; Alm et al. 2021; Martinsson, Griffin, and Giritli Nygren 2016) and even proclaimed dead, the image of Sweden as a model has retained its relevance in politics (J. Andersson 2009). In such a way, both domestically and internationally, the discourses of nation-building and nation-branding, which took forms of welfare, moral, gender, and, finally, sexual exceptionalism, imply a teleological temporality that invests the nation with a special mission and destiny. To add the final touch to the

background of this study, I will now present a brief history of how homosexuality has been understood and regulated in Russia.

Same-sex sexuality in Russia

The history of regulating same-sex relations goes back to Emperor Peter I's Military Articles (1716) that banned sodomy in the army and navy and the ban was extended to civilian men in 1835 (Healey 2017, xi). The anti-sodomy law remained in place until 1917 and was enforced in a sporadic and lax way (xii). When coming to power in October 1917, Soviet Bolsheviks launched a "sexual revolution" that spoke against religious authority and pivoted on secular and scientific values. This led to the legalization of abortion (1920) and the decriminalization of sodomy (1922) (xiv). The Soviet Union returned to a ban on sodomy in 1933–34 in the wake of an economic and societal crisis to crack down on dissent and deviance. After Stalin died in 1953, the period of *thaw* followed, bringing liberalization of some legislation, though the anti-sodomy ban remained unaffected (xiv). On the contrary, policing, and surveillance of homosexual liaisons, not least of those freed from the Gulag, intensified to bolster weakening masculinity (25).[19] Nevertheless, homosexuality started to be discussed in professional fields (Alexander 2021). The living conditions of Soviet people, including homosexuals, did change during Brezhnev's stagnation when people were able to carve out a space for a private life. In this connection, Healey writes of another "sexual revolution" from below that reshaped lifestyles of many during 1960–1980 (xv).

By the end of the 1980s, under Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*, in addition to being victims of homophobia, homosexual men and women started to organize themselves politically around issues of sexuality and gender. The Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 and the anti-sodomy law was finally repealed in 1993. New possibilities for activism and visibility appeared during the 1990s, together with economic and political instability. This meant that in the 1990s and 2000s "sexual minorities" could speak openly. However, by the same token, so could conservative forces. The paradoxically ostensible lack of stigma concerning homosexuality, and instead a desire to embrace homosexuality as a signifier of freedom led several men, including Russian nationalists (Fenghi 2017, 185), in the early 1990s, to adopt a male homosexual identity reviving the connection between male masochism, gay

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[19] The Gulag was the government agency in charge of the Soviet network of forced labor camps, which reached its peak during Stalin's rule 1930-1950. For some perspectives that illuminate the place of homosexuality in the Soviet Gulag see Healey (2017).

identity and Russian identity characteristic of the Silver Age, a period of early and high modernism in Russian culture, from around the mid-1890s to the October 1917 Revolution (Beaudoin 2006). Russian LGBT activism emerged in the same period as the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities was created in the winter of 1989–90 (Essig 1999, 58).

The decriminalization of homosexuality followed in 1993 is largely viewed (Healey 2017, 106) as the outcome of Russia joining the Council of Europe and thus was understood as a top-down political decision. While some point to the marginal role of activists once the ban on homosexuality was repealed, with many strands of activism losing their *raison d'être* (Nemtsev 2008), others (e.g., Kondakov 2023, 160–61) refuse any simplistic attempt to fit these events into a progress narrative, thereby denying Russia its agency vis-à-vis Europe and playing down the role of domestic experts and politicians. Nevertheless, as Stella (2015) highlights, after its decriminalization, no specific legislation addressing discrimination based on sexuality was proposed, and there has been a complete absence of support for LGBT rights from all political sides. In the post-Soviet Russian context, sexual citizenship has primarily revolved around the freedom to express one's sexuality and consume sexual content, without extending to the realm of civil rights and liberties. This perception aligns with the overall scarcity of constructive public discussions regarding sexuality, sexual well-being, and safe practices, and the predominant belief that one's sexuality should remain a private affair during the 2000s (Stella 2015, 38–40).

The early days of Russian LGBT organizing are characterized by a mixture of methods, with both confrontational and compromise-oriented strands and a lack of official political recognition. Unlike contexts where the LGBT movement had a long history before achieving some level of acceptance and visibility, emergent Russian political mobilizations were dependent on foreign funds, at the same as they coincided with a period of political instability (Baer 2011, 178).

Given the specific political culture in post-Soviet Russia in which public demonstrations often arouse suspicion, expressed specifically in a reluctant relationship to visibility, it is no surprise that few people attended the Moscow Pride Parade 2006 (Sarajeva 2011, 149). The poorly attended Moscow Pride 2006, organized by GayRussia, became a symbol of the failure of the nascent activism. Throughout the 2010s, LGBT activisms operated in Russia on local, national, and global scales (Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich 2022), yet their effects were ambiguous, and their achievements too easily contested. Twenty years after the decriminalization of homo-

sexuality, in 2013, the so-called "gay propaganda" law was passed, an amendment to a federal law that prohibited "distribution of information that is aimed at the formation among minors of non-traditional sexual attitudes, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations, misperceptions of the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relations, or enforcing information about non-traditional sexual relations that evokes interest to such relations" (*Federal Law No. 135-FZ of June 29,* 2013). This has been commonly understood as the start of political homophobia in Russia (Edenborg 2018; Wilkinson 2014; Moss 2017).

Contrary to the description of homophobia on an individual level, as a psychic phenomenon, political homophobia operates at the level of the state, which has the power to shape local structures of sexuality (M. J. Bosia 2013, 31; Murray 2009; Rao 2020). The application of political homophobia requires no substantive self-defined LGBT community in a given national context because it can be applied as a set of discursive propositions across diverse contexts (Bosia & Weiss 2017, 5–7). A violent outbreak of political homophobia in Chechnya, a Russian region in the North Caucasus, in 2017 with kidnappings and tortures of Chechen gay men by the authorities of the Chechnya region is a case in point in how political homophobia operates (Brock and Edenborg 2020). Russian media posits violence as the outcome of the activism of Nikolai Alekseev, the leader of GayRussia, who applied for permission to hold pride parades in four cities in Russia's Caucasus republics. Yet the subsequent investigations showed that the applications to hold gay demonstrations were not the sole triggers of violence. In the absence of any clear language to describe crimes against LGBT individuals, the violence in the Chechen case is in line with the growth in hate crimes and highly affective homophobic violence since the 2013 law was passed (Kondakov 2011; 2022).

Outline of the dissertation

So far, I have outlined my aim and research questions and have provided some background on the construction of the image of non-normative sexuality in Sweden and Russia. I now summarize my argument across the analytical chapters. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the theoretical framework, it will situate the study within previous research, and will outline the research design and introduce the empirical material.

Chapters 1 – 4 focus on analyses of media material, popular culture, art, and events by Russian-speaking people in a Swedish context. Chapter 1 analyzes the discourse on Russian non-normative sexuality in the five largest

daily newspapers. It explores how the constructions of Russia as a temporal and affective Other in regard to LGBT rights reinforce the discourse of Swedish sexual exceptionalism. Chapter 2 continues to probe Swedish hegemonic Othering discourse on Russia. It studies visual representations of Russian sexuality in print media, whose textual discourse has already been analyzed in Chapter 1, and in examples from popular culture – two YouTube videos, "Propaganda!" by Måns Zelmerlöw and "Folkkär" by Kamferdrops feat. Frej Larsson. It inquiries into how the need to "save Russia" is articulated through specific articulations of visibility and camp visual aesthetics that reinforce the idea of Swedish exceptionalism by circulating messages of love. The following chapters aim to explore counter-hegemonic representations and ponder what modes of recognition can arise when visibility is de-centered. Chapter 3 examines two art projects, *State of Mind* by Axel Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg, and *At the Time of the Third Reading* by Axel Karlsson Rixon. The chapter argues that art gives space for an alternative mode of recognition, what I call queer recognition, of Russian LGBT people in the Swedish context. I will here draw on queer theory's critiques of linear historical progression to consider how LGBT people are visually represented beyond traditional textual and visual media. Chapter 4 explores the role of gender/non-normative sexuality in construction and performance of a hybrid culture at *Baba Bomba Diskoteka*, a series of club events held in Stockholm from 2017 to 2019 by a group of Russian-speaking friends. Through a discourse analysis of interviews with organizers of the club events, and supplemented by visual and textual material available online, the chapter looks at how the organizers used articulations of sexuality to position themselves and create a queer and hybrid space from out of which the image of Russia could be rearticulated. The concluding chapter outlines this study's results and its contributions to the fields of gender and sexuality studies and Russian studies.

Theoretical framework

This dissertation intertwines and builds on theoretical advances made in queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory. First, I will present an overview of queer theory, the main theoretical lens through which the nexus of sexuality and nation will be approached. In outlining a queer perspective, I consider Jasbir Puar's theorizing on *homonationalism* to be highly relevant to the Swedish context. To contextualize the workings and effects of *homonationalism* for my analysis, I draw on theories of how national images are

shaped as LGBT people are subjected to the logic of *recognition* as theorized by Judith Butler. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of *hybridity*, along with constructivist conceptions of nation, also contribute to the queer theoretical framework adopted in this thesis; postcolonial theory, in particular, allows for an understanding of how national images are constructed.

Queer theoretical perspectives on sexuality and nation

A queer theoretical understanding of gender and sexuality, and their impact on the formation of national images, is central to this study. Since its inception as an academic field in the 1990s, queer studies have constituted a vibrant and variegated theoretical field. Teresa de Lauretis (1991, 5) writes that queer theory has been envisaged as a way to avoid the fine distinctions inherent in the terms "gay" and "lesbian" as labels for specific kinds of sexualities, sexual practices, communities, issues, and discourses. Queer theory seeks to challenge and transgress, or at least critically examine them. Queer theory has been influenced by many theoretical streams, such as mid-20th century deviance studies and psychoanalytic theory (Amin 2020), feminist theory, including sex-radical, Marxist, and feminist of color scholarship, gay and lesbian studies, cultural studies, social constructionism, deconstructionist and poststructuralist social theory, as well as Black, feminist, and LGB and trans activist currents (McCann and Monaghan 2019, 6–7, 54ff.). Queer theory can be a perspective to point out that concepts and identities are specific to times and places yet may also proliferate across geographical areas and persist through time (D. E. Hall 2003, 164–68). However, queer theory's implicit West/Eurocentric bias (Liu 2017) and even rootedness and complicity in American Cold War anti-Soviet sentiment have been uncovered (Popa 2021), which requires a consideration of queer theory's appropriateness across contexts. This issue will be taken up in my later discussions on the use of the term homonationalism in a Swedish context and the applicability of queer theory to a study of Russia in the section *Queer research on/in Russia*.

This dissertation takes as its starting point the poststructuralist understanding of gender and sexuality, advanced by, among others, Butler (1990) and Foucault ([1976] 1990). They dispense with the idea that there is an innate, essential part to identity and stress the constitutive role of language, operating via discursive power, in the process of subject identity formation. Butler (1990) has argued, through the figure of a drag queen, that gender is performative. Which is to say, gender's seeming coherence and binary structure are powerful fictions derived from repeated performances of gender

ideals. Foucault argues that sexuality is not based on innate desire but rather emerges in the process of regulation by historically sedimented institutions. Foucault's view of sexuality as a constructed category is central to his understanding of power not only as oppressive but also as productive (Foucault [1976] 1990, 83). Power thus creates the very categories that it then regulates, such as that of the homosexual. Operations of power always include possibilities for resistance. A queer theoretical approach thus contributes with resistance to and critiques of hetero- and homonormativity. Normativity is understood to pertain to systems that construct norms, standards, and expectations. They function as mechanisms of social control, with the process of their establishment naturalized (McCann and Monaghan 2019, 13). I draw on critiques of heteronormativity (Warner 1993; Halberstam 2005) and homonormativity (Duggan 2002; Puar 2007) to study the processes of both exclusion and inclusion of sexually non-normative subjects within the realm of the nation.

Homonationalism: a queer-theoretical point of departure

Puar (2007) has suggested the term *homonationalism* to capture the sexual politics of "post-9/11" societies. Homonationalism describes the processes whereby mainstream political parties advocate for including homosexual subjects in the self-image of the state as "worthy of protection." This is in contrast to earlier state depictions of homosexuality as a deviation, abnormality, or a threat to public health. According to Puar (2007, 2), homonationalism manifests itself in three related ways: "sexual exceptionalism," such as in the representation of the USA as exceptionally tolerant toward sexual diversity and incorporating LGBT people into nation-buildings projects; "queer as regulatory," which places queerness within a secular framework, so that gay men can "enact forms of national, racial, or other belongings by contributing to the collective vilification of Muslims" (21); and "the ascendancy of whiteness," according to which the state and the market extend national belonging to selected multicultural heteronormative (e.g., middle class and straight) and homonormative subjects while maintaining homophobic/xenophobic practices (26).

Puar's (2007) interrogation of the collusion between nationalism and constructions of normative homosexuality (Duggan 2002) is central to this study's analysis of the Swedish context. Underpinning this theoretical elaboration is Lisa Duggan's (2002) concept of *homonormativity* that problematizes the mainstreaming of LGBT rights and their co-optation by neoliberal ideology, amounting to a "public recognition of a domesticated,

depoliticized privacy [of "the gay movement"]" (65). A critique of homonormativity focuses on a particular form of politics of LGBT liberation that fails to challenge heteronormative institutions and ideals that privilege certain (white, able-bodied, middle-class) queer bodies to the detriment of others (non-white, disabled, working class).

Homonationalism points to the ways in which the inability to accept homosexuality becomes a marker of otherness, which is deployed to construct images of other, religious and homophobic, nations. As Chapters 1 and 2 will show, the workings of *homonormativity* and *homonationalism* in a Swedish context impact on the process of creation and circulation of national images of Russia and Sweden by privileging certain representations of the nation-sexuality nexus. This contrasts significantly to earlier iterations of nationalism, which grounded an idea of the nation exclusively on heteronormative subjects, women and men, specific versions of femininity and masculinity (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Yuval-Davis 1997; Nagel 1998; 2003), and so, positing the homosexual as its antithesis. Now, however, giving equal rights to sexual minorities has become a barometer of development (Puar 2013b). Taking this as a "diagnostic" of global sexual politics, as Schotten (2016) wonders, "are we all homonational now?" The question is how to proceed from here? Puar's and others' theorizations can be seen as a call to examine the assumptions and normativities underpinning contemporary LGBT politics. To this end, I take inspiration from queer theories that critique normativity by elucidating the links between sexuality, nation, "race"/ethnicity, and class, while simultaneously going beyond this focus on (anti)normativity (e.g., Wiegman and Wilson 2015).

Queerly pluralized

To move beyond polarization in sexual politics, which finds expression in opposing national images, and to disrupt how these are mapped geopolitically, I take my cue from queer theory's deconstructive impetus. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queer is useful in this regard. For Sedgwick, queer denotes:

> the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically (Sedgwick 1993, 8).

Sedgwick's definition is taken up by scholars of queer international relations, a field that combines insights of queer studies with international relations scholarship. Building on this, as well as Roland Barthes' rule of an *and/or*, Cynthia Weber has usefully demonstrated how the "queerly pluralized *and/or* subjectivities" (Weber 2016, 197) matter for international relations. Analyzing representations of Conchita Wurst/Thomas Neuwirth, Weber shows how queer complexity was stripped as Wurst became a signifier of difference between the East and the West of Europe.[20] Richter-Montpetit and Weber (2017) explain that non-monolithic expressions of gender and sexuality include those expressions of subjectivities that might be read as, for example, male and/or female, masculine and/or feminine, heterosexual and/or homosexual, as well as neither/nor with respect to any of these categories. Theoretically, Weber's (2016) idea of queerly pluralized *and/or* subjectivities is useful because it allows me to challenge the dichotomous divisions that arise out of labeling some countries "homonational" and others "homophobic."

With these theoretical insights as a springboard, I suggest, in line with queer theoretical thinking that privileges plural and multiple positions, that homonationalist projects rely on normative arrangements of intelligibility. Butler (2009) argues that these schemes of intelligibility underlie patterns of *recognition* that determine in a relative sense who will be regarded as "a subject worthy of recognition." Access to recognition is unevenly distributed and requires meeting certain conditions of intelligibility (6). The concept of recognition can help elucidate the links between homonormativity and sexual exceptionalism that are fundamental to a nations and state's embrace of LGBT people. For Butler, recognition is co-extensive with power. Any act of recognition can simultaneously exert positive pressure, leading to self-

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[20] Weber sees Wurst/Neuwirth, winner of Eurovision Song Contest 2014, as a "transborder figure." On the one hand, this figure, when embraced, can be seen as a representation of a new, tolerant "Europe" or, on the other, when rejected, as a symbol of a backward and homophobic "Europe." On the other hand, this figure "defies traditional understandings across multiple axes" (145). The bearded drag queen, itself a contradiction because one is typically either bearded or a drag queen, not only subverts traditional categorizations of gender/sexuality, making it impossible to define as either homosexual or heterosexual, but also disrupts established racial hierarchies. Wurst/Neuwirth's racial identity, drawn from various anecdotes in the artist's and character's biographies, shifts between white, indigenous, and Mestiza. Refusing to be positioned as *either/or*, in Wurst/Neuwirth there's a dynamic oscillation, not mere ambiguity, due to the theoretical formation of a third element stemming from the simultaneous use of "and" and "or." Neuwirth/Wurst, who can be identified as he/she/they, also embodies a fusion of both physical representation and symbolic significance. Deconstructing the notion of a fixed representation, Wurst/Neuwirth is exemplary of the inability, in Sedgwick's terms, "to signify monolithically."

affirmation and negative, normalizing, or exclusionary effects. Butler's account of recognition as ambivalent is better attuned to the negative effects inherent within acts of recognition (McQueen 2015, 49). This ambivalent structure allows me to problematize the homonationalist underpinnings of the Swedish self-image by paying attention to forms of sexual and national subjectivities that appear not fully intelligible and thus not recognized in a Swedish context.

These critiques of *intelligibility* lay the groundwork for the concept of *visibility*, which allows me to pinpoint the significance of Butler's critiques for my analysis. Struggles for visibility, recognition, and equality have been emblematic of Western LGBT movements. Indeed, the Western model of sexual liberation has been premised on the idea that being open about one's sexual identity, that is, being publicly visible, is necessary for achieving inclusion. By studying representations of Russian non-normative sexuality, I draw on critiques that identify the shortcomings of visibility, of being understood and identified. Critiques of the *representational model of visibility* challenge assumptions that representation of marginalized groups leads to public visibility, which in turn leads to national belonging (Edenborg 2017, 34). Rather than seeing visibility as necessarily empowering LGBT groups, critiques of visibility remind us that it may be linked to control, normalization, and violence (Edenborg 2020b). The occidental assumptions of visibility are especially evident in the Russian context, where hypervisibility has led to violence rather than emancipation.

One viable theoretical alternative to demands of intelligibility and visibility is the notion of *opacity*, which has traveled from postcolonial (Glissant 1997) to queer theorizing (de Villiers 2012). Opacity has been used to argue for visions of sexual politics "beyond visibility and comprehension" (Sundén 2023a; for a theoretical application in a post-Soviet context, see Wiedlack 2023). This study proceeds along similar lines, focusing on the ways recognition and visibility, as western concepts, may be complicated by attending to temporality, space, and emotion as aspects of sexuality and sexual politics and the ways it is practiced and represented. In doing this, I draw on theoretical strands (Halberstam 2005; Dinshaw et al. 2007; Love 2009; Massey 2005; Ahmed 2004) that are discussed more closely in the analytical chapters.

The major theoretical contributions of queer theory to my study are threefold: theorizing (homo)normativity and (homo)normalization and critiquing the global circulation of LGBT identities; breaking with the binaries; and queering concepts of time, space, and emotion, by attending to the role of sexuality in creating ideas of nations and thus providing alternatives to

homonormativity. By attending to the ways Russian non-normative sexuality is represented in Sweden, I attempt to complicate the simplistic binary notions of inclusion/exclusion and similarity/difference. This section has accounted for my theoretical grounds for understanding sexuality. I will now explain how I approach the idea of the nation informing my analysis.

Postcolonial insights: hybridity and nations as spatiotemporal imaginaries

In line with Benedict Anderson (1983), I understand nation as "an imagined community." Central to the discursive construction of the nation are ideas surrounding its internal unity. This though downplays the fact a national community may consist of several ethnic groups and religions, as well as the process of forming boundaries against other nations. A nation is constructed in opposition to the "Other," the outsider (Neumann 1996). Consequently, as Calhoun writes, the "discourse of nationalism is inherently international. Claims to nationhood are not just internal claims to social solidarity, common descent, or any other basis for constituting a political community. They are also appeals to distinctiveness vis-a-vis other nations […]" (Calhoun 1993, 216). Highlighting the ongoing re-definition of boundaries of the nation, Nagel (2003, 44) conceives of the nation to be a "series of moving boundaries." These boundaries are maintained by both physical and symbolic markers denoting who is and who is not part of the nation. The arrangements of intelligibility and visibility theorized above create and promote specific visions of "proper citizens," reflecting the ways Anderson's "imagined communities" become *sexually* imagined communities (cf. Nagel 2003). In this process, sexuality becomes the boundary marker of Self-Other, which is essential to the workings of nationalism, and which produces visions, ideas, and representations of nations that in turn congeal into *national images*. Another aspect of Anderson's thinking is that a nation is a *spatiotemporal* construct, created with the help of technologies, such as newspapers and novels; time is central to creating the space of the nation, "a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history" (1983, 26).

Bhabha's thinking echoes Anderson's conceptualization of the nation as an imagined community. For Bhabha, the nation is "a form of cultural elaboration" (Bhabha 1990, 4) that unfolds in time by traveling down in "homogenous, empty time." Bhabha's concept of hybridity disturbs both this steady movement and the "solidity" of the community. *Hybridity*, for Bhabha, is a way to theorize identities that would prevent them "[…] from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed

identifications opens up the possibility of *a cultural hybridity* that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (1994a, 5, emphasis mine). Bhabha's account thematizes the resistance to Orientalizing discourses, balancing Said's focus on the colonizer and Fanon's emphasis on the colonized (Kraidy 2002, 320).[21] Bhabha's concept of *hybridity* challenges the neat distinction between Self/Other by suggesting that national identities never exist in their pure state and are always already influenced by what they exclude. As such, hybridity is not simply about how different cultures blend when they collide. Instead, Bhabha is interested in how these clashes can lead to completely new and unique forms of culture. For him, any expression of cultural difference is necessarily a creative act (Young 2017, 189). Bhabha's thinking is useful here because it explicitly locates the emergence of hybridity in national time and space.

Discourses of the nation unfold in two main modes of representation, the pedagogical and the performative (Bhabha 1994b, 208). The pedagogical mode claims a fixed origin for the nation and asserts a sense of a continuous history that links the nation's people in the present to previous generations of national subjects in the past. Pointing to a shared past, it produces the impression of the steady, linear movement of time from past to present to future. National discourses are simultaneously performative. Performative strategies are iterative and recursive. This is why icons and popular signs must be continually rehearsed by the people to maintain a sense of belonging to the nation (cf. Billig 1995). The performative aspect of discourses of the nation points toward the future, in other words, to all the possibilities in which the nation could be articulated. National subjects are located in a position between two modes of representation (208), navigating their sense of national identity and belonging in the space between a fixed historical narrative (pedagogical) and the ongoing iterative performances that sustain a sense of national unity (performative). Bhabha theorizes the ability of the people to intervene in the process of national narration and discursive articulation with (re)signifying practices of their own. The "heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference" (212) that emerge between the two modes of arti-

[21] According to Said, Western representations of the Orient rely on a construction of the binary difference between East and West. The orientalist discourse is self-perpetuating and takes on a variety of forms, portraying the Eastern Other as a backward, odd, and sexually deviant stereotype (McLeod 2010, 40ff.). One of the shortcomings of this account, according to Said's critics, is that it places agency squarely with the colonizer. Bhabha's account emphasizes instead the ways cultures mutually impact on one another, producing new cultural forms.

culation, and also between nation and its Other, can never be neatly collapsed into a singular narrative. It is the "split-space of enunciation […] the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (1994, 56). Bhabha urges us to look at the in-between space of cultural contact where articulations beyond binaries may be made and the sense of a coherent Self may be destabilized to engender *hybrid* forms. These understandings are present throughout but particularly salient for my analyses in Chapter 3, which analyzes representations of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women at the margins of the Russian state and nation, as well as in Chapter 4 where I explore the practices of a Russian-speaking club event collective in Stockholm, challenging the images of Russia from within Sweden. This theoretical section leaves open the question of what it means to apply postcolonial theory to Russia as an imperial power within a postsocialist context. I turn to applications of postcolonial theory and the postcolonial/postsocialist debate in the next section on previous research (see p. 55).

While providing a necessary optic through which to approach the unfolding of the nation, the implicit heterosexuality of the nation in Bhabha's approach (Erickson 2010) is addressed by this dissertation's use of queer theory, helping to problematize the connection between narratives of the nation and regulation of sexuality. Bhabha's postcolonial critiques, while not primarily interested in national gender and sexuality (Kulpa 2011), show how nations might be destabilized due to their nature as narratives. A theory of hybridity offers a new perspective on Russia's intermediate positionality – as colonizer and as normatively dependent on "Europe," as well as Russian LGBT people's discursive positionality determined by both Western LGBT ideals and state violence and exclusion exercised by Russia (cf. Dorogov 2017).

The concepts I have outlined above, developed within traditions of queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory are applied to a variegated empirical material. I argue that all of the discursive representations congeal into national images within a landscape of imaginaries whose spatial, temporal, and emotional facets are inscribed in the material I analyze. The three theoretical strands I have described in this section are anchored in post-structuralist thought. After focusing on the postcolonial and queer theoretical approaches in previous research, I will proceed to describe my method.

Previous research: theories across contexts

Postcolonial theory and the postsocialist condition

Edward Said's ([1978] 2003) ideas about the division between "East" and "West" have been applied to the former-state-socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union region since the 1990s. Milica Bakić-Hayden coined the term *nesting orientalisms* to capture the ways ideas of the "Orient" travel eastward. In the case of former Yugoslavia, Eastern Orthodox peoples perceive themselves as more European than those who assumed the identity of European Muslims and who further distinguish themselves from the ultimate Orientals, non-Europeans (Bakić-Hayden 1995, 922). Iver Neumann has observed this process in the case of Russia along the lines of Western Europe – Russia – Bashkortostan – Tatarstan (Neumann 1999, 206), wherein the process of mentally mapping each subsequent entity results in the next being understood as "more Eastern" than the one preceding it. The ideas of "West" and "Europe" have been pertinent to Russia's self-understanding and identity (Morozov 2009; Neumann 2017). Most of these explorations of CEE and Russia as an Eastern Other and the meaning of Europe for Russia have been inattentive to the role of gender and sexuality in these constructions. These tend to simply reinforce pre-Cold War ideas of difference between East and West anchored in culture.

One way to approach the role of gender and sexuality in the process of Othering of postsocialist countries is via postcolonial theory. The terms postsocialist, post-state socialist, post-communist, and post-Soviet are themselves neither neutral nor uncontested (Müller 2019; Tlostanova 2012). David Chioni Moore (2001) asked already in 2001 whether the "post" in "post-Soviet" was synonymous with the "post" in "postcolonial" and, if so, how it might be theorized. Moore's suggestion is that postcolonialism be used not to categorize if a location is postcolonial or not, but to prompt scholars to consider if integrating postcolonial hermeneutics could enhance their analyses. This invitation was eagerly taken up and while some scholars were reluctant to apply postcolonial theory to the "postsocialist" region (Lazarus 2012), others noted the affinities "between the posts" (Chari and Verdery 2009). Postcolonial theory, in combination with decolonial thought and world-systems theory, has been used in feminist research on CEE to explain how post-Cold-War Western European feminists had marginalized Eastern European women's perspectives coming from "the second world" (Cerwonka 2008; Tlostanova 2010; 2012; Kulawik 2020; Koobak 2013). This discussion in the field of gender studies on the postsocialist/post-state socialist region

has also problematized the theoretical usefulness of different geographies. Ultimately agreeing that the region of Central and Eastern Europe, the former "Second World" and Yugoslavia as part of the non-aligned "Third World," has been Othered, this research has called for a nuanced approach to geopolitical power hierarchies. CEE's, and even more relevant for this study, Russia's position as Europe's second Other (Kulawik 2020), has been theoretically grasped in several ways.

My approach to Russia is in line with research that has highlighted the CEE region as a space and time of in-betweenness, a semiperiphery that is characterized by hybridity and in a constant process of transition (Blagojević [Hughson], 2009). The semiperiphery is characterized by both "lagging behind" the core West, which not only views itself as more developed but also has the privilege of establishing norms, with an equal desire to preserve its cultural specificity (33). Because the semiperiphery is "different but not different enough" (37), the core constantly strives to improve it. The simultaneous impulses of the semiperiphery to catch up with the core at the same time as it resists integration, are exemplified in the case of Russia, which has positioned itself variously in relation to the West.

More pointedly, researchers have attested to Russia's simultaneous attachment to, and rejection of and by, Europe, which has characterized its national identity-seeking, yet also stressed its character as an empire throughout history. Madina Tlostanova has argued that Russia was a "second-class empire" (Tlostanova 2012, 135) or a "Janus-faced" empire, that both "felt itself a colony in the presence of the West and, at the same time, half heartedly [*sic*] played the part of the caricature 'civilizer' in its non-European colonies" (Tlostanova 2010, 64). Focusing on the imperial past and Russian present and Russia's normative dependence on Europe (Morozov 2015), researchers stop short of conclusively labeling the Soviet period as colonialist. Productively, Tlostanova (2014) mobilizes a corpus of decolonial thought to bridge the gaps between the post- in postcolonial and postsocialist. She contends that the postcolonial subaltern finds herself, not unlike the postsocialist other, within networks of dependency, subjection, and marginalization vis-à-vis Western modernity. Yet the postsocialist other is more heterogenous (160), and applications of postcolonial theory to the postsocialist context need to attend to the local histories and conditions to highlight the dynamics between the colonial/imperial side of the Socialist project (161).

The analysis in this dissertation, especially in Chapter 4, will contribute to an understanding of Russian postcolonial and postsocialist conditions. By focusing on the image of Russia in Sweden, I will attempt to move beyond a

static conception as a nation-state toward a conceptualization of Russia that highlights its multinational character.[22] In English and Swedish the adjectives "Russian" and "*rysk*" gloss over the difference that exists in the Russian language between the reference to what is constructed as ethnically Russian, that is, with culture and language, *russkii* (corresponding noun – *russkost,* denoting ethnic Russianness), and civic Russian, which refers to Russia as a state, such as citizenship, *rossiiskii* (corresponding noun – *rossiiskost,* civic Russianness).[23] Having discussed some general directions in the field of postsocialist/postcolonial studies and how they echo the specificities of the Russian context, I will proceed to bring sexuality into focus by discussing attempts to integrate postcolonial and queer approaches in the study of Eastern European sexualities.

Postcolonial/queer in CEE

Studies of colonial projects have argued that the "West" has historically portrayed the "Orient"/Other as sexually corrupt and backward because of forms of organizing sexuality beyond the Western/European family ideal. This led to the imposition of heterosexist and homophobic colonial laws seeking to curb gender variance and sexual licentiousness among colonial populations and impose normative heterosexuality (Han and O'Mahoney 2014; Puri 2016). The same "Orient" is now viewed by the West to be sexually corrupt and backward due to its heteronormativity (Haritaworn 2015; Rao 2020). Inspired by the research that has highlighted the role of hetero- and homonormativity in orientalist representations of the Other, this study exemplifies the ways the constructions of Europe's *second* Other, the region of CEE, reflect this reversal (Delatolla 2020).

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[22] For example, Hutchings and Tolz (2015, 8) point out that Russia is "one of the most ethno-culturally diverse countries in the world." This is in line with an understanding that Russia is a multinational state, and not an ethnic nation-state (Tolz 2004). In official policy, this is often complemented with a paradoxical view that an ethnically Russian core is presumed to have a greater role in nation-building, manifesting itself in calls for "ethnic Russians in Russia to be recognized as the state-building people" (Foxall 2014, 142ff.). Eastern Orthodox Christianity in state discourse is also understood as a central building block of ethnic Russian identity. For a critical analysis that highlights the role of this construction in Russia's racial politics, see also Zakharov (2015). For an overview of different uses of ethnic and civic concepts of Russianness in nation-building, see (Shevel 2011; Malinova 2020; Mjør and Turoma 2020).

[23] As Löfstrand (2008, 7n2) notes, the Swedish term *ryssländare* can be used to refer to civic Russianness. Yet this distinction between civic/ethnic is blurred in Russian politics and hardly neatly maps onto identities. For example, Tlostanova (2003) talks about the gatekeeping role of "the dominant Slavic/Christian/Russian" (Tlostanova 2003, 11).

Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska (2011) adopt a queer postcolonial studies framework to critique assumptions about "CEE lagging behind the West" in the realm of sexuality. None of the case studies in their book focus on Russia, yet an understanding of the place of CEE in a Western hierarchy aids the project's aim to understand the discursive construction and positioning of Russian non-normative sexuality. The resulting volume, "an effect of merging post-communist and post-colonial studies" (2011: 19), uses postcolonial scholarship to critique spatial and temporal hierarchies of modernity constructed around global homophobia (Mizielińska and Kulpa 2011). They show how the "Western present" is constructed as a "future" to be achieved by CEE (Koobak, 2013; Mizielińska & Kulpa 2011, 16). Reflecting on the ideas of time and space, they suggest thinking of two separate geopolitical-temporal modalities: communism and capitalism, running parallel, where in 1989 one of them finishes (communism), and the other one becomes universal for both regions (capitalism). The authors contrast the Western "time of sequence" in the progression of different homophile, gay, LGBT, and queer movements with the Eastern "time of coincidence" represented as a "knotting" and "looping" of times. Similar to Hughson, they theorize how CEE is a "contemporary periphery" because it is "European enough" geographically, "yet not advanced enough" to become "Western" temporally (Mizielińska & Kulpa 2011, 16–18).

Rasa Navickaitė (2016) points out that sexuality scholarship in CEE either reproduces a discourse that highlights the necessity of CEE to catch up with the West, positioned as having achieved LGBT liberation, or a second discourse that points to CEE's uniqueness and radical difference.[24] The former approach is detected by Navickaitė (2016) in Štulhofer & Sandfort's (2005, 16) assertion that CEE is following the sexual trajectory of the West with a delay. Kulpa & Mizielińska (2011), according to Navickaitė (2014; 2016), exemplify the latter approach, privileging it as "more queer" than the "straight" Western reality. Kulpa's (2014) conceptualization of *leveraged pedagogy* can similarly be criticized for stripping CEE of agency. The term captures the ways CEE becomes an object of the EU discourse, which points to a supposed lack of attachment to European values, expressed in the

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[24] More generally, in relation to studies on postsocialism, an anthropologist of the Soviet Union Alexei Yurchak highlights the challenge of finding a language to reconstruct socialist life and the creative and paradoxical cultural forms it took, is to avoid *a priori* negative accounts of socialism without falling into the opposite extreme of romanticizing it. According to Yurchak, the goal is to attempt to depict the complex realities of socialism, "where control, coercion, alienation, fear, and moral quandaries were irreducibly mixed with ideals, communal ethics, dignity, creativity, and care for the future" (Yurchak 2006, 9–10).

region's homophobia, and positions the West/EU as an authoritative guide offering help to make CEE "less homophobic." Approaching sexuality as a marker in constructions of geopolitical otherness, Renkin demonstrates how homophobia becomes an essentialized characteristic of postsocialist Europe, whereas Western Europe is considered to have eradicated or at least contained homophobia (Renkin 2016). Not unlike Navickaitė, he critiques the "orientalizing and evolutionist" approaches that either ascertain that CEE is lagging behind or offers the promise of a radical alterity from the West (180–181). The approaches to CEE described in this section provide cues for how to analyze constructions of Russia and its non-normative sexuality. I view "West" and Russia as relational concepts constructed in ways that allow for the division between Self/Other and attempt to develop an analysis that is aware of the extremes that posit Russia's similarity or difference.

Queer research on/in Russia

This thesis strives for a context-aware application of queer theory. By presenting previous research I aim to identify the ways queer theory has been used in previous studies, pointing out the tensions between Western ideas of sexuality and liberation, on the one hand, and ideas about sexuality in the Russian context, on the other. Studies of Russian LGBT people and culture in a Russian context since the 1990s have been entwined with and have taken inspiration from queer theory. In several ethnographic studies, researchers examined identity-building processes in Russia soon after the Soviet Union's breakup, comparing them to the West. Studies of LGBT cultural expression explored how queer identities were expressed and consumed in Russian culture. Research also delved into how Russia was portrayed in global media, questioning the applicability of Western activism in the Russian context.

Scholars working in the tradition of ethnography conducted research in the 1990s and early 2000s in Russia. One of Laurie Essig's (1999) central findings is that Russians did not strive to embrace a Western model of public gay/lesbian identity. Documenting "the fluidity of Russian sexual identity" (Essig 1999, 57), she posited that Russians are, indeed, *queer*, when compared to LGBT people in the US and Western Europe who embrace Western identity politics. Focusing solely on (expressions of) queerness in the public domain, Essig's study omits the private sphere from her research, in this way excluding all gay and lesbian culture in Russia not directly connected to activism or outness. In his analysis, Baer (2011) disagrees with Essig's postmodern critique of the Western subject that, according to him, reinforces entrenched Western views of Russia as enigmatic and mysterious, making

Russia appear, paradoxically, premodern.[25] His critique also encompasses David Tuller (1996), an American journalist who traveled to 1990s Russia, and, exploring the realm of private same-sex desire, declared that Russians did not subscribe to rigid gay and straight identities. Baer concludes that Essig's model of an innocent "queer" Russia colonized by strict Western identities is flawed. He stresses that "there was always a tradition of gay identity in Russia" (Baer 2011, 181). In other words, the erasure of visible gay identity in post-Soviet discourse, argued by Essig and Tuller, is less an embrace of sexual freedom through the rejection of restrictive sexual labels and categories than "a manifestation of traditional Russian ambivalence over the place of individuality and sexual pleasure in the public sphere" (2013, 50).

Katja Sarajeva's (2011) study looks into lesbian world-making in Moscow. Following up on Essig's 1999 research, the study points out a more hesitant perception of the West(ern models of activism) by Moscow lesbians in the 2000s. Concerning visibility and expressions, Sarajeva notes that the practices of self-identification uncover a certain "elusiveness [that] should not be seen as an expression of internalized homophobia," but rather as "a way to maintain the 'secret code' of the subculture, separating insiders from the outsiders" (Sarajeva 2011, 57). Francesca Stella (2015; 2012; 2013) has studied lesbian networks in Moscow and Ulyanovsk. She problematizes the notion of "community" and discusses Moscow as a global city through the prism of cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism and contends that "sexual citizenship in post-Soviet Russia has largely been confined to rights to sexual expression and consumption but does not extend to the political sphere of civic rights and liberties" (Stella 2015, 40).

Some researchers use queer theory to explore the connections between culture and LGBT people in Russian LGBT culture.[26] Stephen Amico (2014) takes an ethnomusicological perspective on gay men's consumption and physical and bodily perceptions of music in Moscow and St. Petersburg in

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[25] Navickaitė's points, discussed in the previous section, regarding balancing exoticization and internalization of the impetus to catch-up, detailed above, can also be applied here. Compare also the discussions in the field of queer transnationalism, e.g., Rahul Rao's (2020, 71–72) postcolonial queer analyses of Ugandan pre-colonial space-time identified perils of *homoromanticism*: the treatment of pre-colonial worlds as warmly inclusive of diverse sexual orientations and gender identifications, and the reluctance to apprehend postcolonial elites for their role in cementing homophobic institutional frameworks.

[26] Adding to studies of Russian culture that have been cautious in drawing on queer theory (cf. Chernetsky 2007), recent research on Russian literature and literary cultures (Doak 2020; 2022; Moss 2020; Klepikova 2020), media (Miazhevich 2022), and visual culture (Engström 2021b; Strukov 2023; Andreevskikh 2023) has engaged explicitly with the concepts of queer theory to explore the practices of Russian LGBT/sexually non-normative subjects and understand Russia's place in the world.

the early 2000s, showing how musical performances help homosexual Russian men create their own social spaces and selves. Katharina Wiedlack and Masha Neufeld (2015) explore how Russian music allowed for a certain visibility of lesbian artists in the 1990s and early 2000s outside of the Anglo-American hegemony and the possibilities of identification from the perspective of the audience they provided. They trace the changes that occurred to public appearances of lesbian artists around 2006, when these performances started to be understood as those of sexual minorities and not as mainstream pop. Between the 1990s and approximately 2006, the absence of a clear articulation of lesbian identity as a political statement, along with the mixed societal attitudes toward female same-sex desire, allowed female singers to express lesbian desire. These artists subsequently became major cultural reference points for lesbian communities due to the lack of interest from legal and state authorities (2015, 154).

Other scholars studied the ways Russian LGBT people and culture are represented in the Anglophone media. Wiedlack and Neufeld's (2014) study complicates the view on Pussy Riot's performances. By focusing on the religious aspect of the punk prayer, a meaning lost in translation in Western media, Wiedlack and Neufeld show how the performance is in fact mimetic of religious language, engaging the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church and critical public discourses.

Wiedlack (2017) analyzes the mediated representations of victimized bodies of Russian LGBT people. She finds that the images of wounded Russian gay youth reduce the subjects to this vulnerability, confirming feelings of moral superiority within the enlightened audience and the role they play in reaffirming the dualistic divide between "the East" and "West." Western media's overwhelming focus on young white gay male bodies creates queer martyrs as visual evidence of Russia's brutality and inhumanity (Wiedlack 2018). The focus on vulnerable white gay men makes lesbian, trans*, and other sexually non-normative subjects invisible (Wiedlack 2018, 14). Neufeld and Wiedlack (2016) focus on the Russian domestic context, turning to Russian LGBT activism and representations of Russian LGBT in 2014 during the Winter Olympics in Sochi and Eurovision. They point out how sexuality is hollowed out from the very term LGBT, leaving it as a signifier for political negotiations between Russia and "the West." LGBT activism becomes hijacked by cisgender heterosexual men who, interested in political protest and visibility, accordingly and paradoxically identify with such a queer dissident identity equally as LGBT people (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2016, 182). They further highlight an absence of viable strategies for Russian LGBT

activism, as the discursive appeals to values like freedom of speech, human rights, democracy, enlightenment, civilization, and progress are closely intertwined with the idea and the image of a queer-friendly and civilized West, which stands in opposition to the Russian project of traditional values. Thus, any engagement in activism that aspires to Western ideals "run[s] the risk of reinforcing the mutual co-construction of East and West in the field of value negotiation, making LGBTIQs yet again voiceless objects" (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2016, 187). In pointing this out, Neufeld and Wiedlack pose the question of how to address Russian homophobia and condemn it, without either amplifying LGBT marginalization in a Russian context or perpetuating Western imperialism, leveraged pedagogy and nationalism. In line with Rivkin-Fish and Hartblay (2014) who surveyed the field of Russian LGBT activism and identified the diverse methods Russian LGBT activists undertake (2014, 104–8), researchers and activists need to pay attention to the local specificity of political strategies and look beyond human rights solutions as a universal framework. This understanding of the contextual dependency of activism helps me analyze the strategies employed in the Swedish context.

The research on the figure of President Putin allows for a comparison between different uses of queer theory in a Russian context. Looking at the Gay Clown Putin Meme,[27] along with other visual activist projects originating and circulating in the West, Cooper-Cunningham argues for the value of using "queer joy and delight in abjection as a form of resistance against the [Russian] state's disciplinary projects" (Cooper-Cunningham 2021, 15). This reparative reading points to the impact of images in community creation, yet the question is whose community such resistance benefits. Clearly, Western LGBTQ people can use the feared figure of Putin (Paulauskas 2015) for their own purposes, for example, at Pride demonstrations, not least to critique the political homophobia in Russia, yet the effects for the Russian LGBT community are harder to pinpoint. Thus, concerns about the impact of Western-driven visual activism on the lives of Russian LGBT individuals remain unaddressed. In a more critical reading, Wiedlack (2020) places the meme among other mediatized appearances of Putin in the US media/entertainment context. She argues that the picture should be understood as misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic. The circulation of the image, reminiscent of the Cold War strategy of ridiculing the Russian masculine

[27] A series of photoshopped images depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin as a clown wearing garish makeup. The images were widely circulated online following reports that the images had been banned in Russia in early April 2017. See https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/gay-clown-putin

threat, by hinting at gay desire (2020, 69) does little to problematize the understanding of the US as the land of freedom when it is compared to an authoritarian unfree Russia. This highlights the need for a relational application of queer theory with attention to resistance, community-building, and reinforcement of the West-East binary in research and activism.

To sum up this quite variegated research field of Russian sexuality studies, the debates around the use of the word queer or the application of queer theory have hardly been settled. As researchers point out, many of the terms whose circulation is taken for granted in a Western context remain contested and in need of constant translation (Baer 2018; Suyarkulova 2019). While employed by (foreign) researchers, explicitly and implicitly since the 1990s, the term "queer" was only introduced to the Russian language a decade later. Mainstream media circulation started through the male cisgender gay lifestyle magazine *Квир* (*Kvir*) in 2003 and its usage largely remained within this growing consumer-oriented apolitical context.[28] It has been used to some degree among activists in metropolitan areas. Small groups of queer-anarcha feminists in St Petersburg and Moscow, for example, have been using "queer" for their street actions since around 2013. Yet, the term has not gained a broader usage within Russian activist or political circles. Queer as a concept is very ambiguous in the Russian-speaking context and, as a term, often remains a foreign word, not filled with any meaning and emotion, unlike in the English-speaking context (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2016, 189). In activist circles, self-labeling as "queer" is seen as elitist (Wiedlack 2017, 253). Russian LGBT activist and scholar Valerii Sozaev (2015) argues that in Russian discourse the term is less politically charged, obscuring the issues that LGBT individuals face and replacing its provocative dimensions. In Russian academia, it has been used to illuminate concerns similar to what queer theory has done in the West, for example, critiquing heteronormativity and the ascent of heterosexuality (Kondakov 2014), to varying degrees of success (Kondakov 2016; 2020).

I operate with a broad understanding of queer theory as a form of post-structuralist critique, and as such I avoid using queer as an identity label. This is done to differentiate the theory as well as its analytical deployment in this book from the use of "queer" as an umbrella term to describe gender and sexual non-normativity and identities. Given that, when applied to people or identities, "queer" is a specific English word with a history of violence, mar-

[28] In the tradition of apolitical journalism, as Beaudoin (2023) reminds us, in 2006, another lifestyle magazine *Sobaka.ru* declared "the end of homosexuality."

ginalization, and resistance, I only keep the term as an identity marker if it is used in the original material I am quoting or analyzing. As a result, I find it more analytically precise and challenging to use the term "non-normative sexuality" as an encompassing term to talk about the versions of sexuality and people who may identify as LGBT, rather than the umbrella term "queer sexuality" or "queerness." Connected to the umbrella term non-normative sexuality are the empirical terms LGBT people, appearing throughout the book, and queer (visual) aesthetics and expressions, discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Methods and material

Ideas about the constructed nature of both sexuality and nation are reflected in my choice of theoretical and methodological approaches, in that they allow me to focus on discursive constructions of sexuality and their role in the articulation of national images. I will respond to this study's research questions by examining several kinds of material. I first clarify the methodological stakes of the project and describe my main analytical method, a discourse-theoretical analysis with a queer sensibility. I move on to describe the four kinds of material that I collected and selected, as well as the specific research strategies used to analyze them, motivating why they have been chosen. The methods and material section concludes with a description of my own position as researcher.

Discourse-theoretical analysis with a queer sensibility

The analytical chapters use the theoretical tools of discourse-theoretical analysis (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007) that build on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1985) poststructuralist discourse theory to analyze textual and visual discourse. Using discourse-theoretical analysis as my primary analytical method allows me to contribute with a deeper understanding of how constructions of the nation rely on and reproduce binary logic. By combining discourse-theoretical analysis with a queer sensibility, I demonstrate that these national images and the gendered and sexual normativities they are based upon are relational and inherently unstable, and as such are open for rearticulation and contestation.

The project is grounded in poststructuralist queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory, which at a very general level can be seen as a social constructionist approach (Burr 2015). One of the key arguments within social constructionism concerns the constitutive role of language. The concept of

discourse is one way to conceptualize the relation between language and social practice. The field of discourse analysis can be approached by distinguishing between the *discursive* and *discourse*. The *discursive* is understood as a theoretical horizon within which everything is ontologically constituted (Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000, 3): "*all* objects are objects of discourse, as their meaning depends upon a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences." In other words, while objects and material practices exist independently, they are necessarily made intelligible and meaningful through *discourse*, understood as "a system of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects" (3–4).[29]

Having outlined some of the broader approaches to discourse analysis, I now turn to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory. Focusing on the role of discourse in the constitution of the world, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, 20) elucidate that Laclau and Mouffe's approach posits that discourse itself is fully constitutive of the world. A discourse-theoretical analysis that builds on Laclau and Mouffe sees texts as materializations of meaning and/or ideology (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007, 277). The focus of the analysis is placed on the meanings, representations, or ideologies embedded in the text, and not so much on the language used. Thus, discourse is approached as representation or ideology, as opposed to mere language use (Carpentier 2017, 15–16). Discourse-theoretical analysis thus considers the social to be the realm where the processes of the generation of meaning are situated, in contrast to approaches that confine the context to specific social settings, such as a speech act or a conversation (16).

Some concepts of discourse theory

Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 105) define two central concepts of discourse theory, discourse and articulation, as follows:

> [W]e will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse* (emphasis in original).

This totality consists of *moments*, that is, signifying elements that are connected through acts of articulation that establish relations between them. *Elements* are signifiers that are not yet articulated, floating in a *field of dis-*

[29] I return to clarify the point about the place of "non-discursive" on p. 67.

cursivity; once their meaning is temporarily fixed, they become *moments*. The key moments in discourse are called *nodal points*, which partially fix the meaning and generate coherence (1985, 113). A *nodal point* is a privileged sign around which the other signs in the discourse are ordered and organized. The other signs, in turn, acquire their meaning from their relation to the *nodal point*. In my material, I consider "LGBT people" to be a nodal point, around which the meanings of Russia and Sweden are constructed in the Swedish discourses. The stress on the incompleteness of fixity leads to another characteristic of discourse – its *contingency* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 110). Contingency implies that the given discursive constellation is not defined as a necessity but as a result of interaction.

There is no "common sense" before its political articulation, which involves both the selective mobilization of some aspects and the selective demobilization of other elements by rendering them silent, ridiculous, unrealistic, out of time or place. This, in turn, leads to an understanding of the social, shared by this study, as "a field of possibility" in which relations of domination and subordination are represented and contested through articulatory practices. Laclau and Mouffe use the term "articulation" similar to the way Stuart Hall uses "representation."[30] In this dissertation, representation *qua* articulation is both performative and constitutive: it brings into being what it purports to represent, rather than representing a social configuration existing before the act of articulation.

Another concept that allows me to unpack the work of discourse is *hegemony*. This notion can be traced back to the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci. In discourse theory, hegemony is what produces discursive stability. Laclau and Mouffe use the concept of hegemony to refer to a situation where a discourse becomes dominant and manages to temporarily move beyond contestation. Jacob Torfing (1999) suggests a metaphor of horizon, defining hegemony as

> the expansion of a discourse, or a set of discourses, into a dominant horizon of social orientation and action by means of articulating unfixed elements into partially fixed moments in a context crisscrossed by antagonistic forces (101).

Yet a hegemony does not imply total fixation of meaning; a hegemonic articulation is characterized by the presence of unarticulated elements and the possibility of their rearticulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 136). Articulations

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[30] In my understanding of representation as articulation, I draw on Laclau and Mouffe for the sake of conceptual clarity. See also Thomassen (2019).

are contingent, and as such, they need to be sustained and renewed and are susceptible to re-articulation. Laclau and Mouffe's idea of hegemony constructs categories and attributes to be seen as inherent in certain subjects, bodies, and places, thus fixing and securing difference and representing specific social arrangements as non-political and naturally given.

Analyzing the non-discursive

One significant point of critique against textual analyses that center on discursive articulations is that they lack a conceptualization of the material. It is important to note, then, that Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 107) state their analysis "rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices." Theoretical positions that are sympathetic to Laclau and Mouffe's stance explicate that their approach does not reduce everything to discourse or deny the existence of the material world; rather, they contend that the material world is always internal to discursive practices (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 3). Stuart Hall shares this view (1997, 44–45, emphasis original):

> Is Foucault saying […] that '*nothing exists outside of discourse*?' In fact, Foucault does *not* deny that things can have a real, material existence in the world. What he does argue is that '*nothing has any meaning outside of discourse*'. As Laclau and Mouffe put it: 'we use it [the term discourse] to emphasize the fact that every social configuration is *meaningful*.'

This very general discussion underpins my approach to emotion, which is not theorized by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), though it appears in their later work. The notions of enjoyment, desire, and fantasy present a case for affect as a necessary condition for the formation of the subject. As Laclau (2004, 302) himself acknowledges, "the dimension of affect is not something to be added to a process of signification but something without which signification, in the first place, would not take place." Mouffe, too, has written on the centrality of passions in political life. In her more recent work, she has addressed discursive practices through the entanglement of "linguistic and affective components" where she speaks of "discursive/affective signifying practices" (Mouffe 2018, 73).

Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of *affective economies*, which I will use throughout, similarly highlights the workings of power in the construction of emotions, thus recognizing that emotions are not purely individual, but are shaped and constructed by social, political, and economic

forces. She suggests that emotions attach to objects, and "it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotions as such" (11). Ahmed's approach is operationalized by paying attention to elements of discourse and how it articulates emotions with them.

Reading with a queer sensibility

To study what role non-normative sexuality plays in the construction of national images, I focus my analysis of discourse and discursive representations of sexuality and nation with the help of my theoretical framework, specifically the concept of queer. Queer theorist Michael Warner (1993, x) has remarked on the lack of sustained attention given to sexuality in the works of social theorists, including Laclau and Mouffe. In discourse-theoretical analysis pursued in this book, queer can be seen as *a sensitizing concept* that attends to this absence in discourse theory. Sensitizing concepts are those that help researchers, in "[...] what to look for and where to look [...]" (Ritzer 1992, 365, quoted in Carpentier 2017, 77). To speak of a queer sensibility in this study, then, is a theoretically motivated way of observing, understanding, and analyzing my material. With queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2019), the process of detecting queer sensibilities can be compared to gay cruising in that it relies on one's capacity to detect ephemeral traces of queer possibility, something that might happen in the future, and potentiality, a "thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" (9). Reading with a queer sensibility is thus a way of moving with "no specific destination" (xiii), where the encounter occurs at chance. This chance has to be actively sought, prepared for, and recognized.

As Jenny Björklund and Ann-Sofie Lönngren helpfully summarize Alexander Doty's thoughts, the purpose of a queer reading as a method is "to *emphasize* and *highlight* structures, figures, relations, themes, contexts, and connotations that might not be immediately visible and understandable, because authors, as well as readers, are caught in webs of heteronormative expectations and conventions" (2020, 196–97, emphasis in original). Whereas some queer readings aim to highlight the possibility for queerness in texts that do not explicitly name LGBT and other sexually non-normative identities by reading "against the grain," counter to the explicit narrative (of a literary or visual text), my material is different in that it has already been generated to include representations of such identities. By contextualizing an analysis of a Swedish literary text from 2014, Björklund and Lönngren (2020) point to a difficulty that this project similarly faces – that is, engaging in queer readings in contemporary Sweden, which has been touted for its embrace of

the LGBT people, by affording to some queers access to rights and institutions.[31] They conclude that the homosexuality of the novel's protagonist is no longer the greatest threat against heteronormativity and that the subversive potential of queerness may be located elsewhere, by attending to notions of race, class, and (dis)ability. In my study of images of Russia in a Swedish context, my use of queer intersects with the nation. The queer sensibility I employ, using the insights of the method of queer reading described above, thus resists both the heteronormativity and co-optation of queer aesthetics by the Russian nation and the hetero- and homonormativity of the Swedish context. My readings of the texts remain close to their representations without going "deep" or aiming to uncover "hidden" truths. The purpose is rather to capture the circulation of ideas about and representations of Russian non-normative sexuality in the Swedish context.

Selecting the material

The selection of the material has been inspired by the case study method. It provides the initial support for the discourse-theoretical analysis with a queer sensibility employed in this study. A case study can be defined as a broad method that covers research design, data collection and the approach to one's data. Importantly for this study, which draws on contextualization of the selected examples in each chapter, the case-study approach allows the researcher to address "how" and "why" questions while also considering how a phenomenon is impacted by the context in which it exists (Baxter and Jack 2008, 556). As feminist researcher Leslie McCall (2005, 1782) argues, case studies and qualitative research more generally have always been distinguished by their ability to delve into the complexities of social life and reveal diversity, variation, and heterogeneity. The cases in this book can be analytically delineated in line with the types of material I have analyzed: media; popular culture; art; and club events. My interest in the role of non-normative sexuality in the construction of national images builds on a cross-case comparison between examples that have been deemed either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. My case selection of examples of counter-hegemonic discourse has been made on the basis of: (i) their relevance to the study's research questions; (ii) my theoretical engagement (cf. Mason 2009, 124–25) with queer theory, and (iii) my interest in the role of space, time, and emotion in the construction of non-normative sexuality.

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[31] See more on the place of LGBTQ equality in Sweden's multifaceted exceptionalism and the history of regulation of homosexuality in Sweden (p. 35).

Following my main research question, the initial selection and collection of material was predicated on two parameters: the Swedish context and Russian non-normative sexuality. The first has followed from using Swedish print media as my point of departure. This has meant that events and news items that were not (or could not be) reported in Sweden have been excluded from my material. Second, because of the focus on *Russian* non-normative sexuality, I have excluded utterances about for example, Belarus, which also were on the agenda of Swedish cultural workers.

The decision to study media discourse is in line with the view that media is a "crucial site of hegemony" (Kellner 1992, 57, cited in Cammaerts and Carpentier 2007, xi), which implies that media play a central role as sites for both deliberation and conflict, disciplining and resistance. The choice of different types of material, not limited to just textual and visual discursive representations in the media, but also including music videos, photography, and club events, is underpinned by a motivation to highlight and challenge the hegemonic uses of non-normative sexuality in mass media and culture. As scholars of popular geopolitics note, mass media, and popular-cultural artifacts continually offer up images of nations for consumption, resulting in them becoming the primary source of dissemination of information about foreign countries. These geographical and geopolitical imaginaries are reinforced by informational (textual/audio) content drawn from newspapers, magazines, and other sources of textual knowledge which, together with visual sources (maps/images/symbols), create and sustain public and popular geographical views of the "foreign" world (Saunders 2016, 71–72). I engage with arts and popular cultural projects to complement and challenge this narrow focus on mass media, to demonstrate that non-normative sexuality is central for alternative images of Russia (and by extension Sweden) in arenas that exist parallel to and on the margins of broadly disseminated textual and visual discourse. In doing so, I highlight the role of alternative loci of creative counter-hegemonic practices of resistance to articulations that operate within binary thinking schemas. In exploring additional domains where images of non-normative sexuality and Russia might be constructed, my goal has been to identify some specific examples of how the Swedish hegemonic discourse on Russia can be challenged rather than provide a complete catalog of cultural works or events or make comprehensive analyses of the state of the Swedish art or club scene as a whole.

Collecting and analyzing the material

To create a media archive, I carried out a search in Retriever Research (*Mediearkivet*). The five largest newspapers were chosen as sources. The theoretical term "non-normative sexuality" was operationalized with the search term LGB* and homo*. The results included the words "Russia," and "LGB*" / "homo*" nearby; Russia was to be named in the text two or more times. To search in *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter* (*DN*), *Göteborgs-Posten* (*GP*), *Svenska Dagbladet* (*SvD*), and *Expressen*, I used the string (rys*) NEAR/5 (homo* OR hbt* OR gay OR bög) AND Count (rys*)>2. Figure 1 below summarizes the number of articles and images accompanying them that I analyzed by period.

Time period	Number of articles analyzed	Number of images analyzed
1991–1998	6	5
2000–2006	8	5
2007–2012	45	20
2013	168	105
2014	96	66
2015–2019	143	144
Total	***466***	***345***

Figure 1: Articles and images in Swedish media 1991–2019

My analysis in the media case study is underpinned by two research strategies. First, I started by analyzing the texts of the articles in my media archive using thematic qualitative analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). I familiarized myself with data and developed a system of codes. These codes emerged during the analysis in an iterative process of dialogue my theoretical perspectives, as outlined above. Having searched for and reviewed the themes, I then selected a number of examples that best represent the themes present throughout the material. This analysis is presented in Chapter 1.

In a second round, I coded the content of the images that illustrated the articles into broad exhaustive and non-overlapping categories (Bock, Isermann, and Knieper 2011, 270) that represented the subject matter of the image. This helped me consider how the content of images has changed over time as well as how they relate to the text of the article they accompany. I

build on this quantitative content analysis, presented in a chart in Chapter 2, to complement my otherwise qualitative discourse-theoretical investigation of the visual discourse on Russian non-normative sexuality in Swedish media.

Examples of popular cultural material include two videos, a recorded live performance, and a music video. "Propaganda!" was performed by Måns Zelmerlöw live at *QX Gaygala* in 2014, and "*Folkkär*" ("Beloved by People") by Kamferdrops featuring Frej Larsson was a music video released prior to the start of the Football World Cup 2018, a competition hosted by Russia. Both are four-and-a-half-minute clips combining textual and visual representations with emotional charges. The clips have been chosen for a better insight into the specificity of the Swedish context. In chapter 2, descriptions of a Twitter campaign, #GoWest2013, launched by Stockholm Pride in 2013, and a brief exploration of two Melodifestivalen clips that feature representations of Russian sexuality, help to contextualize my analyses of the newspaper images and the two videos.

The art material used in this dissertation consists of two art projects: *State of Mind* by Axel Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg as well as *At the Time of the Third Reading* by Axel Karlsson Rixon. The photos and videos from the projects are analyzed in Chapter 3. Although there also exists ample documentation and artists' commentary on the production of these art projects (Karlsson Rixon 2016b; Hallberg and Karlsson Rixon 2011; Rixon and Martinsson 2013), I chose to use these texts as a background. To claim my own analytical voice in relation to the artworks, I have instead chosen to contextualize them in relation to Russian protest art, placing both photo/video projects within a regime of visual representations of Russian non-normative sexuality and LGBT people identified in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4 focuses on a study of a club event to probe into alternative discourses and representations created by the Russian (diasporic) community outside the soft power efforts of the Russian state. The method used for gathering material in this chapter were semi-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014). Here I followed an interview guide that contained a common set of topics and questions for each interview. I adapted the questions in ways that were appropriate for each interview, following up on the answers and ensuring all topics were covered.

The material in this chapter comprises of two interviews I conducted, with a total time of around 160 minutes, with members of the *Baba Bomba Diskoteka* collective. One of these was a one-on-one interview (ca. 90 minutes) and the other was a group interview conducted with two organizers (ca. 70 minutes). The interviews focused on the club events and the organizers' moti-

vations, including the choice of location, audience, and format; additionally, the interviews explored the use of music and other cultural symbols, such as clothes. My analysis in Chapter 4 also incorporates online visual and textual material from the club event's Instagram account (47 posts) and Facebook event pages (15 web pages). Alongside the interview transcripts, these were initially coded using a thematic analysis, as described above.

Methodologically speaking, my gathering of the material, especially the interviews conducted with Russian speakers in Stockholm, is similar to what cultural anthropologist Ulrika Dahl calls doing research within "subcultural communities to which one belongs." (U. Dahl 2016, 149) This idea in turn builds on Jack Halberstam's (1998) *scavenger methodology* as a queer methodology of interdisciplinary work. According to Halberstam, scavenger methodology uses a variety of methods to collect and produce information on subjects that have received scant scholarly attention, bringing together methods that are often cast as being at odds with one another, and refusing disciplinary coherence. As Dahl summarizes, the queerness of this methodology lies in the subject of research, the eclectic collection of "data," and in the "strangeness" of mixing methods from different traditions.

Ethical considerations

Following the Swedish Research Council's guidelines for Good Research Practice (Swedish Research Council 2017), I secured ethical approval for the interview part of this study (Dnr. 2022-03264-01), given that this specific component of the study in Chapter 4 would use personally sensitive data, such as political views, sexual orientation, and ethnic/national origin. One interview was conducted in Russian, and the other in English. I transcribed both interviews and translated one from Russian into English. Written informed consent has been obtained for all interviews; all names have been pseudonymized to minimize the possibility of identifying specific people, to protect individual privacy, and reduce potential harm. I have intentionally decided to omit personal information that can be connected to specific individuals, which might otherwise be common in ethnographic descriptions that account for the positions of the interviewees and their relation to the researcher (Kwame Harrison 2018). In the text of the dissertation, I have decided to keep the name of the organized event by the people I interviewed. This decision was arrived at after having sought a reasonable balance between risks and benefits. The risks for the group of organizers as a whole were deemed low and the benefit of keeping the club's name adds value to my analysis, cohering as it does around articulations of "Russia." In any case,

anonymizing it might have been futile, since at the time there were no other Russian themed queer club events in Stockholm.

Self-positioning

In line with Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledges, I understand reflexivity and positioning to be central components of how knowledge is produced. This means that knowledge is not neutral but is shaped by the researcher's own positionality. A reflection on the process of research and the researcher's own position in the process is necessary, per Haraway, to avoid "speaking from nowhere" (582). The research process, more specifically, my research questions and my theoretical choices, my collection and selection of the material, finding and recruiting interviewees, etc., have been shaped by, inter alia, my positions as a man, born in Russia and with Russian as my first language, as a junior scholar in Swedish gender studies. The research choices I have made over the course of the entire process have invariably resulted in partial interpretations, foregroundings, and omissions in my analysis. Yet, as Haraway asserts, "[i]dentity, including self-identity, does not produce science; critical positioning does…" (586). Thus, acknowledging my subject positions should not be taken as an attempt to construct an individualist epistemology, but instead to put focus on how my belonging to various social and political contexts influences my analyses.

My position in relation to both the Swedish and the Russian contexts, can be understood as between an insider and/or outsider. In detailing this in-between position, Farahani (2011) argues that "[a]cademic work is shaped by intellectual reading and understanding as well as the personal history of the researcher" (127). In line with this, I have attempted to navigate the complex and multiple positions I occupy by reflecting on my understandings of the realities in the Russian and the Swedish cases, which have helped to contextualize this study. Growing up in a Russian context and having moved within Russia from a smaller city to Moscow and then abroad, I am aware of how the livelihoods of sexually non-normative people may look beyond the metronormative, at the intersection of global and local discourses of LGBT visibility and rights. On the other hand, working in Sweden and being able to read and speak Swedish has helped me situate the project within a Swedish context, which is far more uneven and complex than can be seen from an outside perspective (Olovsdotter Lööv 2020; Ahlstedt 2016). As such, in Sweden LGBT people are presented with some affordances such as same-sex marriage and public acceptance that, albeit distributed unevenly are entirely absent from the Russian context. On the other hand, Sweden presents a

specific version of a safe haven that coheres around neoliberal domesticity and consumption (U. Dahl 2022). This is quite different from the experience of Russia, where LGBT people have been able to make fewer formal claims to the state and nation. My position has also been shaped by growing up in a political and national context where LGBT rights were never won and have in fact significantly diminished. Yet, in spite of these constraints, LGBT people have carved out spaces for queer existence and even LGBT activism (Lukinmaa 2022).

More specifically, by choosing a discourse-theoretical analytical approach with a queer sensibility, I have attempted to inquire into the contingencies that shape non-normative sexuality and national images in discourse. My analysis in Chapter 3 is limited and driven by my positions as outsider to the Russian lesbian scene and the art scene in Sweden. For my analysis in Chapter 4, since I am aware of the heteropatriarchal Russian culture in both Russia and in the Russian diaspora, my position as a migrant in Sweden has provided a point of comparison and has enabled contacts with organizers of club events analyzed in Chapter 4. Therefore, the interview part of this study is especially informed by own positioning as an insider in the Russian context who not only shares some experiences with the interviewees but also possesses similar blind spots. This book has been shaped by the power I have as a researcher to select, interpret, and present the examples and themes circulating within both media and cultural discourse. My ability to apply queer and, to a lesser extent, postcolonial theory is also enabled by the context of Swedish gender studies and would have been hard in Russia (cf. Kondakov 2016, Moss 2021).

CHAPTER 1

Russian LGBT people and Swedish sexual exceptionalism

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a pivotal moment in global geopolitics. Domestically, it triggered profound transformations of the political, economic, and social landscapes, themselves outcomes of the shifts that occurred during the Soviet period leading up to the dissolution of the union. Views regarding gender and sexuality in Russia were also reshaped. In pointing out that changes might not be immediately discernible, some researchers speak of "revolutions of intimacy" (Gradskova, Kondakov, and Shevtsova 2020) to capture sexual liberalization and transformation of sexual culture in Russia and post-state socialist countries. Manifesting themselves in private and public spheres, these manifestations remained open to interpretation and reinterpretation in the decades that followed. Given the long history of countries viewing each other, I wonder how the image of Russia in Sweden reflected these changes. Which developments in Russian sexual culture and politics were picked up on in Swedish media? Did Sweden position itself as "homonational" already in the 1990s? To answer these questions, I explore how non-normative sexuality has been used to construct images of Russia in Sweden.

In this chapter, to examine the development of the image of Russia and LGBT people in the Swedish context, I analyze 466 articles from 1991 to 2019 from the five largest Swedish newspapers. I argue that non-normative sexuality is central for how media images of Russia in Sweden are constructed. Images of Russia reflect the Swedish national self-image and feed into discourses of Sweden's exceptionalism. In my analysis, the concept of sexual exceptionalism is foregrounded by tracing how Swedish self-positioning is connected to both historical understandings of Russia in Sweden and histories of Swedish national exceptionalism, outlined already in the introductory chapter. I argue that the mobilization of gender and sexuality for constructing the national image should be traced beyond the temporality of a "very recent phenomenon" of homonationalism (Serykh 2017) by eluci-

dating its links to earlier discursive formations at the interface of Western/Northern Europe and CEE.

This chapter contributes to existing studies on homonationalism in two central ways. First, focused on the Swedish context, it expands the geo-temporal scope of previous research that has so far been limited to discourse in the US and Western Europe. Dean Cooper-Cunningham's (2021) study illustrates how the visual representations of Russian homophobia in Anglophone media around 2013–2014 repeatedly reassert Western sexual exceptionalism. Analyzing similar material, Katharina Wiedlack (2017; 2018) highlights how representations of vulnerable bodies of Russian gay men contribute to upholding the divide between "the East" and "the West." Further, Ann Travers and Mary Shearman (2017) exemplify how reports on the 2014 Sochi Olympics created notions of the USA and Canada as safe havens for LGBT people. Second, in a Swedish/Nordic context, this chapter shifts the focus to Russia. Existing studies on homonationalism in Sweden have focused principally on the 2010s. The Muslim Other (Kehl 2020a) and Africa (Jungar and Peltonen 2017) have been identified as targets of homonationalist (Puar 2007) discourse in Sweden. Analyses of Pride Järva organized in a segregated Muslim-majority suburb by a member of the right-wing party Sweden Democrats (Kehl 2018; Sörberg 2017) and Swedish Armed Forces advertising campaigns (Strand and Kehl 2019) have highlighted the usefulness of Puar's theory for the Swedish context. Before proceeding to my analysis, I will outline the umbrella concept of homonationalism and its critiques to explain my use of the concept of sexual exceptionalism.

Sexual exceptionalism

Focusing on sexual exceptionalism as a specific component of homonationalism, I argue that sexual exceptionalism is better suited for a Swedish-Russian case study than conceptualizations of "homonationalism" in the West vis-à-vis "state homophobia" in Russia. The concept of exceptionalism does not presuppose a binary division between homophobic and homotolerant countries and allows me to explore the role of sexuality as part of a history of national exceptionalism.

The notion of exceptionalism is used here as "a heuristic device" (Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich 2023, 154) that helps me highlight the meaning of sexuality in Sweden's "post-imperial and neocolonial discourse aimed at establishing [its] regional and global dominance in a post-Cold War multi-

polar world" (155). Sexual exceptionalism, whose articulations I explore in this chapter, is a building block for Puar's concept of homonationalism I have outlined in the theory section. To recapitulate, for Puar (2007, 2), homonationalism manifests itself in three related ways. "Sexual exceptionalism" expresses itself in the representation of a nation as exceptionally tolerant toward sexual diversity, incorporating LGBT people into projects of nation-building. "Queer as regulatory" places queerness within a secular framework, whereby gay men can "enact forms of national, racial, or other belongings by contributing to the collective vilification of Muslims" (2007, 21). The "ascendancy of whiteness" denotes a process whereby the state and the market extend national belonging to some multicultural heteronormative subjects, middle class and straight, seen as "a tolerable ethnic" as well as to homonormative LGBT people who can create nuclear families. This draws the line of exclusion at "an intolerable ethnic (a terrorist suspect)" and pathologizes Orientalist queerness, signaled by polygamy and pathological homosociality (2007, 24–26). Similarly, the "heterosexualization" of the ethnic results in the construction of the image of the Other as homophobic and patriarchal, and thus as a new threat to the nation. Haritaworn (2015) has termed this dynamic "hateful Others" against "queer lovers." Oversimplifying, this tripartite structure, "sexual exceptionalism," "queer as regulatory," and "the ascendancy of whiteness", has also been understood, respectively, as tolerance to LGBT people, nationalism, and racism (Freude and Vergés Bosch 2020, 1293). This simplified version makes the concept broadly applicable to any geographical and cultural context but obscures its complexity. This dissertation builds both on Puar's analysis and on critiques of homonationalism.

Critiques of homonationalism as a concept have typically focused on two issues (Winer and Bolzendahl 2021, 8): the evolution of homonationalism from a critique of particular practices to a general, global diagnostic and the expanding application of homonationalism beyond its original context (the United States and parts of Western Europe post-9/11). An example of the first type of criticism, C. Heike Schotten (2016) takes issue with the widespread use of the concept of homonationalism. Schotten draws attention to a shift in the definition of homonationalism that occurred in Puar's (2007; 2013b) two publications. Puar (2013b) updates the definition of homonationalism as a process in which "the right to, or quality of sovereignty is now evaluated by how a nation treats its homosexuals." The brevity of this new definition, Schotten (2016) argues, is due in part to its decisive abandonment of the second part of homonationalism (Puar 2007): LGBT

people's embrace of and complicity with the state. The reformulated homonationalism, rather than align with a specifically American imperial practice, as homonationalism in its original formulation did, names a generalized Western sexual exceptionalism. The West and/or imperial powers are ascendant because they protect gay rights. Homonationalism (2013b) becomes "a broad diagnostic of the international scene" and "a facet of modernity" (Schotten 2016, 11). A second line of criticism has pointed out the term's geographical and cultural over-extension (Winer and Bolzendahl 2021, 6–8) and deployments of homonationalism in non-Western contexts. While geographically and culturally the Swedish context belongs to Western Europe, the use of homonationalism to study Russian image construction could conceal more specific regional dynamics of European boundary drawing between East/West in the process of creation of Central and Eastern Europe. Further, because my analysis traces developments in sexual politics from 1991, the use of homonationalism as a term deployed to describe post 9/11 developments (Serykh 2017) is less suitable for highlighting the temporality of the longer processes of national image construction.

In light of these criticisms, I propose to focus on *sexual exceptionalism*, connected to Swedish national exceptionalism more broadly, rather than the overarching notion of homonationalism to sketch the contours of a critical analysis of Swedish LGBT politics entangled with its national project. These constructions are enacted not primarily by politicians but by journalists and columnists and temporally are not tied to the Russian "gay propaganda" law or the American 9/11, which, according to Puar (2007, xviii) "reflects particular spatial and temporal narratives and also produces spatializing and temporalizing discourses." My argument is that the temporalities in my case study are connected to the implied progressiveness of Swedish exceptionalism and the supposed backwardness of postsocialist Europe. This highlights the ongoing impact of Russia's attitudes toward LGBT individuals on how Russia and, by extension, Sweden are portrayed in Swedish mainstream media. As the earlier research (Kulick 2003; Lönn 2018) I have already outlined in the previous chapter demonstrates, Eastern European and Russian sexualities have been key in Sweden's self-understanding. I will now turn to the analysis of representations in the Swedish media, presenting it in two separate sections, focusing on constructions of Russia and Sweden in articulations of non-normative sexuality.

Constructing Russia

Absence of a future for LGBT people

A central theme presented in the articles I examined is the absence of a future for Russian LGBT people. On 10 November 1991, a month before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* published a report entitled "She is a he. As a transvestite (*transvestit*) in the Soviet Union, he risks imprisonment" (*Expressen*, 1991-11-10).[32] The interview with "Sergei, 20 years old and transvestite" at one of St. Petersburg's discos is followed by a more general discussion about the situation for homosexuals (*homosexuella*) in the Soviet Union. The report begins with the journalist exhibiting confusion about (mis)gendering Sergei on the dance floor. Sergei, however, seems used to this and has a female name at hand—Linda. Yet the reporter, except for the headline and the sentence quoted above, describes Sergei principally using the pronoun "he," which Sergei/Linda also uses when talking about themself. Sergei's life is used as an example of "life as a homosexual" ("*liv som homosexuell*") in the Soviet Union.[33] Nilsson writes that many other homosexuals (*homosexuella*) in the Soviet Union "lose faith in life and become apathetic in their tragic loneliness," quoting Sergei saying: "There is no future for people like me in the Soviet Union. To live a normal life as a homosexual here is impossible […] the risk of being beaten or harassed is always great." These details contribute to an image of the Soviet Union as a place where the future for homosexuals is hopeless and life is unlivable.

In the interview with Sergei/Linda in *Expressen*, there is also an explicit construction of Sweden that is made by the journalist who uses Sergei's words to highlight how Sweden is different from the Soviet Union. According to the journalist, Sergei imagines his life exclusively outside of the Soviet Union and his dream is to go abroad:

> For four years he has, as he says, "just hung around and hoped for a chance to come abroad." His dream is to become an artist, to sing in a [drag] show, like *After Dark*.

—

[32] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Swedish into English are mine.

[33] I continue using the pronoun *he* throughout, based on the journalist's choice.

> "Of course I also want to have a job I enjoy, to live a normal life like all other people. But when I don't even get a chance to work with what I want, when I don't get to live the way I want, how can I believe in the future, in life?"

Further, from the report we find out that Sergei/Linda has managed to undergo makeshift breast augmentation. Commenting on that, he makes the comparison: "[o]f course, here [in the Soviet Union] there are no such plastic surgeons as you have." The journalist constructs Sweden as a place more progressive than the Soviet Union based on Sergei's image of standards for gender nonconforming people outside the Soviet Union, exemplified by the availability of better surgeons for gender-affirming care, and the existence of shows he could perform in. It is only implied that it is better "out there," but whether Sergei refers to Sweden or a more general idea of Europe/West remains unclear. Importantly, the Swedish image is constructed in a complex process enabled by the Swedish journalist's selection, editing, and citation of Sergei's voice. The journalist puts words in his mouth when she suggests the commercial drag show *After Dark*[34] as an example of an act in which Sergei could perform. This implies a lack of spaces in the Soviet Union where participants would play with gender expression. In this, rather unusual, explicit comparison between Sweden and Russia, an image of Sweden is forged as a country of acceptance and opportunities, in opposition to the Soviet-Russian image of loneliness and hopelessness. As we will see later, it is more common for the image of Sweden to be constructed implicitly around a comparison to an image of Russia as Other. This journalist account reduces Sergei/Linda's life to simply that of a "homosexual." This not only stabilizes the complexities of Sergei/Linda's life into a simple identity narrative but also overshadows their self-presentation that confounds the meaning and usefulness of a "homosexual" identity.

Sergei/Linda's story is an example of a specific genre of newspaper article that presents a background story of homophobia in Russia and zooms in on homosexual asylum seekers, giving them media publicity. The article also recounts a story of a Russian [*sic*] homosexual man ("*en rysk homosexuell*

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[34] *After Dark*, established in 1976, can be seen as an example of queer aesthetics embraced by heterosexual Swedish culture, and which continues to this day. In the early shows 1976-1996, two main performers, Christer Lindarw and Lars Flinckman combined, to varying degrees, pageant / beauty and camp traditions of drag in glamorous lip syncing and humorous theatrical performances. Westerling (2006, 19–29) points out that *After Dark* is considered to have left its connection to the social movements of gay, LGBT or queer liberation and instead has embraced the metaphorical theatricality in commercial performances. See, e.g., http://www.nojeskontoret.se/show/after-darks-20-ars-jubileum/ Lindarw being a more feminine, "fish" queen, has also been called "Sweden's most beautiful woman" (Hammerskog 1991).

man") who applied for asylum in Sweden and had his application rejected with the reasoning that "returning [to the Soviet Union] did not constitute a risk." Having described the rejection of the asylum case, the journalist implores the authorities to change the Swedish asylum requirements, writing:

> Life as a homosexual in the Soviet Union involves a constant risk of being caught and arrested, constant hiding of emotions and relationships, in short, *a life without human rights…*
>
> The change in the political climate in the Soviet Union may mean a future change in legislation. Even if this happens, *it will take a long time* before a safe existence for homosexuals can be established. (*Expressen*, 1991-11-10, emphasis mine)

Already here, in an article from 1991, the journalist constructs the lack of a "liveable" life for Soviet *homosexuals*, suggesting "there is no future" there, and, implicitly, that there might be a future in Sweden. Further, it portrays the Soviet Union as underdeveloped on a timeline of LGBT development. This is because

> Many of these [patriarchal traditions and family patterns] still live on today in the countryside and to a large extent also in the cities. Many police are recruited from the countryside, by the way, which means that the understanding of homosexuals is practically equal to zero. (*Expressen*, 1991-11-10)

These two quotes suggest that legal change is not enough. Hinting at the homophobia of the Russian people, especially the police, further places the Soviet Union in contrast to Sweden.

Sergei/Linda here is placed in the subject position of what Weber (2016, 105) calls "gay rights holder," a variant of the "normal homosexual." In a strand that runs parallel to Puar's uses of Duggan's homonormativity, Weber (2016) has also built on Duggan to theorize the figurations of "the homosexual" and the role they play in international relations. According to Weber, "the homosexual" appears in global discourses on homosexuality in specific ways. The West creates and upholds images of the undesirable queers, the "perverse homosexual", the "underdeveloped" and the "undevelopable" and the out-of-place and the on-the-move "perverse homosexual", the "unwanted im/migrant" and the "terrorist," who reside in the non-West. In the West, simultaneously, the "gay rights holder" appears as the "normal homosexual" in some Western homonormative discourses on human rights. In these discourses, the "gay rights holder" is a variation of the (re)productive neo-

liberal subject (Duggan 2002). According to Weber, then, the figure of the "gay rights holder" is placed firmly within neoliberal economics, neoliberal cultures of tolerance and diversity as well as within national discourses of patriotism as "docile patriots" (Puar and Rai 2002). As Weber summarizes, "the 'gay patriot' is the 'gay rights holder' mobilized explicitly on behalf of the 'nation' and against threatening anarchical, pathological, national and international 'others'" (105).

My application of Weber's terminology to 1990s Sweden may seem anachronistic, but I argue it helps us understand this historical glimpse as an early example of the history of homonormalization in Sweden.[35] In some sense, the image of Sergei/Linda that the Swedish reader met in *Expressen* is similar to representations of men and boys from Arabic countries in the Swedish magazine *Revolt!* in the 1970s and 80s (Laskar 2017). In contrast to Muslim youths framed as promiscuous homosexuals, that is, "the underdeveloped, perverse homosexual" in Weber's understanding that fits with making the Orient the sexual Other of Western sexualities, the Russian homosexual here is "normal," while the everyday setting they are forced to live within is homophobic. Sergei/Linda's possible move from the subject position of a Russian LGBT to a Swedish/European context is not at all discussed. Instead, an image of a seamless transition of Sergei, as a homosexual, from one context to another is presented. This story would read quite differently if Sergei had been only offered the subject position of the "unwanted im/migrant."

In other examples of articles centering on the LGBTQ asylum system, Russian voices, selected and represented by Swedish reporters, relay a similarly hopeless message about the future of the Russian LGBTQ. In "Johan Hilton: Sweden must ease the asylum requirements for Russian LGBTQ persons" (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2014-06-18), Hilton cites a Russian activist:

> [Chair of the Russian LGBTQ organization *Rakurs* Tatana] Vinnichenko herself has no hope for the future of the Russian LGBTQ population...

In another piece, an interview with activist-turned-Russian-expert Masha Gessen in *Dagens Nyheter* (2016-02-09), the references to the deteriorating situation in Russia are paralleled by the implicit image of Sweden, unwilling to accept refugees, as having a responsibility:

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[35] Already in 1988, the Homosexual Cohabitees Act (1987:813) came into force. LGBT people, both Swedish and foreign, were now seen as legitimate subjects of human rights discourse.

> If Sweden were more open to LGBT people, it would be a lifeline (*livlina*) for many, [Gessen] says. (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2016-02-09)

These asylum stories, purporting to represent Russian voices by direct citation, revolve around a lack of future. In comparison to another example from 2013, which will be considered in the next section, there is no focus on violence, but rather a comparison in terms of temporality. Importantly, it is the quoted Russian voices who compare Sweden and Russia, and who thereby contribute to circulating domestic and international discourses of Swedish sexual exceptionalism. These stories also implicitly point to Sweden's responsibility, with Swedish reporters and Russian voices urging Sweden to act by relaxing the asylum rules (Gessen in the last example).

The absence of a future, which is a concern raised by LGBT people themselves in the interviews from the early period, also appears in 2014, after the "gay propaganda" law had been passed in 2013. Outlining a background for Russian homophobia, Per Enerud, in the article "The motherland, the people – the family," published on February 11, 2014, in *Aftonbladet* shows how Russian official discourses on family are "for Putin […] closely linked to Russia's future, politically, militarily, and culturally." The article mentions LGBT people who do not fit the concept of family proposed by MP Elena Mizulina, and thus have no place in the future that is discursively reserved for "traditional families":

> The bonds and the community that the family creates must be reflected in the bonds and the community that the people of Russia feel toward their motherland. […] Family, people, and homeland. Love will lead Russia toward the future.

This example shows that the hegemonic Russian and Swedish discourses are constructed using a limited number of elements: family; community; nation, and the future. While in the Russian hegemonic discourse these form links with the notion of heteronormativity, in the Swedish hegemonic discourse these same signifiers are tethered to an emerging homonormativity. Because love in the Russian context is articulated as solely heterosexual, appeals to love, popular in the Western LGBT rights advocacy (Haritaworn 2015; Ahlstedt 2016), are difficult to use.

Overall, this section has highlighted some examples that position the Russian LGBT person as having no future in Russia. As can be seen from the material that spans almost 25 years, there is no improvement in the asylum process claims; Sweden does not easily grant asylum to Russian LGBT people.

Despite the gap between the image and practice, Sweden is constructed as the place where homosexuals might have a future. This is evident, for instance, in the metaphor of the "lifeline." I return to articulations of "responsibility" and the moral aspect of the Swedish image in a later section of my analysis, "Constructing Sweden."

Backwardness

Before Russian LGBT people became an element of the Swedish hegemonic discourse on non-normative sexuality in Russia, in a few articles from the period before 2007 the focus was on the constructions of Russia via Russian people's reactions to popular culture. Among them are two smaller newspaper columns, where Russians are portrayed as prudes constricted by their mores. First, a suggestion that the new James Bond should be a gay Russian sympathizer *(en homosexuell ryssvän)*, to reflect real events. In this example, the story revolves around how "the English spy organization MI6 has sent its first gay couple on a mission to an 'interesting' country" (Wendel, 1998-02-02, *Expressen*). This is suggested because a gay spy from the West would ostensibly provide an interesting contrast to the homophobic "post-Soviet bogeyman" (Saunders 2016, 131–58). Second, similar constructions of the Russian Other appear in a discussion of the 2006 film *Borat*:

> The Russian State Film Committee fears that several groups may feel insulted by the English comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's rampant ridicule of anti-Semitism, homophobia, and gender prejudice. (Winiarski, 2006-11-10, *Dagens Nyheter*)

According to Winiarski, the intrinsic value of screening this movie consists in demonstrating to Russians the "appropriate" ways of ridicule that are coming from the US.[36] Challenges to alleged Russian homophobia, represented by Western cultural production, are welcomed. The two examples of a new *Bond* movie and *Borat* can be compared to descriptions of Russians' reception of the Russian music duo, Tatu.

Tatu, a pop duo consisting of two school-age girls famous for their (faux-) lesbian performances and aesthetics, represented Russia in the 2003 Eurovision Song Contest in Riga. The reception of Tatu by the Russian domestic public was discussed in the Swedish media during the run up to the event. In an article discussing the removal of homosexuality from the Russian Ministry

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[36] For a critique of *Borat* as perpetuating the idea of post-Soviet countries as "laughable nations," see Saunders (2016, 159–83).

of Defense's list of mental illnesses, Winiarski (2003-03-16, *Dagens Nyheter*) wonders how discrimination against homosexuals in the military continues, while Tatu is embraced by Russia as representatives of the country in the music contest. In another article, "Tatu break all taboos" published in *Aftonbladet* on May 24, 2003, Hermann Scholz writes:

> In Russia, Tatu was not uncontested. Homosexuality is an absolute taboo in the country. Pedophilia is not talked about. Tatu takes a hammer to this prudery. […] To the Russian public, Tatu's public presentation of homosexual love was a shock. (*Aftonbladet*, 2003-05-24)

This way of talking about the reception of Tatu contributes to the placement of Russia within an imagined geography that evokes the lagging Other to create an advanced, politically aware Self. Russians are placed in a double bind, simultaneously constructed as too naïve, shocked at the performance that featured same-sex love, and too barbaric, rejoicing at the act of pedophilia. The ways Swedish media in 2003 described the reception of Tatu. by Russians provides an example of constructing the Russian people where a specific way of embracing LGBT rights is at stake. Russians are understood to be not familiar with the standard of Western political correctness, which serves as an indication that Russia is deviating from the pathway of linear progress. Despite domestic controversies, pop music researcher Dana Heller notes that Tatu. "appeared to win official cultural validation" (Heller 2007, 197) in Russia and were quite popular among women with same-sex desires (Wiedlack and Neufeld 2015). The Swedish media's reporting on the Russian public "not understanding" the seriousness and the transgressions that Tatu embody can be compared to accusations of "aping" modernity leveled against Russia, expressed here in paranoid analyses of Russia producing and packaging an image of itself that appears even "more modern" than the West itself.[37] Not only are Russians constructed as unable to "properly" understand the performance, but the authenticity of Russia's queer aesthetics is called into question.

Discussions around Moscow Pride 2007 proved another fruitful ground for creating images of Russia, prompted by the Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov who called it "satanic" (e.g., *Göteborgs-Posten*, 2007-01-30). The Moscow Pride parade of 2006 was framed as a "local" event in Moscow and therefore

[37] Compare also with a critical reading of Russia's uses of sexual excess in Eurovision by Miazhevich (2010).

did not appear in the sources gathered under the keyword "Russia."[38] Moscow Pride 2006 was never covered as a *Russian* event despite marking the boundaries of acceptable and desirable national visibility (cf. Renkin 2009), with participants appearing in places of symbolic importance for the Russian nation, such as Red Square. The violent reactions to the 2007 and 2008 Pride prompted in 2008 Fredrik Strage (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2008-11-25) to make the following comparison:

> [a] Russian pride parade is quite different from a Western one. Instead of disco dancing through the city, the participants are chased and beaten by Christian fascists.

This way of reporting suggests that Russia has failed the test of belonging to the West. The temporal aspect of the reports on the reactions to the 2007 Moscow Pride reveals a silence in the Swedish hegemonic discourse, resulting in the effacement of the history of Russian LGBT organizing.[39] Moscow Pride was the first event to have attracted nationwide attention in Russia and abroad, but certainly not the first-ever pride parade in Russia (Neufeld 2018, 84–88).[40] The Swedish media limits the discourse on Russian LGBT activism to articulations of danger and backwardness, rather than illuminating other shapes that activism has taken historically. As such, it offers the LGBT activists only the subject position of a victim confronted by religious and state institutions.

In addition to a deteriorating situation in Russia with human rights violations (e.g., *Göteborgs-Posten*, 2014-01-11; *Dagens Nyheter*, 2014-01-09) it is crucial to note that Russia is continuously held to an ever-increasing

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[38] In 2005 *Svenska Dagbladet* briefly reported on the ban of the pride parade in Moscow 2006 (*Svenska Dagbladet*, 2005-08-01). *Dagens Nyheter* (2006-05-28) wrote about mass detentions and *Svenska Dagbladet* (2006-05-28) published a longer piece detailing the events.

[39] Essig writes about the *Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities* that emerged as early as 1898 (1999, 58). Neufeld (2018) traces visible organizing, such as the activity of The Moscow Gay & Lesbian Alliance, the first Soviet Gay and Lesbian Symposium and Film Festival in Moscow and Leningrad in the 1990s. For the history of Russian LGBT activism see *Introduction*.

[40] Outside Moscow, Russian LGBT people have attempted to organize "Love parades," not always in Western identarian terms, in Yekaterinburg and St. Petersburg (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2016, 178). These events promoted neither a straightforward political agenda like gay pride, gay rights, or gay/lesbian/ trans* coming out in terms of individual identity-politics nor public visibility. Presented as harmless fun-centered celebrations that were subtler than "gay pride," they were aimed at breaking the silence around the topic of sexuality in Russia and emphasized community building and exchange. Neufeld and Wiedlack suggest, however, that these events contributed overall to greater visibility of gay and lesbian sexuality (2016, 178).

standard of global LGBT rights. This is especially evident in a series of 2015 publications on the difficulties that trans people face in the process of obtaining driver's licenses. For instance, in "Transgender people are prohibited from driving," published on January 25, 2015, by Anna-Lena Laurén in *Svenska Dagbladet*, the nodal point "LGBT people" is broadened to include trans* people, so as to exemplify the ways human rights in Russia "continue to worsen." This is not to say that trans rights do not matter; rather, this example indexes a general understanding of LGBT rights. In line with Kondakov (2023, 118), who compares legislation in Russia and Ireland, I suggest that in the Swedish context the interpretation of certain laws as signs of progress is based on Sweden's self-perception as a progressive country, where affective satisfaction from this sense of progress is evoked.

Geographical proximity

The tragic narrative of Karin Boye is used in Anna Larsson's article "The rainbow flag can boost Carl Bildt," published in *Svenska Dagbladet* on June 1, 2007, to comparatively treat the story of unfolding homophobia in Russia. Karin Boye was a bisexual Swedish author and poet who committed suicide in 1941, at the time when same-sex relations were still forbidden by law in Sweden, three years before decriminalization. The article mentions that Boye's life was defined by and through the ban of homosexual relations in Sweden and the "calls against […] sexual deviants" she heard during her time in Germany in 1941, drawing parallels thereby with views one could hear in Moscow in 2007. This temporal and emotional comparison here presents the past of Western Europe, which maltreated and imprisoned homosexuals, as characteristic of Russia's present.[41] Yet the article also stresses the spatial aspect of Sweden's construction of Russia, by calling on the Swedish government to react to the "brutal and frightening events [right-wing extremists' violence] that are played out just 50 minutes by air from Stockholm." The journalist bemoans the lack of direct communication with Russia from both then-Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and Minister for Integration and Gender Equality Nyamko Sabuni, to whom "[dealing with] Russia's homophobia seems to be delegated." Russia's proximity, "just 50 minutes by air from Stockholm" further points to the usefulness of Russian homophobia for the Swedish image, even despite the inaction of leading politicians at the time. Additionally, this explicit instance of a comparison between Sweden and

[41] This is not dissimilar to orientalist dynamics between Western Europe and postsocialist CEE (Mizielińska and Kulpa 2011, 17).

Russia is an example of a construction of the Swedish and European past that foregrounds Swedish and European present-day tolerance. The article assumes that calls to violence are part of a discriminatory past long left behind, and never to the tolerant Sweden of present day, where homosexuality has been decriminalized since 1944.

Another article, "Russian police stop gay protest" by Joakim Goksör in *Göteborgs-Posten* (2007-05-28), makes a geographical generalization: "The entire Baltic Sea region is a big problem. […] In Russia, there is strong discrimination against LGBT groups." In 2013, the article "Violence and oppression commonplace for the world's LGBT people" published in *Expressen* similarly remarked, "It is enough to look *across the Baltic Sea* to find places where it is life-threatening to be gay, bisexual or a transgender person" (*Expressen*, 2013-07-28, emphasis mine). In these articulations, a spatial construction of Russia is formed. The articulations define Russia as part of the Baltic Sea region, an area of East-West confrontation and ideological competition during the Cold War and again recently (R. Bengtsson 2016; Agius and Edenborg 2019). Russia's proximity to Sweden explains why Sweden should be concerned with LGBT rights in Russia, which justifies the moral exceptionalism centered around sexual rights. This exceptionalism is further analyzed in a later section of this chapter, "Constructing Sweden." The image of Russia constructed in the media can be seen as an example of a more generalized discourse featuring Western Europe's descriptions of postsocialist Europe's homophobia (Kulpa 2014; Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011) by comparing the two sides of the Baltic Sea.

Loneliness, homophobia, and danger

Three affective themes characterize the hopeless image of Russia that the Swedish media creates by focusing on LGBT people. First, in addition to the story of Sergei/Linda, the theme of the loneliness of Russian "homosexuals" features in Disa Håstad's three articles about Russian theatre in *Dagens Nyheter*. These articles, published between 1993 and 1997, mention the famous Russian director Roman Viktyuk's staging of *The Slingshot*, a play written by Nikolay Kolyada, in among other places Stockholm. The play's plot revolves around the story of two men, an Afghan war veteran, and a younger student, who fall in love with each other. The article entitled "'Light blue must be included' Nikolay Kolyada a modest representative for Russian homosexuals," published on 12 March 1995 in *Dagens Nyheter,* includes an

interview with the playwright.[42] Kolyada comments on the lack of desire to be an activist:

> I do not see myself as a writer whose specialty is homosexual problems, even if people in Germany want to make me a militant campaigner. I write about *loneliness*. And it is universal. (Håstad, 1995-03-12, *Dagens Nyheter*)

This constructs Russian LGBT people as lonely and outside the reach of activists. While this aestheticized understanding of homosexuality (Essig 1999, 98ff.), which is meant also to underscore its universal rather than particular character, hints at the existence of an alternative sexual politics not centered around identity politics, this potential is never explored in other published articles. This way of representing queer lives echoes the lack of other representations of LGBT livelihoods and activism in the Swedish media context.

Second, several articles focus on the events of the summer of 2007, drawing conclusions about LGBT people in Russia (and not just Moscow) suffering from homophobia:

> This year marks 14 years since homosexuality was decriminalized in Russia. Despite this, Pride festivals are banned, and homophobia is rife (*homofobin är stor*) in Russian society. [… Russia is] a pretty scary *(otäckt)* country if you're gay. (2007-05-28, *Aftonbladet*)

Sometimes very grim pictures of homophobia among ordinary Russians are drawn. Consider, for example the following comparison of statistics in *Dagens Nyheter*:

> Four percent of the Russian population believes that homosexuals should be exterminated. LGBT people are also said to make up at least four percent of the people. This means that each gay person has their own potential executioner. (Bjurwald, 2011-01-12, *Dagens Nyheter*)

The article titled "Gayfree cinemas" by Lindeen published in *Expressen* on November 24, 2011, claims that "Russia is the most homophobic country in Europe." Due to its conditional inclusion in the European community, Russia is said to have a privileged position among other countries that have a record of violating human rights and LGBT rights.

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[42] Light blue (Sw. *ljusblå*) refers to the Russian word *goluboi*, a slang for male homosexual, used since the 1960s and falling out of use in the early 2000s.

> Homophobia has plagued Russia for centuries, and the Soviet era was no exception. [Despite the decriminalization in 1993…] beneath the surface, the old attitude has survived. (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2012-03-14)

Consistent with the reporting on Moscow Pride, this establishes equivalence between cases of violence and the innate and unchangeable homophobia of the Russian population. In the Swedish hegemonic discourse, this leads to the formation of the subject position of the Russian homophobe, the main danger to Russian LGBT people.

Third, having appeared in the story of Sergei/Linda analyzed in the previous section, the theme of danger has been regularly featured in the discourse. A host of newspaper columns appearing yearly in 2007–2011 around the time of the pride parades in Moscow and St. Petersburg focus exclusively on police and bystander violence against protestors. For example, Göteborgs-*Posten* on 17 May 2009 published a column by Anna-Lena Laurén entitled "The gay parade in Moscow was violently dispersed". The journalist writes that "the Russian authorities do not care about bad PR – about fifty activists were arrested, on the same day as the final of the Eurovision Song Contest [in Moscow]." In short pieces in both *Dagens Nyheter* and *Göteborgs-Posten,* "Police crackdown on LGBTQ protests" (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2010-06-27; *Göteborgs-Posten*, 2011-11-25), LGBT individuals are portrayed solely as victims, without acknowledging either their participation in the wider activities of the Russian LGBT community or the complexity of LGBT lives that are not limited to the public sphere.

Similarly, an article entitled "Would not have lived if I had stayed" by Kenan Habul (*Aftonbladet,* 2013-07-30), tells the asylum story of Laetitia, who "was born as a boy in Russia [and] now she hopes for a new life in Sweden." The same article cites the Swedish Minister for EU Affairs Birgitta Ohlsson, who notes that "Sweden is one of the most assertive EU countries in applying pressure on Russia about LGBT issues." In addition to earlier examples, which featured loneliness and generalized homophobia, the construction of Swedish responsibility is set against the background of an increased visibility of gay people in Russia, which has led to crimes against them. The Swedish media never challenges the idea of using visibility as a strategy for LGBT emancipation (Edenborg 2020b). Even when, as in 2017, visibility of homosexuality became a justification for the torture of gay men in Chechnya (Brock and Edenborg 2020), this only served to place LGBT people in Chechnya in the subject position of victim.

In 2018, around the time of the FIFA World Cup, held in Russia, *Svenska Dagbladet* (2018-06-17) reported on the warnings of the dangers in Russia that were issued from across the EU to foreign fans. This is not unlike the structuring of discourse in 2013 and 2014, in connection to the 2013 World Athletics Championships and the Olympics 2014 in Sochi, where discussions focused on the effects of the law as a danger for foreigners, who might be persecuted because of their sexuality.

Articulations of gender and sexuality that affect constructions of national images appear in an interview with the Soviet-born émigré activist Masha Gessen, entitled "Russia has ready-made plans to attack Sweden," published on 5 October 2018 in *Aftonbladet*. Gessen goes on to suggest that "protective nationalism," of the UK and Swedish kind, can be tolerated, but not Russian imperialist sentiments. She then uses the theme of homophobia to conclude that Russia does not measure up to a standard of a Western country in all aspects, not least because it is aggressive and uses its military force. These two articulations, danger to LGBT people and the threat that comes from Russia as an aggressive military power, are collapsed into one:

> I [the journalist] ask if Sweden is a red flag for Russia ideologically. […]
>
> Russia is definitely trying to demonstrate its strength to Sweden. If there is a small country with an attitude in the immediate area, they should be afraid of big powerful Russia. I do not doubt that there exist plans to attack Sweden. (Gessen in Lindqvist, *Aftonbladet*, 2018-10-05)

While arguing on behalf of Russian LGBT people, Gessen taps into an articulation of the "Russian menace" by placing them within a wider chain of equivalence. This shows an increased entwinement between the two articulations of danger by the end of 2018. Mega-events organized by Russia, together with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, proved to be excellent sites for the construction of the Swedish sexually exceptional Self as both fully developed and responsible.

Constructing Sweden

Temporal, spatial, and affective themes are used to construct the image of Russia during the period between 1991 and 2019. Except for the "Russian voices" sometimes present in the discourse, which explicitly draw on images of Sweden, Swedish discursive identity is most often *implicitly* constructed in opposition to Russia by using the themes of development, in relation to LGBT rights, and its mission to help Russian LGBT people by advocating

LGBT rights in the international arena, with the aim of saving them from Russian homophobes.

Development

Sports events and the Eurovision Song Contest become spaces where the Swedish Self is most often constructed, by hinting at Russia's and Sweden's positioning within the international community, as homophobic and sexually exceptional respectively. In an article by Torbjörn Ek, entitled "Malena on homophobia: Tragic" published in *Aftonbladet* on 2009-05-15, Malena Ernman, whose song represented Sweden in Moscow in 2009, says that she is "upset about intolerance" and "would love to do something to show support." Malena Ernman is also depicted as lacking a political stance with her apolitical opera-inspired song entry, in Baas and Hansson's "Schlager shows a divided Europe" published in *Expressen* on May 15, 2009. The implicit assumption here is that Eurovision is an event where all participants ought to have a political stance. Ek's on-site report from Eurovision also features a couple of gay men from Sweden, who decided to get engaged on Red Square just before the interview and consider it a shame that "homosexuality is so poorly accepted in Russia." They evoke a developmental narrative by pointing out that "these are human rights that haven't yet been achieved here [in Russia]." Sweden's self-image is implicitly constructed by the gay couple and by Ernman as an "us" for whom homosexuality is accepted and pride parades permitted.

Another article, detailing the participation of Victoria, Crown Princess of Sweden at the QX Gaygala,[43] features a picture of her holding a rainbow flag with a cautious caption "The photo is a montage" (*Expressen,* 2013-02-06). Why has the Crown Princess posed with a Photoshopped, rather than a real rainbow flag? I would suggest that the royal family is a cautious advocate of LGBT rights, which, despite being framed as "universal" human rights, remains a political issue. Additionally, perhaps, support for queer/LGBT people in Sweden is not primarily expressed by waving the rainbow flag, itself a divisive symbol (Laskar, Johansson, and Mulinari 2016). The *Expressen* article, however, presents Victoria as a symbol of progress in a familiar progressivist narrative. It contrasts the backward current Swedish King Carl

[43] Established in 1999, QX Gaygala is an annual event organized by Swedish magazine QX. Gathering Swedish cultural elites and LGBTQ personalia, prizes are awarded for contributions to LGBTQ music, film, activism etc., in Sweden.

XVI Gustaf, who despite his royal motto, is "out of sync" with the nation, and Victoria, "a much-needed forward-looking leader."

In the run-up to the 2013 Athletics World Championships, Emma Green Tregaro, a Swedish high jumper, protested Russia's "gay propaganda" law by painting her nails with the colors of the rainbow. This was much welcomed by journalists in all newspapers, and the image of Emma's hand appeared 28 times in my analysis of individual newspaper articles.[44] For instance, Mona Masri (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2013-08-17) said "Sweden is full of heroes who have refused to budge an inch from the demand for democracy." A known Swedish publicist Alex Schulman also supported the action saying:

> I was so proud to be Swedish, to be of the same nationality as Emma Green Tregaro. She showed with a simple gesture that she thinks it is wrong that Russian LGBT people have to wait a hundred years to be allowed to be open with their orientation. (*Aftonbladet*, 2013-08-18)

Tregaro's case points to the ease with which the Swedish hegemonic discourse takes the form of a moral righteousness within, in Michael Billig's words, a banal and everyday discourse (Billig 1995). Concretely, this means daring to partake in practices of LGBT visibility. Visibility is used, in turn, to construct Sweden as having a higher level of LGBT rights than Russia, according to which the former has not placed people's rights on hold by having them wait a century. In making these claims, the Swedish media refer to the fact that in 2012, the Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov banned pride in Moscow for 100 years.

Swedish gay novelist and playwright, Jonas Gardell, in "Putin's triumph is our responsibility," published the following reflections in *Expressen* on February 9, 2014:

> In our lifetime, homosexuals (*homosexuella*) in Sweden and parts of the Western world have experienced changes that no one could have dreamed of. We have won freedom, respect, and the opportunity to live our lives the way we want. […] We must react. We must act. Why? Because we can!

The column "Protection against submarines – or a waterproof personal ad?" (*Skydd mot ubåtar– eller en vattentät kontaktannons?*) talks of how, in 2015, *Svenska Freds*, an NGO committed to disarmament, responded to Russian submarine activity in the Swedish archipelago in 2014, with a neon sign of a

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[44] See Chapter 2 for an analysis of the images present in these articles.

shirtless male sailor with the text in English saying "Welcome to Sweden. Gay since 1944" as well as "Welcome to Sweden" in Russian, sending out underwater Morse signals transmitting the message: "This way if you're gay" (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2015-05-14). This simple assertion that Sweden is "gay" uses sexuality in a tongue-in-cheek move to deflect a security threat, supposing that the "homophobic" Russian submarines would be scared off.[45] This event is reflected in a *Dagens Nyheter* rejoinder written by Maciej Zaremba (2015-06-16, *Dagens Nyheter*). Talking of how Kajsa Ekis Ekman's criticism of his own work (not related to Russia) does not make sense, he refers to her criticism of the *Svenska Freds* sign in an online outlet ETC. He recounts Ekman's argument that *Svenska Freds* spreads nationalism, stating that the sign is inciting an arms race:

> Ekis Ekman does not understand how anyone can think that it is about a peaceful message. In effect, the luminescent sailor communicates that Russia, which persecutes homosexuals, would therefore be worse than Sweden, which does not [discriminate against LGBT people]. This offends Russia, which is portrayed as intolerant. "Anyone who knows anything about war knows that they start with smearing." The moral of the story: protesting the oppression of homosexuals in Russia (if only by performing with rainbow-colored nails) is morally reprehensible. It is "nationalism in its purest form", states Ekis Ekman. So, it was finally said: apparently not even Sweden Democrats can compete with *Svenska Freds* when it comes to nationalism.

Zaremba thus views the sailor as "*Svenska Freds* ironic contribution to the defense debate." Although his goal is to respond to Ekman regarding his own investigative work, his view regarding the function and meaning of the neon sailor, or his aside about the rainbow nails of Emma Green Tregaro, demonstrates that it flies in the face of common sense to criticize *Svenska Freds* for taking a moral stance and instrumentalizing the sailor's homosexuality as a boundary-drawing mechanism. To stress once more how outlandish Ekman's accusation is, Zaremba urges her to continue accusing *Svenska Freds* of racism. Thus, according to Zaremba, criticizing sexual exceptionalism, which bolsters the self-image of Sweden, is beyond the limits of common sense. *Svenska Freds*, I argue, harnesses the gayness of the queer sailor (Warkander and Arnshav,

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[45] The simple equation that 1944 designates the moment when the country became "gay," in that it is explicitly referring to the year in which male homosexual relations were decriminalized in Sweden, obscures the fact that Sweden, and Northern Europe as a whole, were hardly the first in the world or even "Western" Europe to decriminalize same-sex acts. Poland decriminalized homosexual acts in 1932, and France as early as 1791 (Hildebrandt 2014).

Mirja 2014) and puts it into the service of critiquing Swedish militarism. Yet by setting up this comparison along the binary lines of homofriendly Sweden in contrast to heterosexual and homophobic Russia, the action ends up reproducing the very logic it aims to criticize.

My analysis shows that the image of Sweden in the media material has not been as uniform as that of Russia. Often, Sweden is said to have a way to go before "full equality" is achieved:

> Oppression of homosexuals is increasing in Russia, and in other parts of the world, it is even worse. […] In Sweden, there is also a lot left to do before LGBTQ people are treated with the same obvious respect as others. (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 2012-07-09)

One recurring example is repeated in articles on homophobia in Swedish hockey and football. In an article in *Expressen* (2016-08-02), Magnus Nyström discusses the situation in Sweden:

> Of course, there are world stars in hockey who are gay, but choose a secret private life when we live in the world we do. This [for someone to come out as gay] is the next important step for a more tolerant hockey and sports world. (*Expressen*, 2016-08-02)

Football player turned LGBTQ activist Hedvig Lindahl says:

> If [Sweden advocates that] a change is to be made, it is important that we show that here [in Sweden], in our sport, it is okay to be who you are. (*Expressen*, 2013-07-31)

Similarly, the title of an article published in *Svenska Dagbladet* (2013-08-21) addressing heteronormativity in Swedish football reads "Do not assume that everyone is straight." In it, a researcher is quoted saying, "society has moved on, but sport is quite conservative in general" and the journalist notes, "no *Allsvenskan*[46] player has publicly come out." In these instances, homophobia is not portrayed as a widespread phenomenon at the national level; instead, it is perceived as isolated incidents. These sparse but explicit articulations of Swedish achievements might be attributed to the fact that this self-understanding has become naturalized in the discourse surrounding Swedish exceptionalism. At the same time, there exists a future temporality in the

[46] This is a Swedish professional league for men's football clubs, equivalent to the English Premier League.

cautious formulations quoted above about Swedish development. Analyzed together with the articulations about how Russian LGBT individuals face a bleak future, these instances, in which Sweden acknowledges its failures regarding LGBT inclusion, instill a sense of purpose in the Swedish Self for the times ahead.

Responsibility

The image of Sweden linked to the development of LGBT rights underpins the attitude toward Russia and has been continually articulated in terms of responsibility. Appearing briefly in the 1991 article, development and responsibility become thematically interlinked around 2012. For instance, "A long way to go before equal rights" published on June 9, 2012, in *Göteborgs-Posten* formulates Swedish responsibility in the following way: "Sweden must continue to put the rights of LGBTQ people on the agenda […] in development aid, in diplomacy and through the EU" to combat "increasing oppression of homosexuals in Russia."

Peter Rimsby welcomes the then Swedish Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt's Twitter declaration,[47] criticizing the "gay propaganda law." Rimsby writes:

> we [the organizers of Stockholm Pride] find the events in Russia outrageous. We welcome our Foreign Minister taking a stand. (Expressen, 2013-07-30)

In another debate article (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2013-08-03), Peter Rimsby, further expresses the need for helping Russia (singled out, owing to Bildt's reaction, in the article cited above) and other countries.

> Pride means pride and we should be proud of what we in Sweden have achieved together. Now is the time to continue the fight for the human rights of LGBTQ people in other countries. Our representatives in politics, religion, and sports must take a stand and act for LGBTQ people living under oppression.
>
> Thanks to the struggle that has been waged [in Sweden] for decades, this year we can celebrate Pride in Sweden for the sixteenth year in a row and feel that we have the support of large parts of Swedish society. But the fight is not over. We have a responsibility. We are needed. Setbacks replace progress. Now is the time for us to continue the fight for the rights of LGBTQ people. *Our*

[47] "Incitement to hatred against LGBT people in Russia is on the rise after the new law. Repulsive. Inhuman," wrote Bildt on twitter (*Expressen*, 2013-07-30)

> *responsibility* is greatest for people in other countries who are still living under oppression. (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2013-08-03, emphasis mine)

Here Rimsby constructs the Swedish image around the entwined elements of achievement and responsibility. Both are framed explicitly in temporal terms: because of what Sweden "has" achieved, "the future" should be characterized by helping others. Although Russia is not specifically singled out, comparisons both to the Sweden of the past and to the more homophobic outside, such as "Africa," whose homophobia is "far away" (Jungar and Peltonen 2017), are made in search of a solution for Russia's LGBT individuals, who are implicitly constructed in terms of their proximity to Sweden. Rimsby then positions Sweden as having recognized LGBT people's "right to love fully" (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2013-08-03) and cites the reception of Jonas Gardell's drama series *Never Wipe Tears Without Gloves (Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar)*, for which the Crown Princess awarded him a QX Gaygala prize, as an indicator of how far Sweden has progressed.[48]

In the run-up to the 2013 World Athletics Championships, the responsibility to act vis-a-vis Russia is placed on, among others: Swedish politicians and the UN (Johansson, *Expressen*, 2013-08-16); the individual actions of athletes (Kjöller, 2013-08-03, *Dagens Nyheter*); the Swedish Olympic team (Forssberg, 2013-07-26, *Expressen*); the prince of Sweden (Törnmalm, 2013-08-03, *Expressen*); the Swedish embassy, hesitating to raise the rainbow flag in Moscow (Paulsson, 2013-08-04, *Aftonbladet*). 350 Swedish companies in Russia were also recommended to wave the rainbow flag as part of their operations (Ericson, 2013-08-10, *Aftonbladet*). This underscores the idea that responsibility in hegemonic discourse is not placed solely on the government but is distributed among various stakeholders and sectors. The Social Democratic politician Tara Twana underlines: "Sweden can play an important role in strengthening human rights, freedom and democracy. Together, we must show that we do not tolerate the violation of human rights that the new homosexual propaganda law entails" (*Expressen*, 2013-08-02). A similar discussion unfolded regarding the need to demonstrate in Sochi and Moscow instead of boycotting the Sochi 2014 Olympics (e.g., *Expressen*, 2013-07-31; *Göteborgs-Posten*, 2014-01-18), and in the run-up to the FIFA World Cup 2018. In 2014, *Dagens Nyheter* (2014-01-28) published an editorial entitled "A shame for Russia":

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[48] See Anu Koivunen (2013) on the construction of Sweden as "a caring nation" in the series and the resulting inclusion of HIV-positive gay men in the Swedish self-image.

> What Sweden can, ought, and must do is to express our stance (*markera vår inställning*) in every given situation.

In "Give gay (*homosexuella*) Russians asylum in Sweden" (*Expressen*, 2013-11-17), two politicians from the liberal-conservative Moderate party, Fjellner and Ståhl say:

> We are proud that Sweden is at the forefront of LGBT issues. […] Persecution due to sexual orientation is a reason for asylum, […] relevant to Russian citizens.

In an article entitled "M[oderates] should take the initiative for a Russian doctrine" published in *Expressen* on February 24, 2015, Rasmus Törnblom, chair of Swedish Young Conservatives, writes:

> Sweden must be the leading voice against an aggressive, powerful, and undemocratic actor in our immediate area [Russia, which] violates both neighboring countries and people's rights. […] Swedish values of freedom, openness, and respect for differences are defended even when it is inconvenient.

These two examples highlight how the image of the Self and acting responsibly reinforce each other. The last of these examples show how notions of geographical proximity (our immediate area), are woven together with Swedish responsibility. This is done by combining notions of a military threat, following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and a threat to Russian LGBT people. Overall, these examples show how the Swedish Self is explicitly articulated in terms of responsibility, since it exemplifies the values "worth defending." Notably, the articulation is performed by actors with diverging political stances: from Social Democrats to Moderates (liberal conservatives). This suggests that LGBT rights, articulated as human rights, are not a politically divisive issue. Just as ideas of gender equality are incorporated into ideas about the Swedish Self, so same-sex sexuality is an established nodal point used to draw boundaries between Self/Others in foreign politics.

Further, representing Russian LGBT people as human rights holders, by suggesting that Sweden give them asylum, as well as urging the formulation of principles requiring that the Russian state protect Russian homosexuals, contributes to the formation of the Swedish self-image. However, no clear reason *why* is found in the articles, other than what is stated by implication

in the quotes discussed above. One way to make sense of this development is a broad notion of Swedish exceptionalism. As I have outlined in the introduction, this idea of Sweden as a beacon of progress, emerged in the 1930s and since then has taken a series of forms, such as welfare, moral, gender, and, finally, sexual exceptionalism, implying a teleological temporality that invests the nation with a special mission and destiny. This is in line with Swedish scholar Lena Martinsson (2021, 84) who argues that "Swedish exceptionalism, in particular, is built on an understanding of time as linear, making the world's most modern, developed, gender-equal, secular nation a role model for other countries to follow, the one that has found the way to the future."

Swedish politicians and LGBT activists can be understood as clinging onto ideas of Sweden being "the most tolerant and liberal of all Western) countries and (white) people in the world" (Hübinette and Lundström 2011, 45). If seen through the lens of whiteness, an optic through which Hübinette and Lundström interpret these questions, attempts to act responsibly toward the Russian LGBT people can be seen as instances of *hospitality*. In line with Derrida (2000), who notes that unconditional hospitality is impossible, hospitality should be understood as necessarily placing demands and expectations on the guest. In giving time and space to others (Dikeç, Clark, and Barnett 2009), situations of hospitality, however, do not do away with power relations that permeate host/guest relations. By regarding the Swedish hegemonic discourse of responsibility as an exemplar of "white hospitality" (Kelly 2006), we are invited to think about which Russians are allowed and why they are allowed into the symbolic space of Swedish politics. I would suggest that this results in a construction of Russian LGBT as essentially Western LGBT in a homophobic (non-Western) environment. Further, as Kelly (2006) notes, wrapped in "a rhetoric of generosity, white hospitality effectively results in the displacement of responsibility for the government's hostility." In the case of Sweden, this hostility is expressed in the deportations of LGBT asylum seekers who fail to make themselves intelligible LGBT subjects within the Swedish system (Jungar and Peltonen 2017; Gröndahl 2020). The examples of asylum stories, written by journalists, I have analyzed throughout the chapter performatively (re)instate Swedish progressiveness and responsibility while witnessing the Swedish migration authorities expel LGBT people. As such, it also covers the symbolic violence inherent in creating the subject positions of a foreign LGBT person and queer asylum seeker.

The most recent reporting, such as the 2019 articles on the murder of the Russian LGBT activist, Elena Grigoryeva, fits the established discursive pattern as "threats against homosexuals have become systematic" (Georgieva, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 2019-07-29) The event also provided a chance to make a comparison with Sweden in the lead article entitled "The homophobes here are at least ashamed" (*Aftonbladet*, 2019-07-30):

> In Sweden, most politicians walk in the Pride Parade, and ministers and party leaders appear on the Pride Stage during the week. But even though we are ahead of many other countries on paper, it does not make everyday life as a queer easy – homosexuals are still discriminated against, bisexuals are made invisible, trans people are harassed.

Complicating the image of Sweden as a stronghold of tolerance, the journalist writes that "[i]n Sweden, homophobia is not sanctioned by the state, and those who run homophobic policies at least try to hide it" (*Aftonbladet*, 2019-07-30). The notion of homophobia is used to maintain geopolitical divisions. As Kulick writes (2009, 24), the concept of "[h]omophobia […] has been naturalized as a set of understandable psychological structures that everyone has […] but that reasonable people resist and try to come to terms with" (Kulick, 2009: 24). Building on Renkin (2016), I argue that in this particular *Aftonbladet* article, homophobia functions as a term connecting individual psychological reactions to their more general social expression. As such, homophobia signals not merely personal, psychological failure, but a wider failure of one's capacity for reason and civilization. Thus Russians, who fail to cover up their homophobia in public, fail to live up to the standard of the modern, civilized, tolerant European, which even homophobic Swedes successfully embody.

The material from 2017 to 2019, particularly the articles on Chechnya and the activist Elena Georgieva, continues to exemplify the danger for LGBT people in Russia as well as constructing an idea of Swedish responsibility, Sweden taking the lead in standing up for LGBT rights internationally. There tends also to be a broadening of the discussion, in order to include other freedoms lacking in Russia, such as democratic development. It also extends the scope of Sweden's responsibility toward Russia, narrowed between 2012 and 2015 to LGBT rights, but now reaching beyond sexual rights to human rights more broadly.

Conclusion

During the period from 1991 to 2019, sexuality has been instrumentalized in Swedish media to construct images of Russia, with articles drawing on a set of interconnected temporal (e.g., absence of a future, backwardness), spatial (e.g., geographical proximity), and affective (loneliness, danger, homophobia) themes. The Swedish image is most clearly underpinned by the temporal theme of achievement and the affective theme of responsibility. The focus on sexual exceptionalism in this chapter, instead of a broad notion of homonationalism, has elucidated constructions of homophobia and LGBT-friendliness as embedded with longer histories of how Sweden has portrayed Russia, and, in turn, itself. The emergent discourse on Swedish LGBT exceptionalism, rooted in the ideas of sexual liberalism since the 1950s, can already be seen at the beginning of the material in 1991 and the debate on the Sex Purchase Law (1998) (Kulick 2003).

The question posed at the beginning of this chapter, namely, whether Sweden has been homonational since 1991, can be rephrased in terms of sexual exceptionalism. One could compare the images of Russia in Western (American) publications throughout the 1990s with those that appeared in Swedish media. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Swedes, unlike American observers, did not regard Russia as an example of a queer utopia. For Americans, Russian LGBT people skipped a period of civil rights mobilization and ended up liberated. Based on the analysis of the few published newspaper articles before 2006 and regular reporting after 2006, in Swedish media, Russia was placed on track to modernization, and was expected to go through the stages of LGBT liberation seen elsewhere in the West. The necessity to morally position itself internationally meant that Swedish hegemonic discourse could not accommodate alternative visions of sexuality that would belie the neo-abolitionist policy on prostitution or assimilationist tendencies regarding LGBT rights. Thus, any discursive visions of Russia as a utopia, present in the Swedish discourse in the early 20th century, could not be applied to Russia during either the 1990s or early 2000s, let alone in the period after that.

The discursive representations of Russia in Swedish media include both Swedish (cultural) journalists', as well as Russian activists' and LGBT individuals', voices. And yet despite this polyphony and the multiple sites from which the journalists write, including discos, pride demonstrations, and mega-events to name a few, the Russian image is remarkably similar across the period under consideration. My analysis in this chapter has sought to

explain this persistence with the concept of sexual exceptionalism. I have tentatively traced the contours of a transformation, in current homonationalist times, of the concept of Swedish exceptionalism that has historically taken the forms of welfare, moral, and gender exceptionalism, showing how sexual politics is at the center of the Swedish international moral mission and its image of the Self. Such a strategy consolidates Sweden as the nation of sexual (LGBT) exceptionalism whose journalists and politicians can adjudicate the violations of LGBT people's rights in other states, such as Russia. The moral superiority of Swedish political discourse has become part of Swedish LGBT rights promotion, as well as functioning as a way to maintain existing divisions between West and East(ern) Europe.

In my empirical material, constructions of temporal and affective differences between Sweden and Russia shifted in intensity, though not in kind. In the period up to 2006, the images of Russia reflected the ambiguous homosexual culture that cannot be easily explained in Western identitarian terms, the latter of which has a clear place on the scale of progress. Since 2006, the media has placed Russia in the position of a laggard, where LGBT rights in particular, and human rights more generally, are deteriorating. The discursive representations of Russia analyzed in this chapter systemically ignore positive developments regarding LGBT people's lives in Russia and privileged suspicious interpretations of the Russian context. The twofold character of Russia's image, constructing temporal difference and geographical proximity, reveals that in Sweden's sexually exceptional national imaginary Russia is seen not as a *distant* backward and homophobic Other, such as Africa (Jungar and Peltonen 2017), but as a *second* Other – a state in a close geographical proximity, part of, along with several other postsocialist countries, of the Baltic region, to which Sweden has a responsibility because of its achievements concerning LGBT rights. In most newspaper articles, Russian LGBT people have been constructed solely as gay rights holders, desiring but failing to achieve LGBT rights, visibility, and recognition in a homophobic context. Thus, the discursive conditions of Sweden's internationalism and progressiveness, as forms of nationalism, and parallel discourses of postsocialist homophobia have not made possible articulations that would unmoor Russia from an image of sexual backwardness.

By adding to studies of homonationalism as a "recent" phenomenon connected to temporalities and spatialities produced by 9/11 in the American (and global) context, I have shown that themes contributing to discursive Othering have existed before the Russian "gay propaganda" law of 2013 and 9/11 in the US. Instrumentalization of a second Other', that is, Russia, homo-

phobia and homonationalism of the Self are not unique to Sweden. Yet the notion of *sexual exceptionalism* sensitizes us to a process specific to Western/Eastern Europe. First, Sweden can, with little critical self-reflection, construct a sense of exceptionalism and moral superiority on the international stage and, second, the unquestioned discursive practice of the sexual Othering of postsocialist Europe by Western Europe, which exists in parallel to Othering of the Muslim Other, carries on with little challenge. Chapter 2 will further develop these arguments, by showing how the lives of LGBT people have been stripped of their queerly plural complexity (Weber 2016). This will be achieved by studying the visual aspects of representation of Russian non-normative sexuality and also by focusing on how emotions circulate within these representations.

CHAPTER 2

LGBT(Q) (in)visibility in Swedish visual discourse

In May 2013 Stockholm Pride launched a website for the #GoWest2013 campaign (see Figure 2). A response to the Moscow court banning Pride events for one hundred years, the goal was to encourage Swedes to invite Russians to Stockholm Pride. One could compose tweets from drop-down columns and automatically translate them into Russian. These tweets, with the hashtag GoWest2013, were then posted on the website with a randomly selected location in Russia, in an attempt to ensure that the campaign trended on Twitter. As stated in the press release by a PR company responsible for the campaign, it

> has prompted a rise in the global support of the LGBT community, making it a global trending topic with celebrities and other influencers engaging in the conversation to push Russia to reverse its stance on Gay Pride. (Stockholm Pride Launches... 2013)

Most striking on this website campaign is its reliance on a narrow repertoire of visual and textual tropes that obscure more complex discursive and geo-political dynamics. In terms of LGBT politics, it privileges out-and-proud visibility as its main tool, visually expressed in its use of the rainbow. As well as the suggested direction of exchange, namely, from Russia to Stockholm, an additional layer is added through the citation of the camp/gay phrase "Go West." The phrase itself has traveled from an American context to a Swedish one, and in 2013 it was further used to deliver a message to Russia.[49] The phrase is the title of a song, originally a gay anthem by American disco group Village People, a kind of tribute to living on the American West Coast. Appropriating the phrase that encapsulated US manifest destiny, the belief that American settlers were divinely ordained to expand westward across North America, the song praised California's homosexuality laws and the

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[49] Another intertextual message was communicated to Swedish LGBT audiences (gay men?) at Stockholm Pride 2006. Swedish drag performer Christer Lindarw, part of the drag show *After Dark*, called on Swedish gays to "come out" in his eponymous song "*Kom ut*", recorded with Stockholm Gay Choir featuring Swedish lyrics to the tune of "Go West."

Figure 2: A screenshot of www.gowest2013.com (retrieved using Wayback Machine)

many gay men who relocated to San Francisco in the 1970s and 80s (Smith 2001). The Pet Shop Boys' version, released in 1993, amplifies the message of the original. Lyrically, the additions include more explicit appeals to the community and suggest that the West is the space to express personal identity and political activism (M. Butler 2003). Sonically, it features a choir and sequences that sound similar to the Soviet anthem. Visually, the music video mixes computer-generated imagery with representations of Soviet symbols, such as red stars, space monuments and Red Square in shots that were edited to enhance the red color, identical troops of muscular men marching in red hats with red flags toward the Western society, up a ladder and into the sky. The male physique, celebrated by the Soviets as a marker of working-class bodies, is used in "Go West" to symbolize gay emancipation (Padva 2019, 1292). In the music video, images of totalitarianism are substituted for communality, collectivism replaced with solidarity, militarism by liberation, and dictatorship substituted for multisexual diversity (1294). The "West" is

symbolized by the Statue of Liberty, portrayed as a black diva also colored garish red. Pet Shop Boys' video thus renders the distinctions between the Russian "East" and the American "East" difficult to discern, which is precisely one of the points the video is making (Smith 2001, 332). The video ends with the Kremlin red star returning to and disappearing into Liberty's torch as the virtual city of "East" dissolves into fragments. The overall message is equally ambiguous: is it the end of history, the triumph of American capitalism over Soviet socialism, or a suggestion that both the US and the Soviet Union were equally sinister (333)? As Padva (2019, 1298) concludes, portraying this mode of emancipation in which muscular bodies take centerstage, the music video counters the (hetero)sexual order but does not counter capitalism.

Unlike the song that served its inspiration, GoWest2013's message is unequivocal and less complex. Its elements, textually, are quite similar to those identified in Chapter 1. The campaign positions Stockholm "at the end of the rainbow," having achieved liberation, and LGBT Russians within the "Russian closet," suggesting it is high time they came out. The theme of love, which will be explored further in this chapter, is entwined with familial addresses "brother," "sister," to "be a part of the Stockholm pride family." This signals a specific mode of liberation – joyous and apolitical, visually cushioned in terms of the rainbow and devoid of any national symbols. Because Swedish nationalism operates on a terrain of sexual exceptionalism, as I suggested in Chapter 1, the rainbow colors on the website campaign not only strengthen their association with "Sweden" but also highlight it. This renders the presence of the Swedish flag unnecessary, especially in communication with Russia, while the domestic meanings of the rainbow flag in Sweden are far more intricate (Wasshede 2021; Laskar, Johansson, and Mulinari 2016). There is a notable absence of any visual references to Russia in the campaign, compared to the abundance of Soviet/Russian symbols in the Pet Shop Boys video. This reflects the idea that Russian LGBT people in Swedish hegemonic discourse are expected to simply occupy the position of the (Western) "gay-rights holder," largely leaving their "Russianness" behind. This, in turn, reflects the discursive impossibility of renegotiating Soviet symbols in Sweden, connected as they are to the view of communism as a menacing ideology in Swedish hegemonic discourse post-1991.[50]

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[50] An example from 2018 is a case in point. The Swedish DJ and pop-duo Rebecca and Fiona's performance during Stockholm Pride, clad in a red t-shirt with a Soviet flag on, was met with strong criticism for insensitivity. An *Aftonbladet* article entitled "Fans in outrage against Rebecca and Fiona: 'Disrespectful and disgusting'" (Andrée and Pettersson 2018) quoted Swedish gay personality Johan Hilton, labeling the act as a direct affront to LGBTQ individuals ("*hbtq personer*") persecuted in

The campaign is an example of how (American) ideas and political sensibilities are transferred to the Swedish context (Wennerhag 2017) and are further tempered by local (geo)political goals. The invitation to "go West" is strikingly similar to the problematic equation of "the West and the rest", which has been the target of postcolonial critique (S. Hall 2018). As it is used in the campaign, this phrase associates LGBT with Sweden, located in "the West," and suggests that Russia, representing "the rest," offers no opportunities to live out same-sex sexuality. There are also more practical consequences that were disregarded by this campaign. Tanja Suhinina, an independent contributor at *Svenska Dagbladet*, notes that #GoWest2013 ignored the realities of the everyday lives of members of the Russian LGBT community, failing to address the financial limitations, which international travel would involve. She also argued that the initiative appeared to be more focused on gaining attention on Twitter than on genuinely addressing the challenges facing the Russian LGBT community, suggesting it was primarily a publicity stunt for Stockholm Pride. "The creators of GoWest2013 seem to have thought more about trending on Twitter than what they actually want to say – and to whom" (Suhinina, 2013, *Svenska Dagbladet*). The campaign is an illustration of how LGBT visibility relies on familiar visual elements and tropes that structure field of the sensible in LGBT politics. If the construction of space, exemplified by the campaign, is a discursive endeavor, I suggest asking what kind of space is constructed in Stockholm Pride's address to Russian LGBT people.

Prompted by the vignette of GoWest2013, in this chapter I examine how non-normative sexuality is visually portrayed in Swedish media between 1991 and 2019 and will draw on examples from popular culture. The chapter starts with an overview of previous research on visibility and visual representation of non-normative sexuality in Russian and Swedish contexts to further contextualize my analysis of the visual representations of Russian non-normative sexuality and LGBT people in the media. I then move on to examine two YouTube videos made in support of Russian LGBT people, exploring how they rely on and contest visibility, utilize camp queer visual aesthetics, and contribute to the circulation of *love* as a political emotion (Ahmed 2004). The chapter concludes by suggesting the need for representations that center on the lived experiences of Russian LGBT people and

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communist regimes. The use of the hammer and sickle symbol prompted calls for its ban at Pride, aligning with the prevailing perception of communism as a threat rather than a promise in Swedish discourse.

for critical rearticulations of Russian and Swedish national images, some of which are analyzed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The representational model of visibility

In my discussion of the #GoWest2013 campaign, I focused on the entanglements between visibility and textual and visual elements. Analyzing the visual discourse on Russia in Sweden, I understand visibility in line with Emil Edenborg as

> something more than visuality […] as not only connected to sight and vision, but broader: that which is visible appears in the lifeworlds of people, as a body that is perceived, a narrative that is heard, a text that is read or an image that is seen. (Edenborg 2017, 4)

Much research on visibility has viewed visibility in its ideal form as straightforwardly leading to national belonging (7–8). Situating this theoretical concept in the history of collective struggles in post-World War II Western Europe and North America, which have often involved efforts to achieve public visibility in the advancement of political demands, Edenborg shows how many Western liberation movements have relied on the idea that "public visibility is a necessary means for marginalized groups to achieve equality and inclusion" (34), which he terms *a representational model of visibility*. Similar strategies have been used in non-Western contexts by various emancipation movements. A *representational model of visibility* signifies, in research and activism, a highway from representation to visibility to belonging.

Numerous criticisms of the concept of visibility have emerged in previous research (Edenborg (2017; 2020b). First, the Western model of visibility tends to reify and essentialize West-centric categories by setting the Western "coming-out-of-the-closet" model of sexual liberation as the norm. Empirical research in Nordic (Liinason 2020), Central and Eastern European (Kuhar and Švab 2005; Uibo 2021) and Russian (Essig 1999; Stella 2015) LGBT contexts challenges the representational model of visibility by drawing attention to the ways queer people do not always rely on strategies of visibility. Second, visibility may be connected to control and domination rather than liberation, leading to exposure, vulnerability, violence, and backlashes. Theories of surveillance, from the panopticon (Foucault 1995) to racial profiling-based detention (Puar 2007), suggest that making people and populations visible to authorities is an effective instrument of state control. While some bodies can blend in, others become hypervisible objects of scrutiny (Ahmed 2006;

Haritaworn 2015; Puar 2007). On the contrary, evasion and obscurity, claiming "the right to opacity" (Glissant 1997, 189) may be a means to resist the demands of intelligibility and visibility and a way to formulate alternative sexual politics (Sundén 2023a; Wiedlack 2023). These critiques, then, point to the problematic nature of visibility as emancipatory in both Swedish and Russian contexts.

Further, Edenborg suggests paying attention not simply to *visibility*, but to *arrangements of visibility*, which sheds light on visibility as "the object of constant regulation and contestation" (Edenborg 2017, 40). *Arrangements of visibility* are produced in and through projects of belonging, aimed at (re)constituting political communities and their boundaries. They regulate what can and cannot be seen in the public sphere. I build on Edenborg's theoretical explorations of visibility (Edenborg 2017) and its role in global queer politics (Edenborg 2020b) to explore the ways Russian LGBT people appear in Swedish *visual discourse* in media and examples from popular culture. By *a visual discourse* I understand the ways in which queer bodies and expressions appear in images. My broadening of the scope here, from LGBT people to queer bodies and expressions, is purposeful. I argue that as opposed to *visibility*, which presumes a connection between being "being out" about one's sexuality and the ensuing political recognition, *a visual discourse* is a broader category that includes visual appearances of non-normative sexuality and gender-nonconforming expression, which may or may not have (immediate) political effects.

Visibility and visual representation in Russia and Sweden

Russia's LGBT people have had a complicated relationship with visibility. In a critical overview of 1990s anthropological scholarship in Russia, James Baer writes that initially Western communications from post-Soviet Russia, those of David Tuller (1996) and Laurie Essig (1999), "tended to celebrate the new visibility and liberation of gays and lesbians and the birth of a Russian gay and lesbian subculture" (Baer 2009, 23). Yet more detailed reports revealed the reluctance of Russian gays and lesbians to engage in activism (Baer 2002, 503). Research has demonstrated how the increased visibility resulting from Moscow Pride between 2006 and 2009 (Sarajeva 2011; Stella 2015), the implementation of the "gay propaganda" law in 2013 (Edenborg 2017), and the occurrence of the 2017 gay purges in Chechnya (Brock and Edenborg 2020) have brought about the exclusion of LGBT Russians from national belonging. The limited usefulness of an LGBT identity in activism is exem-

plified by the observation that around the conservative turn in 2014, the contemporary Russian LGBT movement can be characterized as a collective of gay men and women who actively resist labels and restrictive affiliations while simultaneously advocating for their rights (Mihailovic 2014, 140). Far from embracing visibility, LGBT Russians preferred to remain less-than-intelligible. For a limited group of middle-class gay and bisexual men, invisibility has also been a way to assimilate into the heterosexual majority (Weaver 2020).

Despite attempting to contest the hegemony of Western LGBT identities, which have indeed made their way to Russia, Russian LGBT activism has throughout the 1990s, and especially since 2006, been dependent on Western funds and expertise in establishing itself (Buyantueva 2018; 2022; Essig 1999; Nemtsev 2008). The adoption of the norm of visibility and the essentialized human rights discourse within the LGBT activist movement, without undergoing local scrutiny and allowing for their specific and autonomous development, presents a challenge in establishing a solid foundation for local LGBT activism (Lukinmaa 2022). In the 2010s, functioning in a repressive environment usually meant that the activists rarely attracted the attention they sought from outside their circles. The demands for visibility that foreign funders place on Russian LGBT activists are challenging to realize in an authoritarian context. From a textual point of view, the Russian LGBT movement has engaged with Western ideas of gay, lesbian, and queer, translating them into local terms *gei, lesbiianka,* and *kvir* (*гей, лесбиянка, квир*). Translation scholar James Baer describes this process as "a site of complex negotiation, deployment, and reworking of Western symbols and images to suit the needs of a target readership." This should be seen as an expression of linguistic and political agency, rather than as a simple submission to the dominant Anglophone culture (Baer 2018, 42). Similarly, other researchers express an urgent need to look beyond the human rights framework, which is not articulated in Russia in the same way as in the West. This would entail discussing alternatives both to "gay rights as human rights" and the notion of "LGBT pride" (Rivkin-Fish and Hartblay 2014; cf. also Luciani 2022). As Lukinmaa (2022, 215) shows, the utilization of an institutionalized and Western-centric human rights discourse by LGBT organizations does not strongly resonate with Russian language and culture (Baer 2017; Suchland 2018). Thus, both the ideal of public visibility and human rights discourse are not universally applicable approaches; they require translation and adaptation in order to better fit local Russian circumstances.

In Russia, queer visual aesthetics can be seen clearly in the well-established scene of popular music culture, the *estrada,* and pop music genres. These enabled gender expressions that could fall outside binary constraints of gender structure and heterosexuality. Famous male artists such as Boris Moiseev, Valery Leontiev, and Filipp Kirkorov played with fluid gender roles and camp aesthetic in their flashy shows in the mid-and late 1990s (Brock and Miazhevich 2022). It was a public secret that they were "gay" in Russia, even for those who did not belong to or were aware of the gay and lesbian movements (Amico 2014). Throughout 2000-2010s Russian popular culture presented LGBT audiences with multiple sites of identification (Amico 2014; Wiedlack and Neufeld 2015). Rich queer visual culture in Russia during the last thirty years has been understood as "visuality without visibility."[51] Indeed, in the Russian context queer visual aesthetics hardly translated into LGBT visibility and activism (Engström 2020; 2021b; 2021a; Strukov 2019). Engström (2020) who analyzed Russian queer culture production at the end of 2010s and in 2020, predicts a normalization of Russian queer culture with transgressive aesthetics co-opted by the cultural mainstream. Describing several popular YouTube music videos and queer appearances on state TV, Engström concludes that because of the proliferation of gay aesthetics, their queer content loses its critical and subversive potential and becomes mere entertainment and thereby sanitized. Between "the queer revolution" of the 1990s and "the queer turn" of 2020, there have existed besides representation in official "state propaganda," various instances of queer visibility connected to the Russian nation. In the Russian context, queer visual aesthetics are disconnected from LGBT visibility.

In a Swedish context, LGBT visibility and queer visual aesthetics have, I would suggest, diverged less as far as public expression is concerned. Pride has been normalized (Wennerhag 2017) as a way to temporarily occupy the space of the city, and its strategies have been folded into the nation (Strand and Kehl 2019). In his examination of representations of male homosexuality in Swedish literature, Timothy R. Warburton (2014) highlights the optimistic and idealistic nature of appealing portrayals of male homosexuality that circulated during the late 1990s and 2000s. These images, identified by Warburton in various literary works such as young adult coming-out novels, and "Gay Chick Lit" published throughout the 2000s, stand in contrast to earlier images of male homosexuality that were characterized by the AIDS

[51] This is the name of Maria Engström's and Vlad Strukov's research project, which has resulted in publications by these authors, and which I cite throughout this chapter.

crisis, disease, marginalization, and violence, ultimately leading to an era of assimilationist discourse surrounding homosexuality. Another example of how homosexuality became culturally commodified, along with ensuing visibility and visual signs, can be seen in Calle Norlén's "Handbook for gay guys" (1999, cited in Warburton 2014, 140–141). According to Warburton, Norlén mentioning "gayglädje," gay *joie de vivre*, as the main driving force in gay men's lives is indicative of how consumerism has focused on gay men. Stefan Ingvarsson (2008, 7) notes similarly in an essay critiquing mainstream Swedish male homosexual culture that love for schlager, galas, and shopping (*schlageryra, galor och shoppingkassar*) are its central components. The 1990s and early 2000s brought media visibility for both gay men and lesbians, and homosexual consumption and lifestyle became widely accepted in society, which is exemplified by the existence of annual events like *Melodifestivalen*, the Swedish preselection for the Eurovision Song Contest (Norrhem, Rydström, and Winkvist 2008, 156), which since 2002 has become a multi-heat competition, and the *Gaygala Awards*, established in 1999 by the LGBT entertainment magazine QX (founded in 1995) (Norrhem, Rydström, and Winkvist 2008, 159). Parallel to these developments seen in literature and popular culture, homosexuality was being sanctioned by the state. In 2009 same-sex marriage, now with the approval of the Church of Sweden, replaced the registered partnership law that had been in place since 1994. This means, in very general terms, that the Swedish context encouraged the visibility of LGBT/queer people, as subjects worthy of having rights, in specific terms appropriate for the post-AIDS fatigue.

Thus, while in the Russian context, "visuality without visibility" (Engström 2020; 2021b) has meant that certain queer aesthetics and gender transgressive expressions have been folded into the mainstream, they have not translated into LGBT visibility that could be used as political capital. In the Swedish context, the LGBT movement has been normalized and folded into respectability or disarmed of its queer subversive potential (Koivunen 2013), also in the case of *Melodifestivalen* (see master's theses by Jilkén 2018; Holmdahl 2018). There are contentious discussions of what kind of visuality is suitable for pride parades. Much of what is deemed not "family-friendly," respectable, or commercially viable, is pushed further out to the margins. Swedish queer kinksters and non-reproductive (Sundén 2023a; Graham 1998; E. Bengtsson 2022), non-monogamous (C. Andersson and Carlström 2022), and racialized queers (Girma and Atto 2017) are located in spaces in-between public visibility and invisibility, in digital spaces (Sundén et al. 2022; Kehl 2020a) and elsewhere. Trans and non-binary individuals (Straube

2020a; 2020b) have relied on alternative aesthetics to represent themselves and their communities. Similarly, in discussions pertaining to Swedish queer film archives, visibility is not at all a given (Brunow 2013; 2019). Thus, while the queer aesthetics might indeed be incoherent and unstable (cf. Baer 2002; Sedgwick 1990), in Western/Swedish public politics, these transgressive expressions have been stabilized in order to make claims to citizenship and belonging, and thus to construct palatable forms of activism (Gray 2009). Central to this stabilization has been the notion of visibility.

Visual discourse on Russian non-normative sexuality in Swedish media

My exploration of visual representations of non-normative sexuality in media and popular culture is juxtaposed against two other studies on the visual portrayal of the Russian LGBTQ community in international and Anglophone media around 2013 (Cooper-Cunningham 2021; Wiedlack 2017). Previous research has noted the use of images of police violence against LGBT subjects claiming visibility on the streets of Russian cities, mostly Moscow and St. Petersburg. Anglophone media circulated graphic images of bloody and frail white male LGBT activists, leading Katharina Wiedlack (2017) to conclude that Western media has created "gay martyrs." Daniel Cooper-Cunningham's (2021) qualitative and quantitative exploration of the images in reports on the Russian LGBTQ community demonstrates that in 2013-2014, Anglophone media outlets such as *The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Guardian, the Times, the Independent, Der Spiegel International,* and *Politico* predominantly showcased images captured by three professional photojournalists, Mads Nissen, Roma Yandolin, and Dmitry Lovetsky, whose work was spread through international agencies. Cooper-Cunningham emphasizes that not all pictures from available databases were utilized, only the most graphic ones. This selection process, according to Cooper-Cunningham, reinforces Western perceptions of Russian homophobia and self-perceptions about the existence of LGBT equality in Western countries (2021, 95).

A content analysis of Swedish images revealed that none of the photos by Mads Nissen (despite him getting the prestigious World Press Photo Award in 2015) or Roma Yandolin feature in the five largest Swedish media. Lovetsky's photos are used, but some images are unique to the Swedish context which reflects the national vantage point from which the lives of LGBT people in Russia are viewed. How is the Swedish image of Russia

different from that found in Anglophone media? How is Russian sexuality visually represented in the Swedish context? Out of a total of 466 articles analyzed, 345 articles included images.[52] These were coded according to the subject matter and then were analyzed. In what follows I will offer a closer description of not only the visibility and invisibility of LGBT people, but also the visibility and invisibility of queer culture. This will be followed by a more quantitative comparison between the Swedish and the Anglophone contexts.

Visible LGBT people

Russian LGBT people have been made visible in Swedish media in two ways – in stories that lack active depictions of violence and in violent clashes with the Russian state. I discuss these two types of representation in turn. The first instance of visual material serves as an example of the asylum story as a recurrent theme that prompts the portrayals of the Russian LGBT community in the Swedish media. In a full-page sized photo from *Expressen* (1991-11-10), Sergei/Linda, whose story I started to analyze in Chapter 1, is photographed at a St. Petersburg disco in a black T-shirt with the Batman logo on the front. He is looking directly at the camera, confidently and almost seductively, with his lips pouted, chin slightly lifted and arms behind his back. The visual elements of the photograph contradict the textual content of the article. Despite the caption under the picture, where Sergei is quoted as saying "there is no future for me here," and, moreover, one of the sub-headings states he "has to hide everything," if one considers the circumstances in which the photo was taken, the text of the article becomes less convincing. The photograph, which is taken to illustrate the idea that there is no life for homosexuals in Russia, is in fact taken at a St. Petersburg club. In the photograph, Sergei/Linda exhibits an androgynous aesthetic, which escapes the easy textual binary categorization that the journalist was able to apply in the text by choosing the male pronoun. Some instances of visual representation of LGBT individuals in Swedish media challenge the textual discourse, pointing to the complexities of their experiences that cannot easily be collapsed into binaries.

Similarly, numerous reports have emerged in Swedish media, primarily in tabloids, depicting Russian LGBT individuals as "on the run." These reports offer a more nuanced and resilient perspective. From the textual content of these articles, it is evident that some of these individuals are still in Russia but plan to relocate, as exemplified by Sergei/Linda, or the couple from St. Peters-

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[52] See also *Figure 1: Articles and images in Swedish media 1991–2019* on p.71.

burg (see Figure 3, p. 121), while others have already moved to Sweden and face an uncertain future. Visually, these stories often portray the possibility of living as an LGBT individual in Russia without emphasizing excessive suffering, although they do convey a sense of vulnerability. These images depict individuals spending time with loved ones, or navigating urban settings in an ordinary, non-dramatized manner. In contrast to previous research, which has highlighted the dehumanizing practices in visual reports on the Other, such as the refugee (Bleiker et al. 2013), the non-violent images of Russian LGBT people contribute to their humanization by eliciting empathy and stressing degrees of sameness among Russian and Swedish LGBT people, rather than difference. These pictures, and the reports they accompany, are in the minority when compared to other images featured together with the articles. Yet they fulfill an important function by visually bringing Russian LGBT people into the Swedish context and demonstrating possibilities for queer existence not bound up with police and state violence. These visually contribute to an image of the Russian LBGT person that becomes intelligible outside the subject position of victimhood. Despite this, these visuals represent Russian LGBT people as always already outside of Russia, either dreaming of moving away or, as Russian LGBT refugees, are dealing concretely with the lived realities of having migrated (e.g., the migration authorities in Sweden).

Visual representations complicate media articulations, such as in a series of images used to illustrate matters that do not directly pertain to LGBT lives or people seeking refuge, but where queer visuality might serve to illustrate the realities of Russia. In a move similarly contradictory to the one I have identified in Sergei/Linda story, for example, pictures of the Sochi gay club *Mayak* (Russian for "lighthouse") are featured in 2014 and 2016 (see Figure 4). In a 2016 article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, pictures taken at the club party are used to illustrate how tourism has contributed to economic inequality. Two pictures from inside the club, one of a drag queen holding a microphone and another of a local Verka Serduchka impersonator with a gay club owner, could be interpreted as proof that queer sociality persists in Russia despite the 2013 "gay propaganda" law. These images, especially picturing LGBT people at home, in clubs, and public spaces can be interpreted as portraying not just LGBT people, but also queer sociality and relationalities (Muñoz 2019, 6). Despite the images having the potential to contradict subject positions offered by the text, which from a discourse-theoretical perspective can be explained by their simultaneous belonging to articulations of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, the arrangement of visibility of

Russian sexuality in the Swedish context privileges visual representations of violence against the Russian LGBT community, which are discussed next.

A second type of imagery used to portray LGBT people are images that depict violence against Russian LGBT people and activists. These images are mostly "on the spot" pictures, taken at various locations during pride demonstrations and forms of protest. The emergence of these images in the Swedish media dates back to approximately 2006, when the first Western-style pride demonstrations were held in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Such images usually feature several police holding or hovering over LGBT activists, often showing a combination of physical restraint of movement and violence.

A critique that can be leveled against this type of images, one that appears not just in the Swedish context, is that they display a narrow perspective surrounding Russian LGBT activism, primarily focusing on its conflicts with the police and the Russian Orthodox Church. This hypervisibility of Russian LGBT activists has multiple consequences. Firstly, it overlooks the history of activism predating this period. Secondly, it renders other forms of activism largely invisible. This concerns the types of activist events taking place in major cities, like St. Petersburg's *Queerfest* and the cinema festival *Side by Side*. In my research material from *Dagens Nyheter*, for example, the Russian *Queerfest* was mentioned only once, in an article entitled "Persecuted in their homelands" (*Dagens Nyheter*, 2016-07-28). Recent research (Lukinmaa 2022; Neufeld 2018) allows us to gain insight into the diverse forms of Russian LGBT activism, often framed in terms that resonated with Western audiences during the 2010s. Additionally, this marginalizes regional activisms taking place outside Moscow and St. Petersburg, the existence of which is rarely explored in academic studies (Buyantueva 2018) and foreign-language media. The images in Swedish media are emblematic of the narrowness of what is constructed as activism in Western media, and, by extension, what is not recognized as political work.

The case of the torture of gay men in the Russian region of Chechnya in 2017 presents a curious point of comparison between the Swedish and the Anglophone contexts. In Chapter 1, as I have demonstrated, the Chechen case received limited textual attention. It also lacked significant visual representations in the Swedish media. Apart from images featuring top-level Swedish and Russian officials like Ramzan Kadyrov, Vladimir Putin, Margot Wallström, and Sergei Lavrov, serving as evidence of the serious concerns that escalated to the diplomatic level, few other pictures were used to illustrate the events. An exception to this is an image of an activist, taken to hide their face/identity. Thus, when, after the "gay propaganda" law in 2013,

visibility became transmuted into hypervisibility for the Russian (Chechen) LGBT people, and they were systemically exposed to a regime marked by political homophobia and widespread homophobic and transphobic violence (Wilkinson 2020, 243), the Swedish context responded by making these figures invisible.

In Sweden, when compared to an Anglophone context, there is a notable difference in the use of violent and non-violent images. Victim pictures of both non-activists and activists are not sensationalized in the Swedish context. For instance, when discussing the dramatized pictures of asylum seekers in the Anglophone world, Wiedlack points out that the story and photograph of a 28-year-old gay asylum seeker from Chechnya, featured in *Time* magazine, should be understood within the broader coverage not only about gay Chechens, but gay Russians in general. Here homophobia is personalized. In portraying young gay victims of violence, and through the enthusiastic circulation of these images, which show an almost stylized focus on their fragile, wounded, and injured bodies, there is a tendency to create iconographic imagery and gay men as martyrs (Wiedlack 2017, 246ff.). Along with several other examples, for instance, pictures by Mads Nissen, which have gained prominence worldwide (Cooper-Cunningham 2021), this type of visual representation and media visibility, Wiedlack notes, is exemplary of a long-standing history of worshipping gay icons. This testifies to a visual discourse of modern "queer martyrdom" that emerged during the nineteenth century in reference to Catholic Christian imagery. Wiedlack (2017, 2018) sees parallels between a tradition of creating martyr figures in Anglophone LGBT culture and the images of Russian gay men used in the reports. Similarly, Lene Hansen speaks of the international relevance of some images that have undergone a transition from images to icons, well-recognizable trademarks and symbols as well as images with wide circulation; in short, photographs that have "made history" (Hansen 2015, 267–68). Although many violent images, for example, from the Associated Press, are used to report violence arising at places of LGBT protest in Russia, there was no tendency to dwell on the individuals who were attacked by the police. In contrast to the Anglophone context, the Swedish media does not feature highly affective iconographic images of Russian LGBT individuals as queer martyrs. Wiedlack's more general observation about Anglophone media's overwhelming fixation on young gay male bodies does not hold in the Swedish context either. In both violent and non-violent images, gay men, lesbians, and trans* individuals are, for the most part, equally represented,

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Världen

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S:t Petersburg. Nu förknippas staden med intolerans

Gaylag får ryssar att flytta

S:t Petersburg. **Den brukar kallas "Rysslands kulturhuvudstad" och ses som en symbol för öppenhet och mångfald. I dag förknippas S:t Petersburg i stället med intolerans. En ny lag mot "homopropaganda" får tusentals att vilja emigrera.**

DN i Ryssland
Ingmar Neveus, text & foto

● 32-åriga Natasja och 26-åriga Olga träffades i staden Blagovesjtjensk vid kinesiska gränsen, 900 mil österut. I den sortens ryska avkrokar är lesbisk kärlek inget man skyltar med.

– Det var naturligt för oss att flytta, säger Natasja. Vi valde S:t Petersburg just för toleransens skull. Det här har alltid varit en öppen stad, mer än Moskva.

För kärlekens skull lämnade de familj och vänner sex tidszoner bort. Nu har de bott här i några år och funderar på om de gjorde rätt.

Anledningen är den lag "mot propaganda för homo-, bi- och transsexualitet inför minderåriga" som började gälla här för en månad sedan. Den förändrade över en natt levnadsförhållandena för tiotusentals invånare i femmiljonerstaden S:t Petersburg.

Kan man vara öppen med sitt förhållande? Kan man gå hand i hand om en 17-åring råkar passera? Kan man vara med i en organisation för homosexuellas rättigheter? Kan man ha en t-tröja med regnbågsflaggan?

Ingen vet än så länge vad som kan anses vara propaganda.

– Vi är inga aktivister eller propagandister. Vi vill bara leva ett normalt liv, säger Olga. Många bekanta funderar på att flytta utomlands.

Olga och Natasja – som inte vill att DN publicerar deras efternamn – vill ändå stanna i staden. De har hunnit rota sig. Båda har bra jobb, Natasja på en hjälporganisation för föräldralösa barn och Olga på ett företag i telekombranschen. Och så har de bildat familj: för ett halvår sedan födde Natasja sonen Jefim.

Han gnäller hungrigt från sin babysitter på köksgolvet. Natasja står vid spisen och steker frukostblinier samtidigt som hon pressar kokt vitkål genom en sil.

– Vi försöker få Jefim att börja äta vanlig mat. Men han vill mest bara ha mjölk.

Mycket riktigt rynkar sonen på näsan åt kålpurén. Till sist får han en nappflaska med mjölk och lugnar ned sig. Lille Jefim är ett piggt barn som tydligt tyr sig till sina bägge mammor. Än så länge är han lyckligt ovetande om deras bekymmer över hans framtid.

– Snart ska han ju börja på dagis. Vi är lite oroliga för vad som ska hända. Tänk om någon annan förälder eller någon ur personalen, Gud förbjude, anmäler oss med hänvisning till den här lagen, säger Natasja.

Hon menar att enkönade par kan hamna i en moment 22-situation. Den som vill tolka anti-gaylagen strikt kan ju hävda att Natasja och Olga "propagerar" för homosexualitet bara genom att vara bra mammor åt sin son.

En som har testat anti-gaylagen konkret är Igor Kotjetkov, ordförande i aktivistnätverket LGBT-set. En vecka efter det att lagen hade trätt i kraft ställde han sig på ett torg S:t Petersburg och höll upp ett plakat med texten "Nej till att tysta ned hatbrott mot homosexuella".

Han greps och anhölls, misstänkt för propaganda enligt den nya lagen, men släpptes efter några timmar i arresten. Rättegången har skjutits upp två gånger.

– Samordningen verkar inte vara så bra mellan polis och domstol, för i rätten klagar de på brist på bevis, säger Kotjetkov till DN.

Hans egen inställning är dels att han är oskyldig eftersom hans budskap inte var riktat till minderåriga, dels att han ändå inte behöver lyda lagen eftersom den strider mot Rysslands konstitution.

Medan alla väntar på att konstitutionsdomstolen ska avgöra hur det ligger till med den saken föreslås liknande lagar i andra regioner, även på nationell nivå. Och oron sprider sig i det ryska hbt-samhället. Även bland Igor Kotjetkovs bekanta talar många om att emigrera.

– Jag kan förstå dem. Men jag råder dem ändå att stanna och slåss för sina rättigheter.

•A4

"Många av våra bekanta funderar på att flytta utomlands", säger Olga (till vänster), här med Natasja och sonen Jefim.

Politiker tar strid mot sexuella minoriteter

Den kritiserade anti-gaylagen från S:t Petersburg kan snart bli verklighet i hela Ryssland. Ett lagförslag behandlas i parlamentet i Moskva och flera regioner är i färd med att klubba sina egna versioner.

Ingmar Nevéus
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● Kamp mot sexuella minoriteter har blivit ledordet för ryska politiker under våren. Förutom S:t Petersburg har tre andra regioner redan olika versioner av anti-gaylagar. I veckan införde miljonstaden Novosibrisk ett eget förbud mot homosexpropaganda.

– Det handlar om att skydda den stora majoriteten som inte har något med homosexualitet att göra. De ska inte behöva se gayparader och behöva förklara för sina barn vad som försiggår, säger Alexander Iljusjenko, en av de politiker som ligger bakom förslaget.

Även i huvudstaden Moskva lanserades i veckan planer på en lokal anti-gaylag. Men den föreslagna lagen ska även "skydda barn mot information av heterosexuell natur". Moskvapolitikerna uppmanar samtidigt det nationella parlamentet att skynda på sitt arbete med att införa en federal antigaylag.

Medan katolska länder som Spanien och Portugal har infört enkönade äktenskap går det ortodoxa Ryssland alltså i motsatt riktning och minskar rättigheterna för sexuella minoriteter.

Homofobi har präglat Ryssland i århundraden, och Sovjeteran var inget undantag. Då ansågs homosexualitet vara en borgerlig perversion som drabbat den degenererade västvärlden. Enkönat sex var belagt med fängelsestraff ända fram till 1993, då den ökända paragraf 121 i brottsbalken avskaffades – mest för att Ryssland skulle kunna bli medlem i Europarådet.

Men under ytan har den gamla inställningen levt vidare. Ryssland har inga öppet homosexuella politiker, knappt ens några kända artister som klivit ut ur garderoben. Så känsligt är detta ämne fortfarande mer än 20 år efter Sovjetunionens fall.

Fakta Attityden till homosexualitet

Lagen mot "propaganda för homo-, bi- och transsexualitet inför minderåriga" lanserades inför valet till den lokala lagstiftande församlingen i S:t Petersburg i december 2010, av en medlem i det styrande partiet Enade Ryssland. Lagen började gälla i mars.

Straffet för den som bryter mot lagen är böter: drygt 1000 kronor för privatpersoner och drygt 100 000 kronor för organisationer och företag. Liknande lagar finns i fyra andra ryska regioner: Rjazan, Archangelsk, Kostroma och Novosibrisk. Ett lagförslag på nationell nivå behandlas just nu av duman, det ryska parlamentet.

Attityden till homosexualitet är över lag negativ i Ryssland. Enligt en undersökning gjord av Levada center 2010 ansåg ungefär var tredje ryss att homosexualitet är en sjukdom. 84 procent var emot enkönade äktenskap.

Efter ryska revolutionen 1917 legaliserades homosexuella relationer, men förbudet återinfördes av Stalin 1934. Under flera decennier fängslades cirka 1000 homosexuella per år. Många av dem dog i fångläger.

Sedan 1993 är homosexualitet inte straffbelagt i Ryssland, och sedan 1999 betraktas det inte som en sjukdom. DN

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Ökad tolerans allmän trend

Washington
Michael Winiarski
DN:s korrespondent

● Mitt Romney, republikansk presidentkandidat, har utnämnt den öppet homosexuelle Richard Grenell till sin utrikespolitiske rådgivare. Det är bara ett exempel på att trenden i USA är ökad tolerans, även i ett parti som blivit allt mer socialkonservativt och fortfarande motsätter sig samkönade äktenskap.

Homoäktenskap har lagligt stöd i sju delstater, och fler är på väg, trots motstånd från kristna fundamentalister. På det nationella planet går utvecklingen långsammare. Något allmänt federalt förbud mot diskriminering i arbetslivet på grundval av sexuell inriktning finns inte, men det finns i en stor del av USA:s delstater.

Sedan september 2011 är det tillåtet för öppet homosexuella, lesbiska och bisexuella att tjänstgöra i USA:s militär. Det är drygt 40 år efter att gay pride-rörelsen uppstod i USA.

Många diskrimineras på jobbet

Peking
Torbjörn Petersson
DN:s korrespondent

● År 1997 ändrades den kinesiska lagen så att homosexualitet inte längre var kriminellt. Fyra år senare ströks homosexualitet på listan över mentala störningar. De senaste åren har toleransen mot homosexuella ökat i storstäder, där det i dag finns klubbar och samlingsplatser.

Flera organisationer arbetar för ökade rättigheter, och homosexuella blir numera sällan trakasserade av polis, men fortfarande känner sig många diskriminerade i arbetslivet.

Myndigheter vägrar att handskas med frågor som rör homosexuellas lika rättigheter. Den kinesiska ledningens linje kan sammanfattas med tre "nej": nej till godkännande, nej till förbud och nej till stöd. Många har vittnat om att deras största rädsla är att deras sexuella läggning ska komma till föräldrarnas kännedom.

Homofobi diplomatisk fråga

Nairobi
Erik Esbjörnsson
DN:s korrespondent

● Homofobin har på senare år blivit en diplomatisk stridsfråga på flera håll i Afrika söder om Sahara. Från att tidigare endast ha varit ett tabubelagt ämne har nu krav på skärpt lagstiftning rests i flera olika länder.

Mest uppmärksamhet har Ugandas extremt homofientliga lagförslag fått, efter att det introducerades i parlamentet för två år sedan. Lagförslaget kan – om det klubbas igenom – ge dödsstraff för vissa homosexuella relationer.

Men även på andra håll i Afrika är homofobin utbredd. Hbt-fientliga lagar har skapat konfliktytor mellan diplomater från väst och afrikanska politiker som hävdar sin rätt till en egen kulturell utveckling.

I mars försvarade exempelvis Liberias president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf sitt lands homofientliga lagstiftning, mindre än ett halvår efter att hon tilldelats Nobels fredspris.

Undantaget i regionen är Sydafrika, som har en av världens mest hbt-vänliga författningar.

•A5

Figure 3: Olga, Natasha, and their son Efim in their kitchen in St. Petersburg. Text and images: Ingmar Nevéus, *Dagens Nyheter*, 2012-04-29

På gay- och trans-klubben Majåk i Sotji uppträder artister från både Ryssland och flera grannländer i före detta Sovjetunionen. "Här gäller det att följa klädkoden och inte se provinsiell ut", säger Andrej Tanisjevj (till höger), en av arrangörerna.

Turistnöje utanför Rosa Khutor, en liten ort som blev känd för världen i samband med vinter-OS 1014.

Små lokala företag i Sotji har fått det det allt kämpigare i takt med att turismen och eventemangsbranschen har vuxit, menar medieföretageran Michail Mirshis som tillsammans med sin vitryska flickvän Julia besöker en fest på ett hotell i Krasnaja Pljana.

Turism ökar Sotjis ekonomiska klyftor

GULDDRÖMMAR Den ryska före detta OS-staden Sotji vill locka de superrika, men för en del småföretagare har inkomsterna blivit sämre. En helg i Sotji visar att drömmen om guldgossarnas Sotji har lett till att många invånare blivit fattigare.

SvD I RYSSLAND

FOTO DENIS SINYAKOV
TEXT MARIA GEORGIEVA

SOTJI I en svettig loge efter midnatt målar Sergej ögonen och säger att han är som en spegel. Snart ska hans scenpersona Isadora Vulkan gå ut på scen.

– Jag har aldrig gömt mig. Många ryssar ser på homosexuellia med öppenhet men våra rättigheter är begränsade, säger Sergej, som är från Ukraina.

Bakom en svart dörr mellan varvshusen nära stranden ligger Kaukasusregionens kanske mest ökända klubb, i folkmun känd som kabaret Majåk. Här uppträder artister från hela före detta Sovjetunionen.

Påtstligt kommer den brittiska sångerskan Adele ut på scen. Det är Isadora Vulkan som personifierar henne.

Showen tycks vara väl anpassad för publiken. En annan stjärna liknar den tidigare Eurovisionsångerskan Verka Serdutjka från Ukraina. Hon springer runt och drar sexistiska skämt tillsammans med en annan blond dragqueen.

Vid ett bord sitter Andrej Tanisjevj, en av klubbens ägare. Vi får en pratstund med honom.

– Vår show lockar alla för den är ocensurerad, säger Tanisjevj.

– Här gäller det att följa klädkoden och inte se provinsiell ut, säger Tanisjevj som har elva års erfarenhet av klubbvärlden.

Under de olympiska vinterspelen i Sotji 2014 kom även makthavare från Moskva till klubben, säger Andrej.

– Jag tror att det finns homosexuella i presidentens administration och de gillar att besöka klubben.

Tanisjevj döljer inte sina åsikter. Han säger att Pride handlar om pr, och inte om solidaritet för hbtq-personers rättigheter.

Men ska man inte stärka hbtq-personers rättigheter?

– Ingen respekterar mänskliga rättigheter här. Det finns ingen yttrandefrihet för någon, säger Andrej Tanisjevj.

Vadim Kotljar pussas med sin pojkvän vid ett bord.

Showen var fantastisk och demokratisk! Sotji som stad är mer tolerant tack vare av den här klubben. Övriga Ryssland är inte redo för oss.

Efter showen droppar Sergejs peruk av svett. Han berättar att lika många heteros exuella som homosexuella besöker klubben.

– Människor blir upprörda om man visar närhet öppet, oavsett om man är gay eller straight. Det man accepterar i Europa gör man inte här, säger Sergej.

Dagen efter tar vi motorvägen från Sotji till Krasnaja Poljana, några mil österut. Värmen från havet krockar med kylan från bergen.

Vägen genom bergen har blivit dubbelt så stor. Inför OS drogs också ny järnväg intill den nya motorvägen. Byggena har präglats av dispyter med regionala myndigheter kring kostnaden för driften av dyra tåg. De används inte i lika stor utsträckning i dag.

Före OS bestod Krasnaja Poljana av mindre gator med slitna trähus längs leriga vägar och anspråkslösa skidanläggningar.

I en angränsande dal har även Gazprom, Rysslands statskontrollerade gaskoncern, utvecklat ett eget turistcentrum.

Regnet smattrar på verandan före partyt. Vi har fått nys om en fest för specialinbjudna gäster på hotellet Mariott.

– Om vären kan man simma i havet och en timme senare åka skidor i bergen. Vi säljer en känsla som ska bidra till att gästerna kommer tillbaka, säger hotellets pr-person Alina Abramovich, som är lite besviken över det dåliga vädret.

Hotellet har 95 procent ryska turister, och man vill ge intrycket av att de mer bemedlade besöker Krasnaja Poljana på semestern.

Framför dimmiga bergskullar står en svart Mercedes upplyst på en platå vid poolen.

Lyxbilsförsäljaren Vladimir står vid en köttmaskin som skär tunna skivor prosciutto till gästerna.

– Sotji har förvandlats till elitens Ryssland i rasande takt och investeringarna har ökat. Men medan de rikare blir rikare blir de fattiga allt fattigare, säger han.

Vid vip-hörnan på altanen sitter Julia, en kvinna med tolvcentimeterssklackar, i en mans knä. De skålar i champagne.

– Under Sovjettiden var uppemot tolv miljoner människor här när det var högsäsong. Sedan dess har de blivit färre, men efter OS var det nästan lika många som under Sovjettiden. Man får ha kul så länge det varar, säger Michail Mirshis, en lokal företagare som äger fem tv-kanaler och en radiokanal.

Vid skaldjursbuffén väntar en unga man med askblont hår på sina fem små rätter.

– Putin behövde OS för att stärka sin position i omvärlden. Det går inte att säga att OS var en misslyckad miljardsatsning för Ryssland. Sotji kanske är billigt för en svensk, men ovanligt dyrt för ryssar, säger han.

Inne på hotellet bjuds det på en sparsmakad modevisning. Till tonerna av Nirvanas "Smells like teen spirit", hasar modeller fram och tillbaka mellan marmorpelarna. En av dem bär en svart kreation med president Vladimir Putins ansikte på baksidan.

Sotji marknadsförs som "staden där livet går före drömmen". Nere i hamnen verkar det vara precis tvärt om. Utbyggnaden av staden bidrar till att lokalbefolkningen frågar sig om det var värt det.

En tidig söndagsmorgon sitter morgonpiggna fiskare vid hamnen och väntar på dagens fångst.

– Sotjis förändring har gjort oss som tidigare var småföretagare arbetslösa, säger en fiskare som inte vill att vi ska uppge hans riktiga namn. Vi kallar honom Andrej.

En man utan fiskespö bryter in.

– Du talar inte sanning! Här stöttar vi presidenten, säger han.

Andrej svarar inte.

Han hade tidigare fyra mindre butiker, bland annat ett bageri, och hann bara fiska en gång i månaden.

– Förut behövde man inte turismen. Människor som bor i Sotji har blivit fattigare efter att priserna höjts.

Enligt Andrej sade den dåvarande borgmästaren att han skulle stänga ner sin verksamhet. Han tror att borgmästaren ville bli av med småföretagare för att Sotji behövde se ut som en europeisk stad inför OS.

– Visst har vägarna och infrastrukturen blivit bättre, men under ytan är människor inte rika.

En uppgraderad semesterort behövde skapas snabbt inför OS, menar Andrej.

– Sotji är fast mellan Sovjetunionen och Europa. Förändringarna märks på ytan men grunden är densamma.

När vi lämnar Sotji ser vi en tröja med en bild på Stalin och texten: "Visste du att Stalin var en hipster?"

Maria Georgieva är SvD:s korrespondent i Moskva. Läs fler artiklar av henne på **SvD.se/av/maria-georgieva**

> *Sotji är fast mellan Sovjetunionen och Europa.*
>
> **Andrej**, fiskare i Sotji.

FOTO: DENIS SINYAKOV

SvD.se

- **Stalins** semesterparadis lever upp

Läs SvD:s reportage från den 4 augusti om Sotji.

SvD.se
Sökord: Sotji

Figure 4: Report from "Mayak," Text: Maria Georgieva, images: Denis Sinyakov, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 2016-08-17

even if these images are relatively few. More common is that the images that accompany media articles are not directly connected to and focus on LGBT people, but on culture and politics, where celebrities and politicians are used instead to represent these themes.

Invisible LGBT people, (in)visible queernes?

As just stated, the majority of images used do not feature any Russian LGBT people or activists. Instead, they focus on issues relating to LGBT people, sometimes quite indirectly, with the use of celebrities and other elements of the Swedish context.

At the beginning of the period under investigation, portrayals of Russian non-normative sexuality—treated as a general theme rather than by any specific portrayals of embodied Russian LGBT people—first emerged on the pages of the culture section of major media outlets, rather than on the news pages. In the years up to 2007, this included photographs of non-normative sexuality in the theater, where a play with gay characters was performed, along with pictures of the theater director, as well as images of the band Tatu. Similar "documentary" style pictures are featured in reports on Russian culture throughout the period, often using archival material. Here we see, for example, a photograph of the famous graffiti on the Berlin Wall of Brezhnev and Honecker kissing (*My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love*); images of the Russian Neoacademicism movement,[53] and a photograph of Rudolf Nureyev doing a leap. These representations of Russia, had they been circulated more widely, and not just on the occasion of the publication of the odd newspaper article, could be understood as examples of the "iconographic" images (Hansen, 2015), which I have discussed above. Their sustained discussion, rather than just appearing occasionally, could contribute to a different image of Russia. Textually, there is often talk of how these visual representations, such as those of Brezhnev and Honecker kissing or "the gay clown Putin meme (see p. 62), will be banned in Russia. Yet the images are manifestations of precisely the opposite. They testify to the ways Russian queer visual culture has been decoupled from a narrow conception of LGBT activism, surviving even in times of censorship. I argue that these images disrupt the focus on "out and proud" activism, and the consequences it faces in homophobic Russia, and instead gesture toward a history of countervisuality more difficult to contain in both the Russian context as well as its

[53] Neoacademism was an artistic movement in Russia's 90s, a prominent example of Russian queer visual art (Cassiday, Goscilo, and Platt 2019).

Swedish renderings. Just as the images visualizing Russian LGBT peoples constitute a minor share of the overall visual repertoire, so too the images not directly portraying the Russian LGBT and focusing on Russian queer culture are outnumbered by a focus on mega-events and Swedish, European, and global politics.

Not dissimilar in this respect to Cooper-Cunningham's observations of the period surrounding the enactment of the "gay propaganda" law in 2013, Russian LGBT people were overshadowed by a preoccupation with celebrities, sports paraphernalia, Eurovision stars, and politicians. Starting in 2013, the attention shifted away from addressing the experiences and concerns of individual LGBT individuals in Russia, which is to say, embodied representations of LGBT people decreased, even if not disappearing completely. The visibility of the Russian activist/non-activists has been overshadowed by images depicting Swedish reactions, protest, and the figure of Putin. In 2013, 2014, and 2018, when a significant number of articles were published about Russia and LGBT issues, the focus on Swedish related images took the spotlight away from Russia and Russian LGBT individuals. This can be observed in a total of 28 articles that featured photographs of Emma Green Tregaro showcasing her rainbow nails (14 images) or simply a portrait shot of her. Within this category, there were also photographs featuring known figures such as Alexander Bard, Carl Bildt, Margot Wallström, the Swedish Crown Princess, and both the Swedish football and Olympic teams. These images, focusing on global events, celebrities, and politicians (whether Swedish, Russian, and European), while discussing Russian homophobia, not only render invisible the Russian LGBQ people but also reinforce the Self-image of Sweden/West. They point to the responsibility, among multiple stakeholders, whose logos are often displayed, for finding a solution to Russian homophobia and assisting those endangered by the "gay propaganda" law, or, more pointedly, by the gay purges in Chechnya.

Hegemonic Swedish media visual discourse

As I have discussed above, the visibility of the bodies of the Russian "normal homosexual" in violent settings dominated the reporting from 2007–2012. Specifically Swedish contextual factors are foregrounded in the majority of these images from 2012. Similar to the Anglophone context, celebrities play a prominent role in these representations, and the Swedish context has featured its own celebrities and companies that are involved with the issue of LGBT rights in Russia. An additional characteristic of the Swedish context is the featuring of historical iconic images as well as non-violent reports on

Russian LGBT people, gesturing toward a long history of homosexuality and same-sex desire in Russia. Just as during 2013–2014, the global and Anglophone context is heavily skewed toward Western activism, something that is already identified in previous research (see Figure 5 below), so the focus in Swedish media representations in 2013–2014 and 2018 is on the Swedish context (Figure 6).

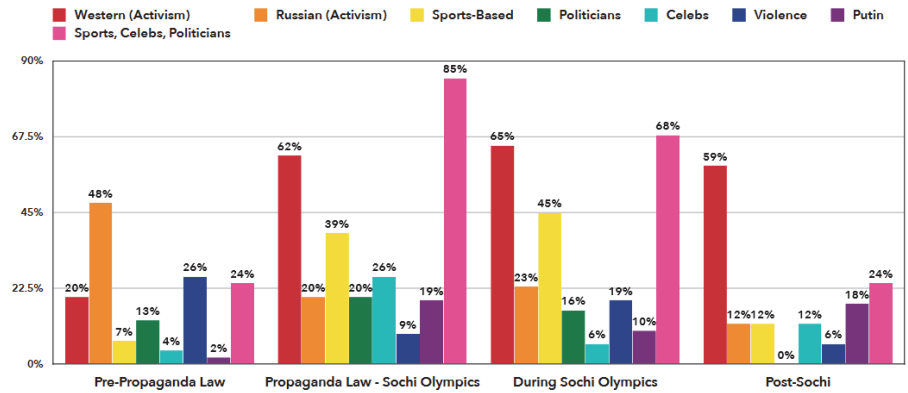

Figure 5: Percentage of News Images in Each Category During Time Period, adapted from Cooper-Cunningham (2021, 196)

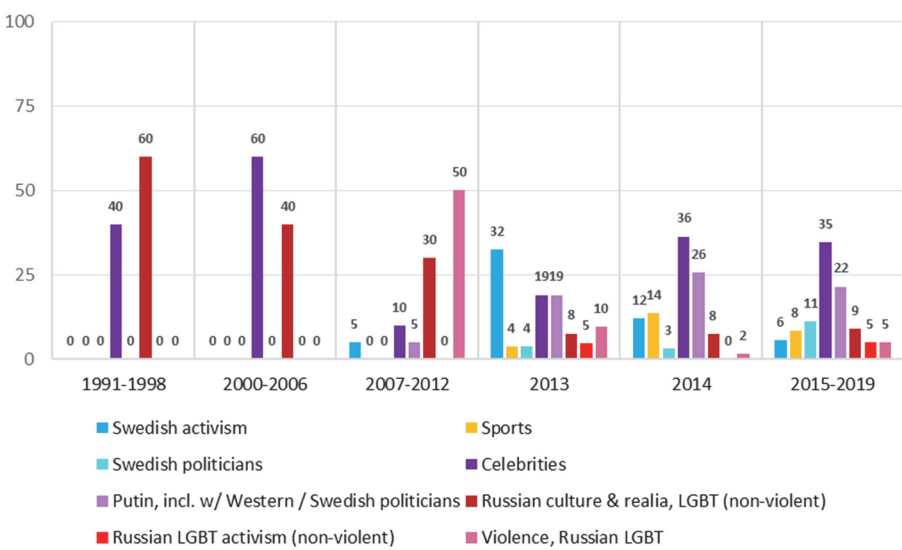

Figure 6: Images in the Swedish media, % of total during each period

The hegemonic visual discourse, structured by the idea of *visibility* in the Swedish press, contributes to not only establishing specific perceptions of LGBT Russians but also perpetuating a particular order. The photos published in the Swedish media to accompany the textual presentations, analyzed in Chapter 1, further cement the dichotomy between homophobic Russia, on the one hand, and progressive and responsible Sweden, on the other. This, though, fails to capture the complexity of both states' strategic use of political homophobia and sexual exceptionalism, positions that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The result is a one-dimensional representation of queer life that reinforces a hierarchy of nations based on ideas of sexual liberty in the West and control in Russia. Scholars Francesca R. Ammaturo and Koen Slootmaeckers (2020) assert that the construction of such a near binary displaces the lived experience of queer people. Thus, when violence occurs in LGBT-friendly countries, these instances are interpreted as single events, such that systemic structures of oppression are ignored. In homophobic countries, on the other hand, people are imagined as perpetual victims, while positive stories and tools for resistance and the ability to create spaces for respite appear impossible. With the start of regular reporting on Russian LGBT people, a certain level of complexity in the range of images exists. These images additionally retain their polysemic character, despite being embedded in a textual discourse that delineates the sexual-political boundaries. Before and during 2012, this complexity is offset to highlight the public display of visibility, and its resultant suppression. Starting in 2013, there has been a notable shift in focus with images of LGBT people being outnumbered by an emphasis placed on Swedish responses by prominent political figures and celebrities. By deploying generic football and Olympic symbols, and photographs of celebrities and politicians, the media images in my material fail to represent queer life in Russia in its complexity. Even when LGBT people are represented, the images used privilege those who face exceptional state violence or have chosen or were forced to flee Russia. There is thus a disregard for communities that exist "under the radar." This also limits the subject positions that Russian LGBT can occupy, if they want to remain intelligible in the Swedish (media) discourse. These photographs establish a simplistic hierarchy of liberated/persecuted sexual subjects, made to signify nations as a whole. The abundance of visual representations that put a premium on a specific visible and visual type of being LGBT, is in line with Western standards of a *representational model of visibility*, which is a perception that if Russian LGBT people are not embraced by their own nation, they must fight their way to gain recognition and support.

This exemplifies how the discursive logic of visibility narrows the broad regime of queer visuality is narrowed in the Swedish media. The logic of visibility sets limits on the possible and effective ways of politically expressing non-normative sexuality and uses of queer aesthetics by LGBT people. The resulting invisibilization of LGBT people living in Russia in the Swedish media should be seen as instrumental in creating images of Russia. This is because other images, which contradict what is sayable and visible in Swedish discourse, are seen as obscuring the genuine challenges faced by the Russian LGBT community or deemed ineffective by those seeking asylum in Sweden. Having established the key features of the hegemonic visual discourse in print media, the rest of this chapter explores how this discourse is confirmed and disrupted in specific examples of visual representations found in the realm of popular culture.

Representations in YouTube videos

Swedish popular music culture has been argued to have a broad global reach. Within the broad category of popular music, the schlager genre, as queer performance scholar Tiina Rosenberg (2005, 338–39) points out, is an important reference point for domestic and foreign LGBT (but mostly gay men) audiences and the general public; it is also a key site for the *camp* strategy of resistance. The significance of popular cultural expression for a Swedish self-image makes such cultural phenomena relevant for my analysis in this section. It exemplifies a more general affinity of media to popular culture and their links to geographical imaginations and imaginaries, which have been highlighted by scholars across multiple fields (Dittmer and Bos 2019; Dittmer and Gray 2010; Saunders 2016).

Already in 2009, Russian sexuality occupied a prominent place in the Swedish imagination, yet without focus on the Russian LGBT. Constructions of Russian sexuality drew on articulations of the Russian menace and Russian prostitution. The opening act of Melodifestivalen 2009 itself was a kind of "declaration of war" to "the East" in a call to save Europe's musical taste in the most camp manner possible. In a pre-recorded segment, all the contest participants were asked to pledge allegiance to Sweden and become military recruits, promising to save, in an imagined military combat, Europe's musical taste. Petra Mede, the host, was driven to the stage in a bedazzled golf cart, by Christer Björkman, the show's executive producer, parodying the use of cabriolets seen on Russian Victory Day military parades. Driving around Stockholm's Globe Arena the two of them are dressed in military attire with

excessive decorations. Commenting on what just happened, Mede exclaims: "What an entrance! For all of you wondering, that is what a Russian pride parade looks like."[54] Later on in the program, the show's interval act represents Russia with a clear focus on sexuality. Performing to a song by Swedish band Grotesco, "*Tingeliin (Russian base-lovers remix)*," a kitschy performance ensues, populated with scantily clad girls in tight shorts emblazoned with the red star, who hide behind human-size Matryoshka dolls. They are joined by Cossack dancers and are serenaded by a choir in Russian officer uniforms. The song itself is replete with references to Russia, such as "Goodbye Putin" and "Cheers, Lenin!" The performance ended up provoke-ing an official statement from the Russian embassy (Johansson 2009). *Tingeliin* thus indexed a broad array of Swedish representations of Russia, e.g., Russian cold climate, the mafia, women, and the military. This particular performance solely emphasized women while completely omitting any representation of the LGBT community. The portrayal of Swedish artists' entrance as "Russian gay pride" at the start of the program shows that same-sex sexuality in 2009 had not yet established its status as a significant element of Russia's image. The visual discourse on Russian sexuality shifted to incorporate same-sex sexuality following the implementation of the "gay propaganda" law in 2013, a period to which both video examples in this chapter pertain.

This section continues to explore how Russia and Russian non-normative sexuality have been visually portrayed in examples of Swedish popular culture, attending to how visual representations both confirm and disrupt national representations and how these representations mobilize emotion, drawing on Ahmed's (2004) understanding of the cultural politics of emotion. By examining the circulation of emotion, I delve into the history of camp as queer aesthetics and its political significance. I propose that through the use of camp, the videos present two utopian visions that construct differing images of Sweden and Russia. I analyze two video performances, available on YouTube: Måns Zelmerlöw's performance of the song, entitled "Propaganda!" at *QX Gaygala* 2014 and a music video to *Kamferdrops* and Frej Larsson's song "Folkkär" ("Beloved by people").

"Propaganda" is a four-and-a-half-minute performance, serving as the opening number of *QX Gaygala* 2014, which is an annual event frequented by Swedish (LGBT) celebrities established by the Swedish LGBT magazine

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[54] "Och vilken entré! För alla er som undrar, det där var alltså en rysk prideparad. Så ser den ut" (Melodifestivalen 2009, SVT, 5:40)

QX in 1999.[55] The video is from February 2014, close to the time when the Winter Olympics took place in Sochi, a city in the south of Russia. "Folkkär," is a music video accompanying a song by *Kamferdrops*, a Norwegian singer and songwriter, and Frej Larsson, a Swedish musician, and rapper. Both the song and the music video were released in 2018, around the time of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, held in Moscow. In an article published in *Aftonbladet* (Elmervik, 2018-06-20), the music video is described as addressing the topic of homosexuality and sports, also touching on the relationship between Russia and Sweden. As my analysis will go on to show, the images of the nations are not the focus, and in this respect the second example is quite different from "Propaganda." By contrasting these two videos, I will consider the differences and similarities in how Russia and Sweden are represented. I begin by describing the content of the performances and then analyze the performances' temporal and spatial aspects. I then move on to offer a perspective on how emotions play a significant role in these two videos.

Nations, spaces, and temporalities

"Propaganda," performed at *QX Gaygala*, is originally a 1978 song by the American disco group *Village People*, entitled "In the Navy." The lyrics were written specifically for the occasion, with the title referring to the "gay propaganda" law passed in Russia in 2013. The number is performed by the Swedish pop singer Måns Zelmerlöw backed by a troupe of dancers. The performance begins with the singer standing still in a fur coat and a matching traditional fur hat (*ushanka*). During the first minute of the music number, images of Moscow's St. Basil's cathedral are projected on a screen above him, and in the background, there are two balalaika players, a man and a woman, in traditional Russian costumes playing to the tune of *En natt i Moskva*.[56] The rest of the performance consists of dance routines performed to the tune of "Propaganda." Måns Zelmerlöw takes off his fur coat and hat to reveal a white navy outfit and a matching cap, while four shirtless dancers in sailor hats appear. From the third minute on, the stage becomes filled with roller skate dancers, drag queens, a lesbian couple in wedding dresses, a male gay couple with a stroller, and a demonstration with rainbow flags and a banner that

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[55] The show features awards in several categories for involvement with LGBTQ questions, such as, in 2014, Homo/bi/trans/queer of the Year, Hetero of the Year, Film of the Year etc., complemented by live performances. The gala has been broadcast on Swedish public TV since 2004 according to QX's website [https://www.qx.se/english/].

[56] Swedish version of "Moscow Nights," known in Russian as "*Podmoskovnye vechera*," a popular Soviet-Russian song.

reads "Proud parents of gay, bi and trans children" (Sw. *Stolta föräldrar till homo- bi- och transbarn*, a network organized by RFSL). In this performance, the construction of Russia's image is mostly done through implication, in contrast to Sweden's assumed sexual exceptionalism that otherwise permeates the video.

The internal dynamics and development of the performance are linked to the temporal and spatial aspects of its representations. From the "dark," slow and somber Russia, envisioned as traditional, to the visually and sonically "enlightened" Sweden, where all parts of the LGBT community present themselves on stage to music that is both fast-paced and joyful. This representation thus constructs Russia as backward, with traditional Russian outfits associated with peasant life of pre-revolution times and balalaika music, freezing any movement that could lead to development. The lack of movement in the first minute of the performance, with the lead singer standing still, clad in fur and with the musicians sitting down, further contributes to an image fixed in time.

The change from the slow-paced Russian traditional music to the upbeat "In the Navy" can be viewed as a transition from Russia to progressive Sweden. The change in the performance can also be understood as a shift in terms of spatiality. The number opens with a stanza of "Moscow Nights":[57]

Nattens mörker faller när dagen dör	The darkness of the night falls when the day dies
Nere vid Moskvaflodens strand	Down at the bank of the Moskva River
Kära, stanna här tills dagen åter gryr	My dear, stay here until the day dawns again
Låt oss vila i drömmens land	Let us rest in the land of dreams

The images projected behind the dancers and performers continue to show St. Basil's, covered by a rainbow flag as well as pictures of Swedish Emma Green Tregaro. We also see "To Russia with love," clearly a reference to the 1963 James Bond movie, featuring the British and the rainbow flags and an image of the British actress Tilda Swinton holding a pride flag in Red Square.[58] It is thus unclear whether it is Sweden, and not Russia, that is to be inferred from the full lyrics of Moscow Nights, that becomes "the land of dreams." As the two "Russians" leave the stage after the first minute, it is the Swedes who come to Moscow to engage in "propaganda" and "recruit more." This serves to (re)affirm the image of Sweden as a progressive *reality*, rather than a

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[57] My translation from Swedish

[58] See Peeples (2013).

utopia, in relation to the image of Russia. While the space of Moscow without Swedes is constructed as lonely and dark, the spatiality of Sweden, symbolically brought to Red Square by everyone participating in the performance, is shared by many; it is colorful and jubilant. In contrast to "Russia" where loneliness seems to be characteristic, "Sweden" is portrayed as a space of togetherness, love, and acceptance. The structure of the performance, as well as the lyrical content, emphasize the temporal and spatial difference between Russia and Sweden, which is used as evidence of a difference between Russia and Sweden in their treatment of LGBT people.

Representations of space and time contribute to creating images of Russia and Sweden, with specific elements therein entrenching the role of visibility. In "Propaganda," the banners that read "Anti-gay law approved in Russia" (*Anti-homolag godkänd i Ryssland*) and "Russia bans 'gay propaganda' during the Olympics" (*Ryssland förbjuder 'gay propaganda' under OS*) appear on the screen behind the performers. The focus on the ban *during* the Olympics, also found in the print media analyzed in Chapter 1, reflects the preoccupation of Western visitors with their safety, rather than with the Russian LGBT community as such. The ban on rainbow flags is equated with the absence of LGBT organizations, even though the Russian LGBT community persists and operates independently, regardless of whether it is being observed or recognized by visitors. However, the backdrop includes quite specific endorsements of LGBT visibility in the Russian context, by celebrities and activists amid cities with visible attributes, such as the rainbow flag and placards. This makes it seem as though the visibility endorsed by the gaze of the Western/Swedish LGBT is what solely enables the existence of Russian activists. The endorsement of visibility is thus transmuted into a demand for LGBT visibility, as a mode of becoming intelligible by the West/Sweden. What is obscured in this process is that visibility as the benchmark of progress on LGBT rights might not be desirable and its effects for the local LGBT population are not as straightforward.

"Folkkär," the second video I analyze, is made in the form of a football game broadcast. In the opening segment, we find out that the match is taking place between two teams with made up names, *Bear United* and *Unicornpool*.[59] Frej Larsson, playing the role of the TV anchor, welcomes the

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[59] This can be read as references to gay male subcultures of bears, with larger hairy bodies coded "masculine" (Hennen 2005), and twinks, young-looking, slim, hairless and usually perceived to be effeminate (Vytniorgu 2023). Worth noting that although the video incorporates subversive elements through the use of camp aesthetics, the primary focus is on the presentation of men and the inherent issues within homonormative football.

viewer to the "intergalactic football championship." The first minute shows the warmup routines of both teams and the pep talks by the team managers. At 1:07 the two teams are lined up with the referee (*Kamferdrops*) in the middle of them, holding the football with the face of Vladimir Putin. The referee has taken a bribe, and so she rigs the game in favor of Bear United, who lead at halftime. We see the other team's manager also bribing the referee. The second half opens with fierce attacks of one team against the other before the score is tied. At which point the male players give up on the game, start kissing and touching each other, and dance in a circle.

Spatiotemporal constructions of "Folkkär" suggest an alternative to the constructions in "Propaganda." Unlike "Propaganda," which relies on constructions of time and space to structure the Russian and Swedish images along familiar lines of hegemonic discourse, "Folkkär" is removes itself from established temporal and spatial coordinates. Representations of space are particularly subverted in this video, thereby opening up a potential for an alternative imaginary of gender and sexual order. The video breaks with a tradition of metonymic representation of a football team as a nation. As scholars of nationalism and media studies have noted, mediated mega sports events, such as the Olympic games and the FIFA World Cup, provide nations with a platform to promote their national values and ideals (Grix and Brannagan 2016; Dayan and Katz 1992). In these typical manifestations of banal nationalism (Billig 1995), nations as imagined communities can cohere and the national identity is constructed and performed. By breaking with structures that discursively define Sweden and Russia, in an apparent attempt to transcend the nationalist sentiment inherent in sports events, "Folkkär" takes a unique approach by situating the game in a different realm – outer space. By placing the match in an "intergalactic" space, the video manages to circumvent the discourses associated with specific nations pitted against each other. As a result, it avoids centering on the competition between Sweden and another national team. Instead, it allows for a critique of Swedish heteronormative football, which can exhibit overtly homophobic tendencies. The act of shifting the setting to outer space creates a symbolic distance from the entrenched nationalistic narratives often present in sports. It provides an opportunity to examine and challenge the heteronormative dynamics that may permeate Swedish football.

This creative choice presents us with an image of a queer utopia. An alternative perspective that encourages a fresh lens through which to analyze and deconstruct the existing power structures within the sport and between nations. Viewed in line with Slootmaecker's (2019) discussion of national-

isms as competing masculinities, the representations in the video take on an added layer of subversiveness: toward the end of the video, the male football players in "Folkkär" give up on playing the game altogether. By refusing to compete in sports, they refuse also to participate in nationalism. By detaching the game from its traditional context and reimagining it within an intergalactic realm, "Folkkär" offers a thought-provoking critique that transcends national boundaries and confronts issues within Swedish football, particularly those related to heteronormativity and homophobia.

The portrayal of Russia in "Propaganda," on the contrary, lacks originality in its representation. Particularly noteworthy is the intentional absence of any depiction of "Russians," specifically LGBT Russians, in the second half of the performance. This omission reflects the prevailing modes of discourse within the musical performance, where LGBT Russians are spoken *about* rather than given a visible presence on stage in what might appear as a gesture of international LGBT solidarity. The representation relies instead on a rehearsal of the discourse on Russia and a corresponding image of Sweden with familiar elements, such as traditional songs and costumes, combined with the absence of LGBT visibility on the Russian side, followed by the recognizable elements connected with LGBT culture in Sweden. These representations entrench existing sexual polarization between the two nations.

Further, within the context of preexisting perceptions about Russia and Sweden, "Propaganda" fails to address the crucial issue of visibility at stake in the Russian context, where the implementation of the "gay propaganda" law was motivated by fears and concerns about highly visible LGBT bodies in public spaces. "Propaganda" does not explore these complexities or provide any meaningful insights regarding the challenges faced by the LGBT community in Russia. The performance of "Propaganda" fails to explore alternatives to Western-style LGBT visibility. Instead, it reinforces Swedish progressiveness and upholds a binary geopolitical narrative. The displacement of "Russians" throughout the performance raises questions about how LGBT activism is represented. Rather than engaging in a dialogue or speaking next to voices of LGBT people, the performance presents a leveraged LGBT pedagogy that is delivered from a place of moral authority (Kulpa 2014) and circumscribes how LGBT activism should be conducted.

In "Folkkär," the use of football as a game and as a sports institution allows for the creation of an alternative image of football that departs from the established discourse. Breaking away from the familiar and sedimented discursive tropes requires the replacement or re-negotiation of certain elements.

In this case, it is the temporal and spatial aspects that are discarded, challenging the conventional framework. It is when the dynamic of "Russia against Sweden" is removed that the possibility of transcending existing discursive conventions arises. In comparison to "Propaganda," "Folkkär" indeed challenges the Swedish self-image as a progressive society.

Still, the counter-hegemonic articulation present in "Folkkär" remains limited, with traces of the hegemonic discourse discernible within the video. Firstly, Larsson's portrayal as the presenter with the title of "Leader of the Free World" indexes the divisions and self-perception of the United States during the Cold War. Such an allusion indicates the remnants of the hegemonic discourse embedded within the video. Secondly, the image of Putin's face on the ball used during the game is itself significant. Despite challenging the creation of the heteronormativity of Swedish football and offering a counter-hegemonic perspective, Putin, as a symbol representing a different sexual politics, remains significant for Swedish self-perception. The Swedish Self becomes dissolved, with the only reference being the language used in "live commentary." However, Putin functions as the constitutive outside, where, despite its absence, the idea of enlightened Sweden maintains its significance. It is unclear whether Putin, as a signifier of absolute difference and otherness, is still attached to "Russia," so that the whole of "Russia" is symbolically sidelined from the game occurring in the "free world", or if his symbolic expulsion to the space of the outside means that national boundaries on the inside are transcended.

A circulation of political emotions

To return to the analysis of the videos, "Propaganda" exists within the framework of Swedish homonormativity. Observing the individuals who appear on stage, such as the dancers and Måns Zelmerlöw, it is clear that only certain forms of acceptable queerness are represented. This includes the dancers and a crowd on stage that represents rainbow families and parents. LGBT "propaganda" is explained as a response to foreign governments "chasing love with laws."[60] Questioning how "anyone can be afraid of and against love blooming freely" and telling "the President of Russia and the Hungarian Parliament" that the whole world is watching, the song suggests the visibility *of love* as a solution to homophobia. The lyrics say one can be "straight, gay and trans" and there seems to be no place on stage for those who fail to be properly "queer" – finding themselves between categories, on the margins of the

[60] "När man börjar jaga kärleken med lagar / Då behöver världen mer / Propaganda!"

acceptable and intelligible, by refusing to procreate and fold themselves into the nation. The video constructs a narrow understanding of sexual politics of non-normative sexuality as LGBT politics, limiting Swedish queer expressions to (white) homonormativity.

The call in "Propaganda" to "send our kisses to Russians" *(skicka ryssar våra kyssar)* within this context raises further questions beyond Sweden's progressive image. The visibility of LGBT people is both instrumentalized as a symbolic marker of progress *and* presented as a solution to achieve such progress. When demanding visibility for Russian LGBT people, the implicit conclusion is that Russia is lagging behind. "Propaganda," as well as "Folkkär" speak mainly to Swedish-speaking or Nordic viewers because some lyrics of "Folkkär" are in Norwegian. "Propaganda" was performed in front of a live audience at the QX Gala, and the audience is included in the video, while the spectators are peculiarly absent from the match in the "Folkkär" video. Both videos are available on YouTube for an international viewer and the comment section attests to the viewership going beyond the borders of Sweden. In "Propaganda," there is a specific call to the listener to actively engage in just that – "propaganda" with respect to what the Russian state, under the 2013 law, terms "non-traditional sexual relations." Visibility is thus presented as a solution to discrimination. It is expressed in the address to the Swedish LGBT elite and the population at large, namely for people to be "more visible" *for* the Russian context ("we want you as a new recruit") and "send our kisses to Russia" (by being visible in the Swedish context?). This obscures the complicated relation between visuality and visibility in Russia. First, since 1991, prominent queer aesthetics of artistic expression have been a strong feature of Russian pop-music, at times assimilated into the mainstream, which do not lead to the visibility of LGBT people, what has been termed "visuality without visibility" (Engström 2021b). Second, the forced visibility of LGBT people, transmuting into hypervisibility, led to their exclusion from national belonging, especially after 2006 (Edenborg 2017; Wilkinson 2020).

The persuasive power of the performance, articulating visibility as the commonsense solution to the problems of Russian LGBT people, rests on its circulation of emotions, most noticeably, *love*. In discourse, emotions play a significant role in the impact and effectiveness of representations, extending beyond the visual realm. Central to the practice of signification, they can influence how discursive articulations are received and interpreted. Sara Ahmed's (2004) approach draws attention to the workings of power in the construction of emotions. Recognizing that emotions are not purely

individual, but are shaped and constructed by social, political, and economic forces, Ahmed's focus is on the circulation of emotion and its role for making national bodies cohere in specific ways, by means of delineating "the other," which serves as the origin of "our" emotions. Ahmed considers the function of emotions in teasing out their entanglements with power. Over time, certain emotions become firmly attached to, or reside in, specific objects (9). Thus, certain objects become associated with positive emotions and vice versa. Emotions are, per Ahmed, sticky. Stickiness is "*an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*" (90, emphasis in original); it is the outcome of repeated impressions that emotions have on us.

Repeated portrayal of homosexual desire and LGBT people in terms of *love*, in global and Swedish LGBT discourse, holds an important place in my discussions on visibility. In global contexts, *love* has been subsumed within dominant discourses of sexual politics. It has been institutionalized and naturalized within mainstream consciousness and used to cover up the problematic aspects of radical queer politics and instead present Western LGBT activist practices as universally applicable beyond Western contexts. Going back to the 1970s, love in the 21st century has become a central element of the discourse of LGBT equality in the US and Western Europe, traveling from a human rights and equality discourse to the realm of popular culture (Thomas 2023). "Love" has consciously been linked to the queer body by many activists while "sex" has been detached from it, in a number of LGBT campaigns. With the dawn of homonormativity, love has transformed the figure of the LGBT replacing "the perverse homosexual," with "normal homosexual" discriminated against because of who s/he loves. The homosexual subject is normalized and domesticated through marriage, consumerism, and patriotism, allowing homosexuality to be embraced by the heterosexual majority (Weber 2016). As Rastegar (2013) has shown in a case study of how Americans interpret same-sex persecution in Iran, *love* is called upon to redeem "deviance" and transform the focus of sexual desires from the realm of the disrespectful to the sacred and respectful. Romantic love possesses the power of salvation for those suffering from (state) homophobia while at the same time functioning as a signifier of civilizational LGBT pedagogy (Bracke 2012; Kulpa 2014).

Historically, in the Swedish context, love has displaced pleasure in discussions of homosexuality from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist 2011; 2012). This runs parallel to global critiques of homonormativity, which point out the de-sexualization of queer desire and the articulation of LGBT in terms of respectability politics. The visibility of

homosexuality in a Swedish context, limiting acceptable displays of homosexuality to expressions of *love*, is thus not at all disconnected from the emotion's usage during 2010s equality campaigns in the West. In addition to normalization, love is central to othering. While love makes individuals intelligible, as Ulrika Dahl writes, by being connected to a person's "humanness" (2014: 151, cited in Ahlsted 2016), Sara Ahlstedt (2016, 190ff.) shows how, in the contemporary Swedish context, love operates as a powerful force for normalizing queer migrant subjectivities. Persecution on the grounds of sexual orientation is similarly connected to love rather than to sexual practices because the recognition of love as a positive and universal feeling is what allows sexual practices to be accepted. The Swedish homonationalist discourse operates by making queer desires intelligible by recognizing them as love. Describing this process, Kehl focuses on the depoliticizing and racializing functions of love in a Swedish context. The production of an intelligible queer identity for racialized Swedish queers is connected with a move from being treated "as people with human rights" to "only 'to be able to love whom you want'" (Kehl 2020a, 150).[61]

This focus on love, as a signifier of the specific formations of the LGBT rights discourse, should also be viewed in another genealogy of "love" in Russia. The element *love* was used to advocate sexual diversity in the late 1990s and 2000s. Love Parades took place in cities like Yekaterinburg and St Petersburg (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2016; Sarajeva 2011, 179ff.).[62] These events did not promote a straightforward political agenda like gay pride and gay rights or coming out in terms of individual identity-politics and public visibility, but were visually camp and transgressed the heterosexual order. If they had a political motive, it was disguised as a harmless fun-centered celebration. Although they did not reach the Western standard of advocacy, they nevertheless contributed to an overall increase in the visibility of gay and lesbian sexuality (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2016, 178) and, I would suggest, functioned as forms of queer community building.

This *stickiness* of love can be observed in the video, which, along with showing Måns Zelmerlöw, the dancers, and the stage, zooms in on the audience, consisting mainly of Swedish celebrities and individuals known for their engagement with LGBT art and activism. The audience appears united,

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[61] Love has functioned as a gatekeeping device to delineate "proper" asylum seekers in Swedish (Gröndahl 2020) and Norwegian contexts (Akin 2017).

[62] Although sharing a name, the events themselves were quite different in reach and agenda when compared to the depoliticized electronic music festivals in Germany (Borneman and Senders 2000; Nye, Hitzler, and McKay 2015).

happily cheering and clapping to the song's melody. "Propaganda," I suggest, functions as an example of the schlager genre, which, as Tiina Rosenberg (2005) points out, is itself sentimental and therefore, as a form of entertainment, is sticky. "Propaganda" is also clearly *camp*. Eve Sedgwick has noted that camp-*recognition* does not ask, "What kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?" Instead, it says in the hypothetical mode "What if the right audience for this were exactly me?" (Sedgwick 1990, 156). The Swedish LGBT elite then realize they are the right audience for this. These effects are evident in the video; there is joy on the faces of the audience in feeling togetherness. They clap, they smile. In this particular case, they feel together when addressed as a group. The circulation of *love* they are asked to perform – by sending it to Russia – already assumes that they possess it. This circulation is thus performative, constitutive of Sweden as a homofriendly nation. The constant references to the homophobic Russian outside in the lyrics of the song additionally facilitate the circulation of love within the Swedish nation. Ahmed raises another point about how a circulation of love domestically covers up for the international fear of terrorism. In the Swedish context, the circulation of love in "Propaganda" is a response to the atmosphere of Russian hate of its LGBT people and the danger it poses to Sweden, dovetailing with a historic discourse surrounding the threat of the Russian military to Swedish security. The signifiers of gender and sexuality become securitized (Agius and Edenborg 2019).

Can the emotions that circulate in the video not only reach but have political effects for Russian LGBT people? This question is prompted by following Sedgwick's suggestion that paying attention to affect can help identify "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (Sedgwick 2003, 150–51). Can queer Russians who stumble upon this video mobilize a different affect in themselves, such as joy or pride as opposed to shame and hesitancy? As one of the lines in the song goes, "we want the whole world to see [more propaganda]." On this account, wanting to be less-than-visible, or not wanting to be public with one's sexuality is not an option. The underlying assumption here is that it is possible to choose a different affect altogether. The notion of *free* affect also underlies Sedgwick's theoretical impetus that urges us to read artifacts queerly. Yet as Clare Hemmings points out in her critique of affect (Hemmings 2005, 559), affect is rarely free, contrary to what Sedgwick posits, but rather embedded in the social and cultural contexts within which it

operates. Thus, the desire not to be visible is not simply an individual desire of the Russian LGBT people not to be "out and proud," but should be understood as an expression of a political emotion in Ahmed's sense.

Emotion circulates differently in "Folkkär," where, in contrast to "Propaganda," no live audience is present. The affront to heterosexuality and homonormativity performed in the video by the football players is thus not immediately seen by anyone. The football players are thus shown to be enjoying the game on their own; the joy of queer play is their main goal, rather than performing for spectators. Yet the affective power of homosocial-cum-homosexual camaraderie spreads easily to the viewer. Here, I suggest, a camp sensibility is used not only to get rid of the Russian structures of oppression by destroying the homophobic Other, Putin, symbolically but also by shaking up the heteronormativity of the Swedish Self. Central to engendering this camp sensibility are camera angles, which clearly break with the conventional ways (male) football players are usually filmed. A regular sports game usually focuses on the male sportsman's body as "an instrument of supreme sporting performance" rather than an invitation for sexual pleasure (Rowe 2004, 159–60). The camera in "Folkkär" approaches the subjects differently, using what Steven Drukman (1995), taking a cue from Laura Mulvey's (1975) seminal essay, calls the "the gay gaze." By focusing on the bodies of the players in ways that are usually not seen in regular football games, "Folkkär" transgresses both the visual grammars of heteromasculinity and the rules and the structure of a (heterosexual) football match. After the judge is bribed, the game goes off the rails, and toward the end of the video, the players abandon the match altogether, and end up making out with one another, finally performing a group hug in a circle. The camera moves around the space in suggestive ways, allowing the gay viewer to both identify with and observe the players, making them, in the language of psychoanalytic film theory, both the object of scopophilic pleasure as well as the subject of ego-identification (Drukman 1995, 93).

"Propaganda," sung to the tune of a song by the Village People, who are known for appealing to queer (largely gay male) audiences, is fronted by Måns Zelmerlöw while half-dressed dancers appear as objects of visual pleasure for heterosexual audiences. Even though the dancers are shirtless and ripped, the camera angles, their movements and (the lack of) interactions with each other are expressions not so much of subversive queer visuality but simply of "gay male gym culture" and, as such, as a performance of virile masculinity (Halperin and Traub 2009, 10–12). This visual repertoire draws on heterosexual ways of presenting male bodies for the female gaze and

ultimately normalizes gay bodies as included in the homonorm. I interpret this as a need to present, in the Swedish context, a respectable image of the male homosexual that takes care of its hypermasculine body. Itself a reflection of the visual discourse of homonormativity, the presentation of masculine bodies is hardly subversive or queer in ways that the masculine "Soviet soldiers" were in the Pet Shop Boys video, discussed at the start of this chapter (Padva 2019). Rather, it rhymes with the idea that after all, it is *love* and not *sex*, that Swedes are supposed to be sending to Russia. This mirrors the replacement of (homosexual) "sex" with a more palatable "love," with which the Swedish LGBT movement in general identifies.

Both videos can be further understood as calling on pleasurable emotions by functioning within the aesthetic of *camp* to transmit their message, even despite their shortcomings that are identified within a representational paradigm. While "Propaganda" presents a comfortable arrangement of visibility, muscular men's bodies, and assimilated LGBT activists, "Folkkär" subverts the naturalized visual patterns of visibility. It places "LGBT propaganda" in front of Swedish eyes, rather than sending it abroad, forcing the Swedish viewer to imagine football players as homosexual rather than heterosexual. While both performances can be seen as embodiments of the homonormative camp tradition (Rosenberg 2005), "Propaganda" simplifies and embraces "naïve" kitsch consumption, while "Folkkär" allows for an ironic detachment from the mode of representation associated with kitsch/camp. Thus, in contrast to "Propaganda," which promotes heteronormativity and seeks to save the Russian LGBT people, "Folkkär" is an example of a more complex camp sensibility. Further, "Folkkär" might be understood as a gesture of a queer utopia in José Esteban Muñoz's interpretation. It points to an ideality of queerness that "is not yet here" (Muñoz 2019, 1), where the rules of football do not apply, and nations (almost) do not exist. In giving us a glimpse of campy queer messiness, "Folkkär" offers us a taste of what a queer utopia might feel like.

The articulations centered around *love* continue to be salient in determining which forms of LGBT organizing are prioritized, how "normal homosexual" bodies (Weber 2016, 105) are rendered intelligible. Ultimately, of course, it helps to construct the discourse on Russia. As I have demonstrated, this is evident in numerous engagements with Russian heterosexual and homophobic Other, wherein interactions are re-routed as introspective examinations of the Self through the political circulation of emotion. Russian LGBT people become entangled in the logic of Swedish sexual exceptionalism. Their discursive positioning and role contrasts with the portrayal

of Muslim homosexual people within the Swedish context, who are often depicted as inadequate in embodying the "the right kind" of queerness (Kehl 2020b). Rather than facing exclusion from the public realm and tokenistic inclusion in the private realm (Kehl 2020a), Russian LGBT people are publicly invited to Pride and are addressed. I suggest this is because Russians are mostly racialized as "not quite white," thereby facilitating their intermediate position between exclusion and inclusion. Swedish sexual exceptionalism is built precisely around constructing Russians as second Others, due to their "acceptable whiteness," including specific formations of Swedish internationalism and homonormativity, such as invitations are invited to Pride (LGBT people) and castigations of homophobia (heterosexual Russians). Another possible explanation is that the Muslim Other is rarely stereotyped as homophobic in Swedish popular culture and media, save for the political discourse of the Sweden Democrats. This is in line with research that points out that the racialization of subjects from CEE and Russian specifically does not entirely rely upon skin color and can include other intersecting political, economic, sociocultural, and colonial relationships (Krivonos 2020; Lönn 2018; Kalmar 2023). The Russian homophobic Other, as a second Other, then becomes a suitable target for the discourse of sexual exceptionalism.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the dual role of visibility in the construction of images of Russia and Sweden and non-normative sexuality in media images and YouTube videos. Visibility is a structuring strategy for LGBT activism and a way of being LGBT that is discursively naturalized in the Swedish visual discourse on Russian sexuality. Visibility also circumscribes the broader visual discourse with respect to who (among Russian LGBT people) and what (forms of activism) can and cannot be seen. I have shown how national Russian LGBT people are constructed within a specific mode that necessarily views *visuality as visibility*. I have assessed the implications of this visibility, and by discussing Swedish popular culture, I have highlighted how they reinforce and challenge images of Russia and Sweden. Certain forms of visibility of the Russian LGBT people make invisible queer visuality and activism. A similar – but certainly not identical – argument could be made when it comes to the Swedish context. Visibility and the politics of visibility occupy a hegemonic position in mainstream media and popular culture. This means that whatever does not translate to the language of visibility remains hidden, and flies "under the radar." This does not necessarily mean that alter-

native queer esthetics do not exist or that they cannot underwrite alternative ways of thinking about sexuality or nations.

I have shown how saving Russian LGBT people in the Swedish media and popular culture is articulated with a specific notion of visibility, whose articulation often relies on camp visual aesthetics. This camp aesthetics can be read simultaneously as breaking down the essentialist norms of the LGBT community because anyone – even the heterosexually identifying Swedish performers – can be queer, and also as reinforcing the idea of leveraged pedagogy (Kulpa 2014), that is, showing the Eastern European homophobic Other how LGBT inclusion "is done" by circulating messages of love. This move obscures the context-specific dynamics between visual discourse and visibility in both the Russian and Swedish contexts. In Russia, visuality has been detached from visibility, whereas in Sweden, as "Propaganda" shows, visuality can be put in the service of homonormativity. In contrast, "Folkkär" dispensed with this link between visuality and visibility, offering camp aesthetics for its own sake, and using sexuality to imagine alternative images of Russia and Sweden.

The mobilization, in hegemonic visual discourse, of states or institutions as responsible for LGBT people internationally happens always already on a terrain where "the right kind of queer" (Kehl 2020) has secured its position via locally specific types of activism and strategies. These same arrangements of visibility, specifically, and visual tropes (such as camp aesthetics), more generally, are then articulated as a solution for another, in this case Russian, national context. This is indicative of dynamics observed by scholars of global sexuality in several Western contexts: a specific arrangement of recognizable and defendable queerness is produced and circulated internationally. In going international, those culturally specific sexual and gender identities and/or practices, which have been historically mobilized in their own particular ways, such as LGBT identity politics, become "geo-temporally dislocated" from the contexts and moments in which they first emerged (Bosia 2013, 438). This practice displaces local expressions of non-normative sex and gender, thus precluding the ability of "local sexual and gender minorities [...] to generate their own innovative responses" to resist state-sponsored homophobia (Bosia 2013, 447). What we see in the media images, then, is LGBT activism and forms of solidarity that are only recognizable as such to Swedish audiences. Russian activism is most recognizable and visually represented when it deploys the symbols such as the rainbow, and the "out and proud" ways of being LGBT. This prompts the question: who, among LGBT Russian community, can occupy the positions of acceptable Russian LGBT people within the Swedish

discourse. This chapter suggests it certainly is not those who are consigned to or choose invisibility. To become visible thus means occupying a specific position that is enabled by this very visibility.

This specific type of recognition places Russian LBGT people in a subject position that serves the goal of affirming Swedish sexual exceptionalism. These modes of recognition in Swedish media and popular culture have resulted in a mode of recognition of Russian LGBT for the purpose of othering Russia, and of fixing geopolitical power relations between Russia and Sweden. So far, in chapter 1 I have argued that representations of Russian temporality, space, and emotion function to construct a hegemonic discourse of othering. In Chapter 2, I continued to explore the media material, focusing on the visual representations of Russian non-normative sexuality within daily newspapers and two video clips. I have suggested that they articulate normative expectations regarding the visibility of Russian LGBT people, a norm that while existing in the Swedish context, is lacking in Russia. Thus, the alleged backwardness of Russia is due to a lack of visibility and recognition of LGBT people by the state. The next chapter considers the forms of representations that may not be recognized as easily. It proceeds to further critique the visibility-recognition nexus by examining two projects that counter the model of recognition based on representations of visibility. Building on this chapter, I ask: what modes of recognition can the shifting regimes of visibility result in and what different images of Russia can such a recognition of non-normative sexuality produce?

CHAPTER 3

Embracing backwardness: Recognition in Swedish visual arts

Throughout the 2010s, Russian LGBT people found themselves excluded by the Russian state discourse and interpellated by the Western LGBT discourse. Detailing this, Neufeld (2018, 84) argues that while LGBT people have existed in Russia throughout history, a specific gay discourse that centers on gay civil rights, public visibility, and radical street protest was indeed *imported* to Russia. When operating within this discourse of LGBT and/as human rights, Russian LGBT activists and projects cannot escape comparisons to the West, which inevitably leads to a construction of the homophobic/homofriendly binary. Russian LGBT activists depend on their Western peers for economic and affective support; however, Western donors and activists rarely reflect on this hegemonic position. This, Neufeld suggests, results in perpetuating the perception of the Russian LGBT movement as backward. Using this idea of backwardness as a point of departure, I wonder how representing Russian LGBT people, some of whom may also be LGBT activists, can challenge the unquestioned (Western) presuppositions of LGBT progress and make use of these supposed failures and backwardness. Guided by this question, I continue to explore the representation of Russian non-normative sexuality in the Swedish context, turning my attention to two art projects that feature representations of a community of Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women.[63]

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[63] This is a formulation I borrow from Karlsson Rixon (2016, 20), who settles on the phrasing "'The living conditions of lesbians and bisexual women are specifically in focus [in *State of Mind*].' With this formulation, the intention is to stress that people appearing in the installation will address the subject, but do not necessarily represent such an identity." In the videos, several cis men, Russian LGBT activists, also appeared. When the project was to be exhibited in St. Petersburg, Karlsson Rixon explains, some *State of Mind* participants started to identify as straight instead of bisexual; others changed their names to be gender neutral or masculine. At the ime of the artists' research for the project, none of the people the artists interviewed addressed transgender issues or addressed themselves as identifying as trans. In *At the Time*, a less specific approach was taken, and "queer women" were added, Karlsson Rixon (2016, 81-82) explains, so as not to reveal individuals' identities and to underscore fluidity and an inclination to change. In this chapter, I use both "Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women" *and* LGBT, in order to remain consistent with the rest of the dissertation. This use, however, should not be read to suggest that these art projects reinforce LGBT as (political) identities that are mobilized in the media.

My analysis focuses on two photo and video projects: *State of Mind* and *At the Time of the Third Reading / Во время третьего чтения* (hereafter *At the Time). State of Mind* is a photo and video installation created by the Swedish artists Axel Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg, between 2006 and 2008. *At the Time* is a series of photographs made by Axel Karlsson Rixon. Both projects are outcomes of extensive fieldwork that Hallberg and Karlsson Rixon conducted in Russia.[64] The artworks cohere around representations of the community of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in St. Petersburg during the years 2006–2008 and 2013, respectively. *State of Mind* has been exhibited in the post-Soviet region, in public art institutions in St. Petersburg (2008, 2012), Kharkiv (2009), Kyiv (2009), and in an independent art space in Minsk (2010). Exhibitions also took place in Stockholm (2008, 2010), Gothenburg (2008, 2016), as well as in Salzburg and Berkeley (both 2011) (Karlsson Rixon 2016b, 21). Because the exhibitions in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia (2012) were funded by the Swedish Institute and supported in other ways by the Swedish Embassies in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, the artists felt they became "representatives of Sweden," part of Swedish foreign politics (Karlsson Rixon 2016, 137n28). *At the Time* has been exhibited four times in Sweden – in Stockholm (2014), Malmö (2015), and Gothenburg (2015, 2016) (Karlsson Rixon 2016b, 190–91). The circulation of *State of Mind* in institutional contexts and the additional availability of *At the Time* as a photobook make these two projects significant for the (re)negotiation of the image of Russia and Russian non-normative sexuality in Sweden. The material analyzed in this chapter consists of *State of Mind*'s photographs (11 photos) and videos (seven looped films ca. 35 min each) and the photographs comprising *At the Time of the Third Reading* photobook.

This chapter explores how Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women are visually represented beyond hegemonic textual and visual media and popular culture discourse, and what work these representations do in shaping, creating, and disrupting images of Russia in Sweden. Using feminist and queer theory, I argue that these representations offer alternative subject positions for Russian LGBT people and thus form another mode of recognition. Theoretically, my analysis is motivated by queer theory's critiques of the linear progression of history and the LGBT movement's investment in the future, more specifically, Elizabeth Freeman's call to turn our attention "backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to

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[64] The projects *State of Mind* and *At the Time of the Third Reading / Во время третьего чтения* are part of Karlsson Rixon's PhD dissertation in Photography at University of Gothenburg (Valand Academy), written in the tradition of artistic research.

forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal" (Freeman 2010, viii). I also heed Heather Love's (2009) call to pay attention to modes of queer existence beyond mainstream lesbian and gay culture. In doing this, I build on and extend my analysis in Chapter 2 that highlighted the demands of intelligibility (J. Butler 2009; 2004a) and the limitations imposed by the representational model of visibility (Edenborg 2017) to study how the art projects by Karlsson Rixon and Hallberg, represent Russian lesbian, bisexual and queer women in photographs and videos.

This chapter begins with a presentation of the artworks and the theoretical starting points that inform my approach to recognition. I then delve into the representations of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women by engaging with queer and feminist concepts of space and temporality, for which I account in the respective analytical sections, within these works. The concluding section draws together the analyses of representation with theoretical insights about recognition and suggests that the projects exemplify resistance to both Russian state violence and Sweden's mode of recognition of Russian LGBT people.

The artworks

State of Mind includes eleven photographs depicting smiling people, mostly women and some children. In the exhibitions, the portraits were made into quite large prints and exhibited in wooden frames (see Figure 7 on page 155).[65] Most pictures show two or three people in various city settings, most looking directly at the camera. In walking into the exhibition space, a wall of faces could be seen in the videos on the seven small monitors mounted on scaffolding pipes at different heights and depths inside the blue cube (Figure 8 on page 156).[66] In these videos, women are either sitting down or standing in city landscapes. Sometimes there is an empty street in the background, on other occasions there is a busy avenue, a residential house, or a small pond. At the bottom of each of the seven videos, small subtitles translate the Russian into English, at other times from English/Swedish to Russian.

State of Mind was donated to the permanent art collection at the Gothenburg Museum of Art in the fall of 2016. Getting acquainted with the photographs and the videos comprising the artwork was therefore quite different from what would have been seen in the exhibition space. Having agreed with

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[65] Photographs in *State of Mind*: 11 chromogenic color prints, wooden frames (birch), Plexi glass, some 131 x 106 x 5 cm and others 93.5 x 76 x 5 cm (Karlsson Rixon 2016, 188)

[66] Seven looped films ca. 35 min. each are shown. In total, 35 interviews with 38 people speaking Russian, English, Swedish with subtitles in English and Russian.

a collection registrar to visit in the spring of 2022, I waited for viewing permission from the artists. I then went to Gothenburg and, after signing an agreement that I would not use any recording devices at the time of viewing, sat through around five hours of moving picture footage on a laptop screen with a member of staff in the room. This meant that I saw all the videos in a sequence, instead of experiencing the simultaneity of the original exhibition. Doubtless, this impacted on how I perceived the body of work as a whole.

At the Time is both a photographic series and a book (Karlsson Rixon, 2016a), which includes 20 photographs and short texts by Russian activists and scholars, as well as an introduction by Jack Halberstam. In this chapter, I analyze the photos in *At the Time,* in its book form. *At the Time* captures the camping experience of queer women. In the photographs, tall tree trunks run from the top to the bottom of the page. Dogs, women, children, camping equipment, campfires, and smoke appear mostly hidden among and behind trees. The name of the series and the photobook refers to the moment in the Russian legislative process, when, before coming into law, a bill passes three readings in the parliament's lower chamber. The federal bill prohibiting minors from being informed about non-traditional sexual relationships, the so-called "gay propaganda" law, was approved by the lower chamber of the Russian parliament on June 11, 2013,[67] at the time when the women were camping.

In contrast to most of the images present in print media, which I analyzed in Chapter 2, these photographs and videos lack any sensationalism. In the videos and photographs comprising *State of Mind,* women are, on the face of it, simply talking to the camera in a city landscape. *At the Time* captures them on a forest camping trip, with many images showing more nature than people. Women are engaged in simple activities like setting up tents, sitting around, and tending to bonfires. Why might these images be important for the image of non-normative sexuality and Russia in Sweden? Before answering this question in my analysis, I briefly locate these art projects within broader visual regimes that feature Russian protest art, to provide useful points of comparison not only to Swedish media discourse but also to practices of Russian artists and their ways of engagement with ideas about sexuality.

Artworks within visual regimes of Russian protest art

Both projects' representations epitomize a shift compared to how sexuality has been deployed in representations of Russia in terms of gendered

[67] See the introductory chapter for more information about the law.

visibility and subject positions in my earlier chapters. This holds true even if one draws the comparison further to the context of Russian contemporary protest art. The work of artists and collectives such as the art-group *Voina, Pussy Riot,* and other figures of Moscow Actionism, such as Oleg Kulik, have become emblematic examples of contemporary political Russian art in Sweden and the West. An overview of Russian performance and art activism from the 2010s to 2023 (Osminkin 2023) reveals that the image of Russia created by these artists manifests masculine subjectivity and isolated heroic gestures, often violent and provocative, as a mode of speaking to (state) power. The work of Swedish queer artists, featuring Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, discussed in this chapter, thus represents a significant shift in terms of gender representations, subjects, and style of political art in Russia.[68] First, it departs from "a celebration of the phallus" (Borenstein 2020, 14) that constituted the main operating mode of Moscow Actionism[69] and a more general focus on the subversive masculinity of the post-Soviet avant-garde artists (Stodolsky 2011).[70] The

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[68] This is not to say that portrayals of lesbian, bisexual or queer women in photography analyzed in this chapter are unique. There exists a significant body of lesbian photography (Corinne 2000; Gabb 1999). It is rather portrayals of Russian women qua lesbians and queer, especially in a Swedish context, that I highlight as deserving attention.

[69] For the overwhelming male and violent representations featured in the actionist style e.g., Oleg Kulik, Pussy Riot, Pyotr Pavlensky, AES+F, Blue Noses etc., see the materials of Art Riot exhibition that featured the work of movement: https://www.artriot.art/page.html?id=62. Note that no one except Oleg Kulik ever performed or was exhibited in Sweden.

[70] An example of using subversive masculinity in an image that circulated internationally and seemed to make a commentary on the "homosexual issue" in Russia, The Blue Noses' artwork *An Epoch of Clemency - Kissing Policemen (Era Miloserdiya)* (2004, 75×100 cm print). I mention this artwork because of its similarities to images in *At the Time,* both in terms of theme and regarding the question of the image of Russia. The Blue Noses is a Russian artistic duo, consisting of two male artists, founded in 1999. The photograph in *An Epoch of Clemency* features two Russian police officers wearing uniforms kissing against a background of tall birch trees. The attempts to exhibit the image in Europe in 2007 attracted a lot of publicity in Russia and abroad. This testified to the symbolic charge the image possessed: two Russian policemen caressing each other in a typically "Russian" setting seemingly disrupts the official image of Russia as heterosexual. Despite the subversiveness of the artwork featuring two kissing policemen, it foregrounds specifically *male bodies* subverting the heterosexual script and the centrality of men, and their assumed heterosexuality. Even though the series expanded in 2005 to include five other prints, three featuring men – *Kissing Paratroopers*, *Kissing football players*, and *Kissing Middle Easterners* and two featuring women – *Kissing female railroad workers* and *Kissing ballerinas* the focus remained strongly on the transgressive (maybe even queer) potential of the male, rather than female, body. This becomes evident if one looks at other works by Siniye Nosy that play with phallic forms of symbolism and male nudity. See a catalog of their works https://www.artriot.art/artist.html?id=BlueNoses.

two projects also further disrupt the focus on gay men and gay male culture in contemporary Russian (LGBT) photography.[71]

As attention shifted from *Voina* to *Pussy Riot*, heroism and defiance remained the main methods for Russian protest art, as portrayed in Western discourse. It is only toward the late 2010s that the direct confrontation with the masculine spectacle of state power shifted toward more subtle forms of protest, grounded in and reflecting the material conditions of everyday life in Russia (Lucento 2017). These aesthetic strategies steeped in a feminist approach have become more widespread since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. They de-center the individuality of the male artist by privileging cooperation with the public (Osminkin 2023). Second, the artworks analyzed in this chapter give Russian LGBT people a space to be represented *as* LGBT people. This contrasts with other examples of Russian protest art that suggest a more general focus on body, vulnerability, and norm subversion, as seen in the post-Soviet protest art of the 1990s (2015, 27).

I have decided not to analyze the actions of *Voina*, *Pussy Riot,* or Moscow actionists, even though they have thematized gendered embodiment and sexuality. Their work neither has a direct connection to my interest in uses of non-normative sexuality nor based on my media search and conversations with artists and curators in the Swedish context, seems to have affected the Swedish context (in 1990–2019). Based on my search with the keyword "homosexual" is a video performance by the Russian art collective Chto Delat, entitled *Excluded. In a moment of danger* (2014) also came up. It is concerned with, in the words of journalists (e.g., Hammarström, 2015-11-19, *Aftonbladet*), a critique of the homophobic Russian state, though it does not explicitly feature any Russian LGBT people. This and other artworks by Russian artists remain outside the scope of this chapter, because they do not seem directly concerned with LGBT or queer and also because of their limited reach to the Swedish public, judging by the absence of media coverage, except for Kulik's *Dog House* (1996) and Chto Delat's *Excluded* (2014). Russian political actionist art has been the subject of some general as well as academic interest outside of Russia. However, scholarly analyses (Jonson 2015; Jonson and Erofeev 2017) with a recent notable exception (Baer and Fiks 2023), display a lack of interest in representations of non-normative sexuality and LGBT people in works by Russian contemporary artists and, similarly, in the role of gender and sexuality in contemporary political art in Russia. I con-

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[71] As exemplified by Seva Galkin's *Dream Boys*, Slava Mogutin's *Lost Boys*, and Yevgeniy Fiks' more diverse oeuvre.

tribute to these studies by focusing on representations of Russian gender and sexuality by Swedish artists.

Recognition

In this chapter, recognition serves as a central concept, guiding the exploration of counter-hegemonic articulations. It allows me to extend my interrogation of the ways Russia has been othered with respect to how Russian LGBT people have been constructed within the Swedish hegemonic discourse. My understanding of recognition is in line with Butler's approach, as outlined in the theory section. To recapitulate, Butler (2009) posits that recognition requires certain conditions of intelligibility, which consequently gives rise to the establishment of conditions of recognizability, ultimately leading to *recognition itself*:

> The "frames" that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (or that produce lives across a continuum of life) not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject. Subjects are constituted through norms which, in their reiteration, produce and shift the terms through which subjects are recognized. (J. Butler 2009, 3–4)

I focus on representations of Russian non-normative sexuality that challenge hegemonic discourse. I suggest that such representations have the potential to disrupt normative expectations and create new conditions of recognizability.

Russian LGBT lives have indeed been apprehended as precarious and in need of protection by the hegemonic discourse in Swedish media and popular culture. Yet my argument is that by placing Russian LGBT people in subject positions of the rights-holder and/or victim, as I have shown in Chapters 1 and 2, these discursive articulations offer a one-dimensional view of the place of LGBT people in the nation. They are either excluded, as is the case in the Russian context, or included, as is the case in the Swedish discourse. Drawing on Butler's discussion of recognition, rather than perceiving "Othering" as the binary opposite of "recognition," I propose that Othering and recognition should be regarded as differing in degree, not kind. In essence, "othering" can be understood as a form of recognition as well, located at the opposite pole of (legal) recognition that usually leads to the granting of rights to the LGBT subject in Western societies. This chapter explores those modes of recognition that are located between these two poles, where subjects are "less than intelligible" (J. Butler 2004b, 3).

The artists' use of a "non-provocative" (Karlsson Rixon 2016, 101), that is, an "aesthetically cautious" (104) approach to portray Russian LGBT people brings into focus what is at stake in my understanding of the modes of representation and recognition in the artworks. Elsewhere, the artists have said the photographs in *State of Mind* contribute to the exhibition appearing "'nice' on the surface" (*på ytan en 'snäll' utställning*) (Hallberg and Karlsson Rixon 2011). This should be seen in light of artists addressing critiques they have received regarding the ways the subjects appear in *State of Mind*:

> They thought that the people portrayed appeared too "normal" – they could pass as heterosexual and were not featured as sufficiently queer. How would anyone understand that these women (and one man) belonged to a queer community? (Karlsson Rixon 2016, 67)

This quote attests to how recognition is always already entwined with conditions of intelligibility. To be "queer" under those conditions means being intelligibly or visibly queer. To be "queer" equals not "being normal," that is, queer enough so as not to be able to pass as heterosexual. It presupposes an either/or division – one is either "normal" or "queer." The effects of this binary division can be further understood with the concept of recognition. Recognition, according to Butler, also places Russian LGBT people into a network of subject positions.

What does it mean that the subjects were portrayed "kindly"? *State of Mind* features 11 photographs of women in city surroundings. To focus on just three of such images (in the center of Figure 7 on p. 155): in these examples, couples of women are depicted. In two of the photographs, the couples are just standing together, while in the third, a couple is featured with a young boy. They are looking at the camera and appear quite friendly and non-sexual. None of the images contain anything that immediately would mark these women as part of the LGBT community, nor are there any visible signs of romantic affection. In the videos, some women are more clearly holding hands and standing closer in ways that romantic partners do. Yet others could indeed "pass as heterosexual," as a critic quoted above has noted. This, rather than a shortcoming within a Western model of LGBT visibility, should be seen as a central part of the ways these artworks reflect how Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women position themselves in space, and as such embrace ways of being (in)visible.

Representing queer space

How is space used in the photographic and video representations of the lesbian community and Russia? Research has shown how sexualities interact with space to produce ideas of queer space, a space that is beyond heteronormative ideals (Browne and Ferreira 2016; Brown 2007). Urbanity has been entangled with LGBT history, and the anonymity and independence of city life have been seen as liberating, with quite a prominent focus on male same-sex practices, such as cruising (Delany 2019). Still other research has suggested alternatives to queer space occupied primarily by gay men and territorially and commercially clustered in large metropolitan centers (Halberstam 2005; Gieseking 2020).

Parallels have been identified between the modes of Soviet-style dissidence and the sexual dissidence of Russian LGBT people (Moss 1995), both of which occupy a space of ambivalence concerning the public politics of the repressive (then Soviet and now) Russian state. Ethnographic research among Russian lesbians has proceeded along similar lines. Conducting research in the Russian capital and a smaller regional center – Moscow and Ulyanovsk respectively, Francesca Stella has explored how queer space is produced, arguing that Western LGBT literatures cannot directly be used to understand how lesbian-queer space is organized and claimed in Russia. Neither public visibility nor territorial concentration are a feature of the queer scene in Moscow; lesbian spaces are not immediately visible or recognizable (Stella 2013, 466–67). Thus, the publicized and visible initiatives, such as Pride Marches in Moscow in 2006, 2007, and 2012, did not lead to a rights-based LGBT mobilization in Russia and proved divisive among the local LGBT community and local civil society organizations, despite mustering international solidarity (2013, 475ff.). The ineffectiveness of these attempts to reconfigure queer space is proof of the limited utility of strategies rooted in visibility, recognition, and formal rights for respect, toward sexual diversity beyond Western contexts (2013, 479). Similarly, in Ulyanovsk, transient and precarious appropriations of urban space as queer reveal limited currency of the notion of visibility and openness. Queer-lesbian space in both Moscow and Ulyanovsk was produced not through visibility, but via delineations of an in-group that would meet regularly in public, communicate, and consume culture together. (Stella 2012, 1843). Likewise, arguing against "fixed, property-owned, neighborhood-based models of traditional LGBTQ space," Gieseking (2020, 941ff.) suggests emphasizing the attractiveness and meaning of queer places and spaces for lesbian and queer

women, as well as their temporary and passing character. My exploration of the modes of alternative recognition in this chapter draws on this research in queer and lesbian geographies in elucidating ways that queer spaces are carved out by (Russian) lesbians.

Unremarkable city and nature

The photos and videos in *State of Mind* feature lesbians in public and semi-public spaces – on the streets, rooftops, and embankments of St Petersburg. In *At the Time* women are photographed in the forest on a remote island in northwest Russia. The artworks show that LGBT people can exist not only in the private space of the home but also as visible subjects in public spaces. The works capture more complicated ways of existing in both the city and nature. I focus on several aspects of the representation of space in the photographs. I begin by analyzing the queer spatiality of city-life and nature, the unfamiliar and non-specific settings of the photographs, and then I will focus on how representations of spatiality matter for the recognition of Russian LGBT people and the image of Russia in the Swedish discourse.

Figure 7: *State of Mind in Talkin' Loud and Sayin' Something*, Gothenburg Museum of Art, Sweden 2008. Photo: A. Karlsson Rixon

Figure 8: *State of Mind,* Y–gallery of Contemporary Art, Minsk, Belarus, 2010. Photo: A. Karlsson Rixon

Figure 9: *At the Time of the Third Reading*/Во время третьего чтения #01, 2013. Photo: A. Karlsson Rixon

Figure 10: *At the Time of the Third Reading*/Во время третьего чтения #05, 2013. Photo: A. Karlsson Rixon

Figure 11: *At the Time of the Third Reading*/Во время третьего чтения #12, 2013. Photo: A. Karlsson Rixon

In *At the Time*, people are photographed in nature, more specifically in a forest,[72] as opposed to the city. Representations of nature matter for structuring both hegemonic national discourses and feminist/queer accounts of resistance. Some researchers have pointed out how hegemonic cultural constructions of "nature," and what is "natural," are mutually reinforcing social constructions of national gender and sexuality and have inquired into how these representations might be challenged (Erickson 2010; Gosine 2010). In the photographs in *At the Time* nature is a secondary concern. This is to be expected, given that the artists in the projects centered on developing friendships and close collaboration with Russian women, a point that comes through in the personal tone adopted in many (but not all) interviews in *State of Mind*, as well as in extending an invitation to be photographed for *At the Time*. Representations in *At the Time* echo scholarship that has paid attention to nonurban environments, showing that rural areas are also homes to LGBT people and queers and that moving to or being in the city is not necessary for a queer life (Halberstam 2005; Bell and Valentine 1995). Photographing lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in nature challenges the overwhelming sense of nature as straight and nationalist. LGBT subjects from Russia have rarely appeared photographed in nature, and this adds to queering images of Russian nature and, in turn, the Russian nation. These photos, however, attest to how nature can be important for queer organizing and community building. I interpret the artist's decision to focus on the sociality of nature as a way to privilege the queer community-building efforts that persist in the face of the hostile state, as the title of *At the Time* suggests.

What stands out in the photographs and videos is the unremarkable character of the photo settings. Both projects feature places that do not appear immediately recognizable to an outsider yet are meaningful for the participants of the project and are familiar to those who are part of the St. Petersburg lesbian/queer scene.[73] Rather than fixating on a specific place, the

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[72] On a more general level, the forest itself is a contradictory space filled with many cultural meanings (Griffin 2011). My goal here is not to queer the forest or demonstrate its beyond-human characteristics. The forest in the photographs does not appear particularly mystical. The photos are taken in regular light and appear unedited. I thus choose to adhere to the non-magical understandings of the forests, inquiring more how the forest is a place as a refuge for LGBT people compared to the city.

[73] As Karlsson Rixon writes (2016, 105), "The sites were most often picked by the people portrayed, as we [the artists] asked them to choose a place that they felt represented the city, a place they had a special relationship to." One example is a secret escape pathway, visible in one of the photographs, and commonly used for escaping the police by queer and political dissidents. This exact passageway was recognized by a visitor of the exhibition in Minsk, who used to frequent St. Petersburg (2016, 107). Because I have no experience of lesbian circles in St. Petersburg, I did not personally recognize any specific places in these photos.

images in both projects reflect the reality of queer geographies in Russia with their lack of permanence and specific territorial localization (Stella 2012; 2013). In *State of Mind*, the participants are filmed and photographed in various places in the city: in *a* park, near *an* apartment building, etc. and in nature – in *a* pine (as opposed to a birch, stereotypically used to represent Russia) forest, which cannot easily be marked as "Russian."

This choice of location also challenges the image of Russia. Thus, instead of images of "Russia" that might appear on a postcard, such as the Church of the Savior on Blood and Palace Square in St. Petersburg or the Red Square and St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, recognizable by the foreign outsider, but less meaningful for the insider, artists chose places of some significance for the local LGBT community. These places, transient and not obvious to outsiders, would become queer only to the in-circle. While the idea of visible and proud activism involves asserting one's presence in public spaces, arguably the 2006 Pride Parade in Moscow has received significant backlash precisely because Pride participants laid claim to historical monuments and central streets, paramount to the formation of the national myth and imagery.[74] As Sarajeva (2011) notes in her study of lesbian culture in Russia during the 2000s, the highly politicized claims of Moscow Pride made the event very controversial and alienated possible participants. On the contrary, the apolitical subversion and queering of public space during the "Love Parade" staged by a local gay club as part of the St. Petersburg City Day celebration went more or less unnoticed by the press and state despite attracting a considerable crowd of spectators and supporters (Sarajeva 2011, 192).

The spaces of the city and forest in the artworks appear non-specific to Russia and thus help to displace Russia as the prime exemplar of homophobic attitudes on the margins of "Europe." Tall trees, growing densely in the photos of *At the Time*, hint to the viewer that this could be happening in any place in the global North. The ordinariness and generic character of the settings also shift focus from St. Petersburg and its surroundings, where the photos and videos were taken, to suggest that queer existence is possible in other places in Russia, where LGBT people might organize and socialize. The resources of LGBT people and organizations outside of big cities are often limited (Lukinmaa 2022) and the art projects highlight how one may survive as an LGBT person outside urban centers. Since the Russian queer experience

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[74] Hadley Zaun Renkin (2009) has made a similar point about LGBT organizing and the choice of spaces in regard to prides in Budapest, Hungary.

is hardly encompassed by city life, the projects may help us think what socialization among LGBT people, ordinary and unremarkable, might look like elsewhere in Russia.[75]

Further, the choice of "unfamiliar" places in these art projects allows us to break with the tradition of representation that has denied coevalness (Fabian [1983] 2002) to Russia, conceived as Other. Denial of coevalness, by the Western spectator, constructs the Other as existing in some other time. This is done by using the metaphor of time as distance (2002, 28). When the same "postcard" images are used to represent Russia, this suggests that Russia is stuck in the past and never changes. Feminist geographer Doreen Massey's (2005) understanding of space counters the fixed role of hegemonic narratives of spaces. Massey (2005, 9) argues that space should be viewed as the product of interrelations; it is constituted through interactions at various levels. Space makes possible the existence of a multiplicity that is always under construction (9). I use Massey's conceptualization of space to offer alternative ways of imagining space and to go beyond the hegemonic understandings of spaces and places, pointing to the possibility of alternative geographical imaginations that would foreground people and their experiences constituting those spaces. Building on Fabian, who suggests that "relations between the West and its Other […] were conceived not only as difference, but as distance in space *and* Time" (Fabian 1983, 147; emphasis in the original, quoted in Massey 2005, 69), Massey provides a useful vantage point on representations of Self and Other. While representing the Self follows the logic of conceptualizing time as a dimension of change and dynamism, and immobile, inert, pre-given space, the logic of representing the Other usually freezes both time and space. A way of representing the Other via space that deviates from the familiar "freezing in time" changes how difference is represented. The inclusion of a variety of unremarkable spaces in representing Russia, such as street views, parks, and a forest, helps destabilize the fixed representations of Russia to outsiders.

Space as social relations

Represented in *State of Mind* and *At the Time* are not only physical places and spaces but also *the relations* that individuals in the photos have to those spaces and to each other. Paying attention to spatiality, the outcome of

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[75] For an example of how Russian experience can be conceptualized in terms of the country's center-periphery relations, see the geographer Natalia Zubarevich's (2013) concept of *Four Russias*, comprising post-industrial cities; (de)industrialized cities; rural and semi-urban villages and towns; the less developed ethnic republics.

intersecting social relations, can further contribute to rethinking and queering the space. Massey argues:

> 'Recognising spatiality' involves (could involve) recognising coevalness, the existence of trajectories which have at least some degree of autonomy from each other (which are not simply alignable into one linear story). (Massey 2005, 71)

Illuminating the nature of spaces and places as constructed and relational, emerging from interactions of subjects, changes how these spaces and places are perceived. I understand spatiality both as relations engendered between the participants of the art projects and when it comes to interpretations of these representations and their role in constructing images of Russia in a Swedish context.

The choice of unremarkable places discussed above allows the community to take shape in places that are, symbolically, on the margins of the nation and the state, avoiding a direct confrontation with the latter. Crucially for the images of Russia in Sweden, it challenges the representations of Russia that rely on portrayals of LGBT activists putting themselves in harm's way and breaks with articulations that accord LGBT people the position of a victim vis-à-vis "the cold monster" of the Russian state with its authoritarian grip on civil society (Filimonov and Carpentier 2023). Given the context in which these projects took place, of state attacks on the LGBT freedoms in Russia, it is also possible to suggest that in the pictures and videos that are part of *State of Mind* and *At the Time,* state power is not thematized explicitly but hidden just beneath the unremarkable, seemingly harmless surfaces of the spaces occupied by Russian women.

Helpful in clarifying participants' use of space, represented in these artworks, is the concept of simultaneously being both inside and outside (*vnenakhodimost),* developed by an anthropologist of the late Soviet period Alexei Yurchak (2006). Yurchak borrows from Bakhtinian literary theory, focusing on the spaces between practices of subjection and resistance by and against Soviet power. In explaining that Bakhtin highlights a *relationship* between inside and outside, Yurchak formulates the concept *vnenakhodimost* not simply as exterior to the state. Highlighting the space of being *both* inside *and* outside helps Yurchak highlight how some Soviet citizens constantly lived in spatially and temporally distant worlds, which was manifested by the explosion of interest in the 1960s in various cultural and intellectual pursuits based on the experience of a faraway "elsewhere" (160). This meant that

citizens could reproduce the hegemonic discourse publicly but subverted it by imbuing it with new meanings, which led to the downfall of the Soviet Union.[76] The subjects of Karlsson Rixon and Hallberg's photos also exist in the space of *vnenakhodimost*, in/exteriority. It is in this space that forms of sociality, which might be political, emerge outside the state's control. With this idea I do not imply a lack of agency, rather I suggest it highlights the space, even freedom, that Russian women may acquire vis-à-vis the state.[77] The Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in these photographs, then, are not simply and dichotomously either "inside" or "outside" of a state that pursues homophobic policies and that constructs a notion of citizenship along homophobic and heteronormative lines. Instead, these women occupy the space of *vnenakhodimost,* being simultaneously inside and outside the (homophobic) Russian society.

Despite such adversity, these women manage to carve out a space for themselves, building networks that are alternative to, but never completely outside, the state. In both *State of Mind* where they are filmed occupying public spaces in the city center and in *At the Time,* where women are depicted in a common camp environment enjoying each other's company. While a sense of "sociality" is what is thematized in all the photographs and videos, rather than political action with visible connections to either LGBT or the nation, references to the state are not entirely absent from the artworks. In *State of Mind,* the participants repeatedly reflect on politics, mostly choosing to avoid interaction with the state regarding their sexuality. One image in *At the Time* (#01) suggests that state and nation are inescapable, even if there is no explicit reference to them in the art projects as a whole. The photograph depicts a canopy tent decorated with two rainbow flags, the Russian flag, the Soviet flag, and two prints of the clenched raised fist combined with a Venus symbol attached to a tree. Nobody stands in the photo, and it is unclear if this is a deliberate artistic choice. The fact that no people are photographed is perhaps because being (depicted) close to the rainbow flag in an image for public consumption would put an individual at risk, given the sanctions of the "gay propaganda" law. Another photo (#05) of a tent being pitched shows, on the contrary, a group of women standing inside and outside together.

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[76] Yurchak shows that the authoritative discourse became hollowed out precisely because Soviet subjects *both* reproduced authoritative discourse *and* created new meanings within Soviet reality by imbuing it with new meanings.

[77] The term bears parallels to the queer and cultural studies theory of disidentification (Muñoz 1999). While Muñoz is focusing on "working on and against" dominant cultural norms in order to create alternative modes of being and belonging, Yurchak's term, originally elaborated in an analysis of late Soviet counter-publics, emphasizes these processes in relation to the state.

Some are next to their smaller tents, placed around the canopy, which will be used as a common space – perhaps as a kitchen – while clothes are hung out to dry on a clothesline stretching between trees. Others are more directly involved in pitching the tent. One woman is stretching up her arms to secure the metal structure above, and in the center of the photo, the camera focuses on another woman stretching her arms up, being held by the waist to gain additional height. At the time of the third reading (of the "gay propaganda" law), as the title of the project reminds us, the women are not in the city protesting the new law being passed but are engaged in other activities that acquire importance precisely in relation to what they are *not*.

The photographs attest that a queer community is emerging via interpersonal interactions. *State of Mind* and *At the Time* depict instances of sociality within temporary and transient queer spaces. Sociality can be connected to the pleasure of togetherness, friendships, and romantic relationships. Especially in the post-Soviet and Russian cultural context, this pleasure has a particular history. Yurchak (2006) uses the Russian word *obshcheniye* that, although similar to the notion of sociality, also has a connotation of proximity and togetherness. Owing to the absence of viable public alternatives in the Soviet Union and a particular cultural understanding of friendship, these hangouts provided a space for "an intense and intimate commonality [...] both an exchange of ideas and information as well as a space of affect and togetherness" (148). This togetherness created a circle of people labeled with an informal word *svoi*, meaning "one's own," "the in-group":

> For many people, belonging to a tight milieu of *svoi*, which involved constant *obshcheniye*, was more meaningful and valuable than other forms of interactions, sociality, goals, and achievements, including a professional career (149).

Drawing on Pilkington's (1996; 2002) understanding of *tusovka*, which was used in her studies of Russian urban teen subculture, Francesca Stella suggests that the Russian LGBT community and queer spaces can be best understood through this notion, because it blurs the rigid boundaries between space and social relations. The informal network of friends that crystalizes as a result of hangouts, *tusovka,* fulfills the function of socialization for loose networks of people (cf. Halberstam 2005). Usefully, it denotes both a gathering place as well as a group of people linked by common interests and bonds of friendship and solidarity who habitually meet at a certain place

(Stella 2015, 114).[78] Drawing out the meaning of *tusvovka* or *svoi* in societies with a limited public sphere can, with the help of Yurchak's analysis, explain the fact that, rather than simply portraying individual women, the images focus on the forms of community these women have built and to which the artists had access.[79] By appearing on individual monitors together at disparate times (exhibition form), the women, in *State of Mind* are portrayed in similar outside settings. This reinforces the queering of space achieved by constant presence in that space. Such representation also broadens the scope of what is shown in the pictures, from single LGBT individuals to the portrayal of a community. Even while watching the footage of *State of Mind* on a single screen in its archived form, I got the impression that all these women (and several cis men and activists who also participated in the video interviews) indeed belong to a single community; they shared the same space, expressed similar thoughts, hopes, and concerns.

In *At the Time*, women are shown spending time together both as groups and as couples. Although photographed from some distance, in order to make identification of single faces difficult, the viewer can still see the closeness of the women's bodies. Whereas photos and videos in *State of Mind* feature few displays of romantic affection, it is more fully present in *At the Time*. One particular photo (#12) reveals that the camp provided not only opportunities for group socialization but also time for romantic connection. It focuses on a large green tent and trees, with a couple of women in sports clothes appearing small in comparison to the tent and the bush in the foreground. One of these women is sitting in a foldable chair and the other in her lap, their heads leaning against each other and the arms of one woman wrapped around the lower body of the other. The glowing embers from a bonfire add to the melancholic atmosphere of the photograph. The small size

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[78] Since late the 2010s, the word acquired a more negative exclusionary and self-important connotation, namely "the scene," "the cultural elite," as in "the Moscow liberal *tusovka*." Here I am using it in a neutral way to approach the Russian "LGBT community" as a loose network of people and the spaces they occupy.

[79] Karlsson Rixon (2016, 94-95) uses the term *svoi* to acknowledge that being understood as part of the in-group allowed the artists to access women's personal stories, and this influenced which video and photo portraits the artists could take. The artists also reflect on how this subject position was enabled by their self-presentation as queer, white, women, from Sweden. The last aspect could especially be leveraged to glean more information and perhaps confirmed, on the one hand, the status of Russian queer women as "worthy of interest," and, on the other, the status of artists, coming from a Sweden, as "foreign anthropologists." Further, due to the affordances and dilemmas of receiving Swedish funding, the artists' self-perception of being included in Swedish foreign politics (Karlsson Rixon 2016, 137n28) and the privileges of being "an outsider" are explicitly reflected on by the artists (Hallberg and Karlsson Rixon 2011).

of the two women relative to the dimensions of the photograph suggests that these moments of affection may be small and fleeting in relation to the other more prosaic activities of the camp, such as making fires, and setting tents, hanging clothes, which are the subject of most of the photos in *At the Time.*

With the help of Massey's understanding of space and spatiality and Yurchak's concept of *vnenakhodimost,* I have illuminated how these images represent a shift from stereotypic depictions of Russia. Instead of focusing on what immediately can be seen as Russia, the project sustains a focus on the local place – St. Petersburg and its vicinity – and the spatiality that emerges between women as a strategy that in my interpretation allows to break with images of Russia as a homophobic place. A focus in these artworks has been on spaces that afford the production of community. The images in the two projects are markedly different from the portrayals of symbolic claims to the space of the nation as well as direct confrontations with the state, i.e., images that privilege a spatiality of violence or forms of homophobic exclusion, as analyzed in Chapter 2. The subjects presented in the photographs are "in Russia", and yet what "being queer in Russia" might mean is established in an immanent way, within those photos, rather than conforming to earlier stereotypical conceptions that would arise from a fixed idea of Russia as a space. These alternative representations of space, in turn, challenge the progressivist narrative of Western Europe in relation to LGBT rights, highlighting the ways different ideas of being queer may coexist

Representations between present and future

This section untangles temporalities that are represented in the art projects. Both projects are located at critical junctures in relation to the future of Russian LGBT. Work on *State of Mind* took place between 2006 and 2008, at a time when Pride Parades were taking place in Moscow and became politicized. *At the Time* began five years after finishing *State of Mind,* and observes the developments in Russian politics from the relative lack of any centralized state approach to non-normative sexuality in 2006, to a centralization of state homophobia around 2012–2013 (Buyantueva 2018; Wilkinson 2014). Even though the visual representations in both projects highlight the political significance of the present, the future prospects of Russian LGBT people are also thematized in both works.

The queer and precarious "now"

While the title *State of Mind* captures how the artworks seek to communicate what is on the participants' minds, as we hear them speak about their lives, *At the Time* directly refers to what is happening elsewhere, in the Russian parliament's lower chamber, the Duma, On the level of the works themselves, the subjects portrayed are placed within, what at the time of making the art was, the present moment. The specific contexts, in which both works were created, reveal the future as uncertain. It is precisely for this reason that representations of the "now" matter. This is in line with Jack Halberstam's (2005, 2) understanding of queer temporality:

> The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers over like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands.

Writing in the aftermath of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the US, Halberstam suggests that the idea of an uncertain future places a sense of urgency on how best to exist in the current moment. This idea challenges the traditional heterosexual narrative, which often relies on expectations of a predetermined future, such as marriage and reproduction (5).

The focus on the "now" in the photo projects reveals a queerness unfolding in the present. The specific present in *State of Mind* is captured by way of the local lesbian community in St. Petersburg and can be placed in relation to the pride events in Moscow, which occurred around the time when work on the project began, and to the "Love Parade" organized by a St. Petersburg gay club. Similarly, by focusing on the here and now of a camping trip to nature, *At the Time* displaces an otherwise possible focus on the city where, as the photographs are being taken, the "gay propaganda" law is being discussed. The women in the photographs appear unconcerned with the ongoing legislative process. While the legislative process unfolds in the city, the subjects in the photos are immersed in a different temporal and spatial reality. This juxtaposition underscores the tension between the immediate experiences of the individuals depicted and the larger social and political context of Russia in which they exist.

The interviews in *State of Mind*, filmed in 2006–2008, contain narrations of everyday life within the lesbian community in St. Petersburg, and photos in both projects visually capture, an existing dynamic queer present, how the lesbian scene looked in St. Petersburg and how the participants navigated their lives. The videos and photos capture a moment before the discourse of

(Western) LGBT activism achieved hegemonic status in Russia. Visibility, public activism, and recognition remain contested terms. The videos thus demonstrate the existence of possibilities beyond these terms and reflect the complex lived realities of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. Among the people who were interviewed in the videos are several musicians, writers, activists, as well as lawyers, who mention their work as connected to lesbian and more generally LGBT issues.

Ambivalent futures

The focus on the now, which I have analyzed, in both projects appears juxtaposed to an uncertain future, on which several participants reflect in the videos of *State of Mind* and which can be prompted by the title of *At the Time of the Third Reading*: what happens after this "third reading"? The images themselves reveal nothing about this question.

Yet the text in the photo book describes that the pictures were taken at a camp for lesbian women, which faces an uncertain future, because the current organizer is due to retire from activism after having organized the camp for more than 10 years. When the artist Karlsson Rixon asks Elena Botsman,[80] the organizer of the camp, about the future of LGBT in Russia in an interview, Botsman says "I don't believe our lives will be any better" (Karlsson Rixon 2016a, 75). The organizer is both hopeful about finding new ways to keep the camp in some less public form, since under the new law, such camps are especially vulnerable because of the presence of children. She also regrets that Karlsson Rixon did not come some years earlier, when the participants were not constrained by the law and did not face an uncertain future (75).

For *State of Mind*, Karlsson Rixon and Hallberg came up with questions that were translated into Russian by volunteers, in order to ask participants while they were filmed. One question asked "about future visions, what they imagined queer living would be like in St. Petersburg in five years" (Karlsson Rixon 2016, 139, n35). Represented in the video work, the query disrupts the representation that LGBT people in Russia have no future, which otherwise saturates the hegemonic othering media portrayals of LGBT in Russia. In five hours of footage, the women speak of future possibilities, instead of excluding themselves from it.

Often the women speculate briefly on what the future might look like. Watching this footage in 2022, more than fifteen years after the videos were

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[80] See also Sarajeva's (2011) thesis about Elena Botsman's role in Russian lesbian organizing.

filmed, very few things sound surprising. The attitude is mostly ambivalent, oscillating between the belief that nothing will change "in five, ten, fifteen years,"[81] which is held by most people. Some are cautiously optimistic: "time will tell," "we'll wait and see." In the meantime, they appear to lament the lack of LGBT organizing in Russia. However, despite this uncertainty, they aim to "live, work, love" and "enjoy their lives." A few participants say that positive change is underway. Neither the optimistic nor pessimistic predictions were followed by explanations. Significantly, as tentative as these thoughts about the future appear to be in the videos, they act as counterweights to those prevailing articulations, found for example in media representations, that speak of Russian LGBT people as having no future (see Chapter 1).

Queer(ing) recognition

The artworks offer an array of subject positions for Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women to occupy: city dwellers, campers, friends, and lovers. They both reveal and enable their participation in the LGBT tusovka, beyond the subject positions of oppressed LGBT in confrontation with the Russian state apparatus and emigrating LGBT fleeing persecution and claiming their rights. These artworks serve as a documentation of the fact that an alternative queer scene did exist at those points in time when the artists' cameras took photos and videos, especially in *State of Mind* depicting times when Western modes of LGBT activism had not gained hegemony. Capturing fleeting moments of everyday life of Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women become in these artworks a practice of *queer recognition*.

Picking up Johannes Fabian's invitation to think what differentiates a "denial of coevalness," as a condition of domination, and a "refusal of coevalness," as an act of liberation, postcolonial and queer researcher Rahul Rao (2020, 2) asks under what conditions one might be transformed into the other. In attempting to answer the question of how denial of coevalness, by Western observers to Russian LGBT, can be transmuted into a refusal, I draw on Heather Love's (2009) concept of *feeling backward* to argue that the role of positive feelings in their complicity with the geographical and emotional project of Sweden's sexual exceptionalism needs to be recast.

The idea of feeling backward operates at the intersection of emotion and temporality. Love suggests untangling the temporal-emotional nexus that underlies contemporary (Western) LGBT activism, where ideas of temporal

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[81] The quotes used in this section are from notes I took when watching the footage of *State of Mind* in the museum archive.

progression are linked to "good feelings," such as pride and love. Love focuses on the political potential of being oriented toward the past, refusing, as it were, to accede to notions of pride and happiness. This is an argument against models of progress and "compulsory queer happiness" (Love 2007) that also resonates with the critique of Swedish exceptionalism's progressive temporality, discussed in Chapter 1. The solution to this view of LGBT history and pride is the idea of "feeling backward." Love defines *feeling backward* as a "tradition of queer experience and representation" that constitutes "an account of the corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia" (4). Love focuses on feelings such as

> nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, ressentiment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness [because such] feelings are tied to the experience of social exclusion and the historical 'impossibility' of same-sex desire. (4)

To navigate this contradictory experience of "looking forward" while "feeling backward," Love advocates exploring feelings of backwardness in LGBT history, without simply overlooking "the difficulties of the queer past" (32).

Parallels emerge between Love's concept of backwardness, taking shapes of various emotions and the feelings that are entwined with representations of space and temporality in *State of Mind* and *At the Time*. Lesbians are represented not as brave activists confronting the Russian state, but in the space of in/exteriority, at best ambivalent to such engagements. When they fail to participate in Pride parade events, their reluctance from public politics is a queer one (Halberstam 2011), disrupting the idea that Pride Parade is the exemplary site where one's non-normative sexuality should be lived out. In *At the Time*, these women, in an escapist gesture, leave the city altogether and instead spend time together as friends and lovers. In relation to time, the interviews reveal no sympathy for reassuring narratives that things always "gets better," with many women unsure what kind of future awaits. Being in the now, simultaneously precarious *and* claiming space and time for themselves, is for these women the only solution. These "backward" feelings of ambivalence, withdrawal, heedfulness, appear, as Love suggests, on the face of it useless when compared to Swedish emotions of love, togetherness, and pride, encapsulated in progress narratives of Swedish LGBT rights and the success of the LGBT movement as well as its openness and orientation toward the future. In contrast, the projects analyzed in this chapter stay with the uncomfortable emotions. In doing this, they also recognize the other,

banal and sideways ways of being queer. Together, these modes of seeing disrupt the linear progress narrative of the LGBT movement. The projects analyzed here force us to linger with alternative ways of organizing, questioning the meaning of "backwardness" as a negative label. By locating the representations in the space in-between the Western ideas of pride and the idea of Russian homophobia, I have sought to explore what these artistic representations can do to disrupt binary images of Russia and Sweden.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored alternatives to *recognition* seen in Swedish hegemonic visual discourse that focuses on Russian LGBT people as victims of Russian homophobic oppression. Drawing on queer theory, I have sought to demonstrate that the artworks analyzed here offer a mode of *queer recognition* embracing the backward emotions and sideways spatiality of Russian LGBT people and activists. Rather than conceptualizing this backwardness and absence of public visibility as a need to catch up with the West, queer recognition reflects the Russian LGBT peoples' desire *not* to be recognized as LGBT or queer within the Russian context. Contrary to modes of recognition in the media, where bodies mark themselves in opposition to the Russian state by attempting to be visible and intelligible as LGBT bodies, the visual arts projects place women in spatiotemporal arrangements that *queer* the ideas of intelligibility and recognition. This mode of *queer recognition* invites a rethinking of the western-centric norms of LGBT subjectivity, bound up with the notion of visibility and rights, which are secured through political and legal instruments, and which further are bolstered through transnationally reaching activism and funding.

The art projects by Karlsson Rixon and Hallberg move away from representing gay men in the positions marked as victims or in direct confrontation with the state as shorthand for representations of Russian LGBT people in Swedish discourse. In doing so, they also depart from a one-dimensional and androcentric focus by focusing on women and their life conditions. In the photos and videos, lesbians claim both urban and non-urban spaces and inhabit multiple temporalities. Thus, the choice of photographing Russian queer women in their everyday contexts and community constitutes an intervention in the process of creating images of non-normative sexuality in Russia. It challenges two visual discursive traditions: the dominant modes of Russian protest art and representations of Russian LGBT communities in the Swedish context. By occupying semi-public spaces, lesbians in these photos

assert presence without claiming visibility. Lesbians' everyday lives and inner worlds thus come to the fore, constituting a part of the Russian LGBT community that embraces its own backward and sideways ways of existence.

These projects function as interventions in the Swedish hegemonic, media and cultural, visual discourse as a response to the few images of Russian LGBT people in Swedish media. The artworks open up to contest the polarization of sexual politics. Disturbing visual discourse that assigns hypervisibility to certain bodies and methods of LGBT politics (seen in Chapters 1 and 2) and invisibility to others, explored in this chapter, the artworks emphasize the complexity of Russian LGBT experiences and avoid reducing them to simple narratives of oppression. This means that the LGBT community could be represented as positioned in the space of in/exteriority in relation to the Russian state but never fully excluded from it. A queer analysis of the kind I have suggested throughout this chapter has embraced the plural in-between positions of Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women's *in/exteriority*.

CHAPTER 4

Russia, sexuality, and gender at a Stockholm club event

It is October 2019, a month after I moved to Stockholm and started my position as a PhD candidate at Södertörn University. A friend, a Russian speaker I met in Stockholm the month before, tells me about a Halloween party and sends a link to a Facebook page. From the header of the page, Ivan the Terrible stares sternly from a well-recognized painting by the Russian artist Viktor Vasnetsov. The words BABA BOMBA DISKOTEKA X HALLOWEEN are written over the image in a yellow Sans Serif font resembling Soviet constructivist posters. Reading this invitation to a Halloween celebration with an array of music from Ukraine, the Soviet Union, Tatarstan, 90's Russia, and genres as diverse as chart hits, ballads, and hardbass, I am immediately hooked. My friend and I agree, jokingly, that it would be great to follow one of the costume suggestions, which seem to encompass all things terrible about Russia, inspired by culture, literature, politics, and history:

> Princess Anastasia, *Novichok*, Ivan the Terrible, The Bronze Horseman, Gogol's Nose, The Queen of Spades, Tsarevich Dmitri, The Communist Ghost, The Russian Bear, Baba Yaga, KGB, *krokodil* or just a regular Russian visa application! (Original in Swedish)

Acknowledging that the list of suggestions reeks of Russian mystique as a tongue-in-cheek joke, yet unrealistic to fulfill, we still decide to go, marking ourselves as "Interested" along with about 1200 other Facebook users. This event, I would learn later, would be its penultimate iteration. The Covid-19 pandemic would soon begin, then followed by the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The club would not continue. But up until 2019 there was a series of club evenings organized by people who called themselves *Baba Bomba Diskoteka* (henceforth *Baba Bomba*). After participating in the club once in 2019, and collecting media material throughout 2020, I contacted the organizers in early 2022 to ask whether they would agree to be interviewed. The realization that these cultural events, albeit niche compared to the media discourse discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, contributed

to shaping the image of Russia and Russian non-normative sexuality in Sweden, did not come to me immediately. Yet after analyzing the media material as well as examples of popular culture and art projects while contact with people outside of one's home was discouraged, I realized that an exploration of *Baba Bomba* could enrich the dissertation by suggesting ways to engage with the image of Russia and Russian non-normative sexuality in Sweden not found in my other material.

Baba Bomba was a series of club events held from January 2017 to the end of 2019 by a group of friends in Stockholm. At the time, these people were in their early to late thirties and had lived in Sweden for around ten years or more. Some grew up in Sweden with no family connections to Russia or the CEE region at all, but simply have an interest in the culture and politics of the region and undertook trips there. Others were born or grew up in Sweden in Swedish-Russian families, and one other person moved to Sweden in their mid-twenties.[82] Approximately fifteen club events were held in a bar/club in central Stockholm, near Hornstull, and other established venues in Stockholm upon invitation. These provided a space for Russian speakers to socialize and meet each other, as well as Swedes, on the dancefloor. Visiting in 2019, I remarked on the informal and non-commercial atmosphere of the events, the presence of a drag queen and several same-sex couples dancing together. The organizers did not charge entrance fees and tried to engage the visitors in conversation and dance. I interviewed three of the five members in October and November 2022, when doing more substantial ethnographic fieldwork at the site of the event was not possible, because events had not been held for almost 3 years. My analysis is based on one interview with Dasha conducted in Russian and a group interview with Misha and Sofia conducted in English. Gleb and Anna, two other members of the collective, were not interviewed but are mentioned in both interviews I conducted.[83] The interviews are complemented by the visual and textual material, promotion pages on Facebook (15 web pages) and the event's Instagram account (47 posts).

In this chapter, I analyze how images of Russia are constructed and circulated at these club events, paying specific attention to how non-normative

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[82] I have chosen not to associate specific age with names to make individual participants harder to identify. Further, because my interaction with *Baba Bomba* was limited to my one-time visit before the study began and the two interviews, the presentation of the analysis in this chapter differs from traditions of ethnographic writing (Kwame Harrison 2018).

[83] The names of the participants interviewed were changed to pseudonyms, which they themselves chose, while the names of the other two participants referred to in the interviews were were chosen by me.

sexuality and gender expression co-construct these images. Because these nights were not a singular occurrence but instead a series of events, I argue that the club events are a fruitful site for my analysis. Using the notion of hybridity, to which I return after presenting the club in more detail, I pay attention to how it is constructed, practiced, and navigated. Queer theory in this chapter informs my analysis to highlight the role of sexuality and gender in the construction of the nation during the events, which, as I will analyze below, were not explicitly conceived as such by the organizers who drew on articulations that presented the party as both open and welcoming.

By focusing on a Russian-speaking cultural event outside Russia, I extend the work done on Russian LGBT communities that exist across the world. Scholars have foregrounded analyses of how sexually non-normative Russian-speaking migrants negotiate their Russianness and non-normative sexuality in diaspora in countries with large numbers of Russian-speaking residents, such as Israel (Kuntsman 2003; 2009), Germany (Mole 2018), and the United States (Fisher 2003; Novitskaya 2021b). As Alexandra Novitskaya (2021a) argues, Russian-speaking LGBT diasporas in the West find themselves negotiating post-Soviet gender, sexual, and ethnic identities in their respective local contexts. Richard Mole, in his study of a queer Russian diaspora in Berlin, shows that heterosexual diaspora communities often promote a very traditional understanding of shared identity, norms, and values, especially regarding gender and sexuality (Mole 2021, 70), perceived "unwelcoming and unappealing" by Russian speakers (75). The desire to maintain a sense of national identity led the Russian LGBT diaspora in Berlin to create its own spaces, such as *Quarteera*, which provided support to the Russian-speaking queer community and solidarity with other queers in the post-Soviet space. Russian queer diaspora in the US, Novitskaya (2021b) shows, on the contrary, labored to engage with the larger heterosexual Russian diaspora and participate in political activism. Building on this earlier research that focused on migration and negotiation of belonging, I explore how club events in Stockholm, as an instance of a Russian (queer) diasporic space, position themselves in Sweden.

"A home party, but on a bigger scale": Locating the club in a Stockholm landscape

Baba Bomba grew out of home parties where one of the event collective members used to play music to entertain guests. Responding to my question about how it all started, Misha and Dasha gave the following response:

> MISHA: I had an intention to transform the understanding or the perception of Russian culture in Swedish society […] I was missing a place, a club in Stockholm where I could feel myself more relaxed and more.... I wouldn't say included, but more like I would feel myself in a bar in Saint Petersburg […] [a place] that would be more relaxed and less pretentious than [typical] Swedish places. I used to say there's clubs in Sweden and there's bars in Sweden – there's no in-between – [where you] can somehow transition from bar to the dance floor.
>
> DASHA: we [the five organizers] all had a feeling that there are not enough spaces, well, except for our house parties, where you can hear the kind of music that interests us. […] We made the Swedish public discover a lot of music, which is not known here at all.

By music "that interests us" Dasha means a body of tunes that originate outside of Sweden – its definition and delineation is itself a contested discursive practice that relies on drawing and crossing several boundaries, as this chapter will show. Both Misha and Dasha articulate two reasons for why they started the party: first a need for a space to hang out and socialize and second a desire to change the image of Russia in Sweden.[84] In the interviews, *Baba Bomba* events are referred to as *non-professional*, highlighting the style and the absence of technical mastery among DJs. However, this characteristic could be perceived as an advantage in comparison to other venues:

> DASHA: none of us are particularly technically gifted […] about how to play [music professionally]. For us, it didn't even matter…. [we wanted to] listen to a song, for there to be energy, and not stand there quietly in headphones…

In both interviews there is a notable emphasis on the amateur atmosphere of the party. Dasha, along with Sofia and Anna, created an amiable atmosphere in the bar adjacent to the dancefloor and by the entrance to the party by "hanging out with the guests" (Dasha). The ostensible lack of activity in *Baba Bomba*'s virtual spaces, on Facebook and Instagram, save for an occasional YouTube link to request a specific song, further highlights the significance of

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[84] This points to the ways Swedish space is also transformed, in line with postcolonial theorists of diaspora, into a *diaspora space* (Brah 2005, 205ff; Farahani 2016) because of the presence of diasporic communities within "a majority" community. The Swedish *diaspora space* is occupied not only by Russians but also by Swedes, and their interactions are crisscrossed by power differentials. A detailed discussion of the club event as *diaspora space* and its effects on Sweden is however beyond the scope of this study. In this chapter, while not privileging the label *diasporic* (Mole 2021), I position my example within a network of other events organized by and for Russian speakers (in contexts beyond Sweden) to draw out the specificity of these in a Swedish context.

the physical space of the club for constructing and communicating ideas of the nation.

My interviewees compared their club to another example of Russian culture in Stockholm, the club nights organized at rented venues in Stockholm by a Swedish Russian-language dating website aimed at Russian speakers.[85] In her description of what those parties looked like, Dasha shares the desire to play music, but criticizes its other aspects:

> DASHA: In Stockholm, Sweden, in general, there is a large [Russian] diaspora. But they often have parties of the [specific] kind: girls under 21 get in free, a beauty contest, face control – this is not quite for us, because we are all […] I wouldn't say we're […] some kind of super activists or anything like that. But it's just that we, we love parties [where] everyone is welcome, everyone treats each other normally [i.e., in a respectful manner]. And even when we want to hear the pop music of the 90s, this does not mean that we want there to be face control, beauty contest, but just want some [music].

Thus, Dasha's interpretation of Russian culture with a welcoming and hospitable attitude is positioned against other ways of using Russian culture in diasporic contexts, which can be understood as the opposite of being hospitable to people who are the target audience for club events. Here, nothing is said about professionalism. Rather, the fixity of gender roles and forms of expression are a source of regret, along with stereotypical features of Russian clubs, such as strict guard vetting, *face control* (Goscilo and Strukov 2010, 5, 255) a practice aimed at evaluating the looks and clothes of women and the financial status or connections of men. In contrast to this, *Baba Bomba* did not charge entrance fees for the parties organized at their main location. Instead of presenting themselves as "activists" striving for social justice, the hospitality of the organizers is revealed in their practices and their approach to guests. In doing so, the organizers themselves do not assume an explicit subject position other than those who would organize "a home party" and provide a welcome space, once the private home party is transformed into a public event. My interlocutors draw on articulations of non-professionalism that lends itself to the spontaneity of the organizers' *modus operandi*. Misha also recounts an experience at a party like that, which leads him to conclude that there is a big difference between other events and *Baba Bomba*:

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[85] Events are arranged by the website http://www.2flirt.se/. A visit to the website reveals a gallery of photos taken at some of the earlier parties, also advertised on Facebook.

> MISHA: I went to one [such dating website party]. I remember I ended up talking business with a guy […] He wanted to do [some business] together and [asked me], Give me your number. I gave him my number, but I purposely messed up one digit.
>
> […] our parties, I knew that they're not going to look like those parties for sure, the example of how not to [have] a party.

Here, instead of having fun in the same way as at *Baba Bomba*, Misha was approached more seriously by a potential business networking partner. When I asked during the interview whether he perceived that as flirting, Misha was certain it was not. This echoes the lack of fluidity between the homosocial and homosexual spheres, identified as central to Russian culture (Baer 2011, 180). These "dating website" parties are difficult to compare to *Baba Bomba* at length, and in any case this is not my goal. What my interlocutors perceive is the fixity of the former – given its expectations of guests' appearance (face control) and gender display (a beauty contest), and certain types of homosocial interactions – talking business. *Baba Bomba* is thus understood as more of a fluid free-flowing environment, both with regards to who may come in terms of gender presentation and what types of cultural exchange happen there. Thus, Misha and Dasha contrast the club event with the less open-minded "dating website" parties and more established Stockholm club milieus.

In comparison to other Stockholm clubs, which might be organized more professionally, *Baba Bomba* would play Russian pop music – something that would not happen at either regular Stockholm clubs or Russian-themed techno parties (even with invited Russian DJs). *Baba Bomba* offered a different mode of socialization for Russian speakers and Swedish visitors, one not unlike the Soviet socialization practices of the 1980s (Yurchak 2006; Zdravomyslova 2003) and how LGBT communities function at the interface of private and public in Russia (Stella 2012; 2013; Lukinmaa 2022). The space of *Baba Bomba* provided affective and social possibilities for the organizers and participants to consume culture, which led to a negotiation of the idea of Russia by Russian speakers in Stockholm, in situations where negotiations of the idea of Russia in public (media, political) spaces would be limited, unwelcome, or irrelevant. The remainder of the chapter will explore exactly how non-normative sexuality permeates the ideas of non-professionalism, spontaneity, mix of cultures, and playful irony, and how these together inform the ways hybridity was constructed and practiced,

Constructing hybridity

"We all are a bit mixed," says Dasha at the beginning of the interview. This is a literal translation of "*my nemnozhko mikst vse*," which means "we all have some different ethnic backgrounds." This sentence constructs the heterogeneity of the participants' ethnic backgrounds as the central premise for how the club was organized. As I will elaborate, it also captures the continuities between the spontaneous and amateur nature of the club events, outlined in the previous section, alongside capturing *Baba Bomba's* attitude toward its guests, culture, and music. Such an approach also levels some of the other differences between members of the collective due to age (late twenties and mid-thirties) and varying degrees of closeness and distance to Russia and Sweden. Before analytically tracing hybridity at the event, it is useful to consider it as a theoretical concept.

Attempting to complicate the view that that Russian LGBT people are linked to some pre-given idea of Russianness, I attend to this complexity with the use of Bhabha's concept of *hybridity*, which I outlined in the introduction (see p. 52). Dmitrii Dorogov (2017) argues for the usefulness of hybridity for understanding the multiscalar processes of Russian nationhood formation and Othering on two levels. First, it is applied to understand the position of Russia as a state on the global arena. As a state, Russia is seen to occupy the position of the colonized, a second-class empire, in the presence of empires proper. The "third space" here refers to the space of "discursive interaction between Russia and its constitutive outside" (Dorogov 2017, 53). It points to the ways Russia and the identity formations of Russians (inside as well as outside Russia) have never been outside the colonial discourse of European modernity. Second, on a related level, Dorogov considers how the Russian marginalized "queer subject," (52) silenced by the Russian elites purporting to represent the family values of "the ordinary Russian," is subjectivized in Russian state rhetoric. Russian LGBT people are thus in the third space of the Russian nation, simultaneously included in and excluded from its discursive space, stuck in a position between the Russian nation and Western mainstream LGBT culture, which racialized them (Dorogov, 2017, 50–51).

An application of hybridity to my material inevitably raises the question of hybridity in the postsocialist context, discussed in the literature that I have outlined in this thesis' Introduction. This chapter combines the theoretical insights of the postcolonial approach, building on and developing applications of postcolonial theory to postsocialist contexts, with a queer approach, showing how the practices of my interlocutors "queer[ed] the

production of the nation" (Erickson 2010, 312) by looking at how national symbols are taken from the (heterosexual) nation and used by queer people who are not interested in the ways of belonging a nation offers. In this, they move beyond the future orientation of the Swedish regime of LGBT visibility by returning to the (distant and near) past in Russian music as part of music events. *Baba Bomba* might be understood as Othered, even doubly so, by the majority Swedish culture, which sets specific expectations of visibility, and by the Russian context, which is hostile to LGBT people and their visibility, denying them a place in the project of national belonging. In turn, the collective itself might reinstate power hierarchies along the lines of being Russian/not-quite-Russian.

I thus understand the hybridity, which I identify in the practices of the Russian club event, to be shot through with power differences. As Robert Stam notes in his analysis of Latin American and Caribbean aesthetics, "hybridity has never been a peaceful encounter, a tension-free theme park" (Stam 1999, 60). He continues by pointing out that while for some hybridity is lived as just another metaphor within a Derridean free play, for others it has been entangled with colonial violence, lived as pain and visceral memory. As though responding to a brewing concern with Bhabha, who is seen as an example of postmodern theorizing, as noted by for example, Antony Easthope (1998), Stam is keen to note that hybridity as a general description fails to recognize the difference between various modalities of hybridity such as

> colonial imposition […,] obligatory assimilation, political co-optation, cultural mimicry, commercial exploitation, top-down appropriation, bottom-up subversion. Hybridity, in words, is power-laden and assymetrical. Hybridity is also co-optable (60–61).

In a similar vein, Kraidy (2002) views hybridization not simply as a cultural exchange, given that multiple cultures are involved. It also stresses the implications of unequal power of cultural dominance. Any study of hybridity thus needs to differentiate between hegemonic cooptation of hybridity and counter-hegemonic political projects.

This chapter will explore the ways the collective responsible for *Baba Bomba* articulates its own place, negotiating between its own position as doubly othered and an agent of Othering of non-ethnic Russians. By examining how the organizers and attendees of the club event perform their Russianness and queer expressions, I suggest we can better understand what

role non-normative sexuality plays in the construction of alternative images of Russia.

The variety of visitors

Already aware of their approach to "ethnicity," I attempted in both interviews to get a deeper sense of what kinds of guests were invited to the parties. Misha and Dasha told me that *Baba Bomba* attracted about 20 regulars – from Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and Ukraine. In addition to a mixture of visitors from different countries, openness meant that the club would be a place where Russian and Swedish speakers, and even parents of the club organizers, could come across "*Östermalm* people" (commonly perceived as upper class) who would be so surprised by the variety that they would leave soon after coming in, as Misha explained jokingly.

The non-professionalism I have described meant that invited DJs did not have to be professional. This helped to level the differences and include a border notion of what is considered Russian within the space of the club events. *Baba Bomba* also invited guest DJs: one who played East German music, another from Dagestan, and two drag queens, Regina Baltica and Galina, the latter of whom are both Stockholm locals who have worked together on a Baltic Sea ferry operator, often playing music. Differences across Eastern Europe (post-socialist European cultures/post-Soviet space) were not simply erased, as happens in accounts of diversity or imperial Russian accounts, they were instead included. Inclusion was also achieved via interaction, by inviting DJs with diverse backgrounds, or, as Dasha mentions in the interview, instances of receiving national costumes as gifts from party visitors.

When I asked how the organizers approached the class issue, and which types of visitors they had from this perspective, Misha and Sofia resort to the *spontaneous* articulation:

> MISHA: Yeah, that that deep we didn't [go]… like. We didn't have this discussion...
>
> SOFIA: It was impossible to tell [which social class the visitors belonged to], yeah. Because that was the thing I mean, if you would go to another bar, you could clearly say [who the people were in terms of class]. Like if you go to a place, Trädgården or... I don't know. Somewhere in Stockholm you would see, and you could actually. Tell by how they look. But at Baba Bomba you couldn't really. I think that was…. the nicest part, yeah?

> […] You don't find that very often in Stockholm... you know this mixture of ages…

Misha points to an absence of preoccupation with class, while Sofia values the impossibility of telling people apart based on their class at *Baba Bomba*. When asking the organizers whether the party was a queer event, both interviews highlighted the presence of queer visitors, owing to the club's welcoming atmosphere:

> KIRILL: Was your club a queer project?
>
> SOFIA: it was a very safe environment for that [queer] community, that's why many people actually came.
>
> DASHA: I can't say exactly how it turned out that people we did not know from before, queer people, started to come. […] but we started to notice that more and more fairly young queer people from post-Soviet countries, who have been in Sweden for five or ten years, but not necessarily born here started to come […] It's very nice that in some way it's like a safe space, but you can also listen to some kind of trash [music], which is familiar to you from home, not only trash… I [actually] love this music. … I am very glad that they were able to find their way to our parties…
>
> […] And we ourselves do not feel comfortable if we feel that someone is about to fight or that our LGBT friends and guests are not comfortable... This is very important for us. Well, to [have a] safe space for everyone.

According to the organizers, because the atmosphere of the club events was open and welcoming, it attracted a mix of people from different cultural, class, ethnic, and national backgrounds. As I have mentioned, the parties were held at various locations. The invitation to play outside the "home" venue meant changes in which guests would attend. Sometimes the collective was invited to play at gay and queer clubs.

One instance of *Baba Bomba* playing outside its home base revealed how Swedish ideas of Russian non-normative sexuality as bound with ethnicity. Both interviews mention an owner of a big gay club in the city center warning against *Baba Bomba* inviting "some *orten* people," suggesting, as Sofia told me, that they would represent "wrong people who don't like the LGBT com-

munity."[86] The remark of the club owner, by which my interlocutors were outraged, reveals the construction of the Russian as white, which is rooted in Russian imperial and Soviet history. The exclusion of non-ethnic Russians from national belonging, commonly practiced by Russian nationalists (Zakharov 2015; Foxall 2014), is then mirrored in the homonationalist Swedish exclusion, which I have understood in Chapter 1 by drawing on the work of Puar (2007).

This encounter, which the club owner wanted to prevent, between the white Russian and Swedish LGBT people with racialized Others in the physical space of the club, can be interpreted through the lens of Jin Haritaworn's (2015) "queer lovers" – Swedes and ethnic/white Russians versus "hateful Others," Russian speakers who appear racialized. The owner's comment, reflecting on the invitation to play at their club, raised concerns among the interviewed participants about the decision to perform there. My interlocutors did not impose restrictions on who could attend the disco, employing a form of "strategic color-blindness" to challenge Swedish homonationalist associations between whiteness and queerness, as well as non-whiteness and heterosexuality. This also aligns with my argument regarding the racialization of Russian LGBT individuals, which proceeds along distinct lines compared to the notion of the "right kind of queer" that exclude Muslim queer people in Sweden (Kehl 2020b). Instead, Russian LGBT attendees at the disco are perceived, by the owner of the centrally located Swedish gay club, as the "normal homosexual" (Weber 2016, 105), given their ability to pass as white and participate as a consumer. Further, this example echoes my earlier discussion (see Chapter 1), of the contingency of Swedish white hospitality (Hübinette and Lundström 2011; Kelly 2006), revealing that a hierarchy between the owner of the Stockholm gay club that served as the venue for *Baba Bomba*, and the visitors to the club, including the organizers, is still in place. This points to the limits of the centrally located gay club's hospitality, if hospitality is understood as the giving of time and space to others (Derrida 2000; Dikeç, Clark, and Barnett 2009), and where the power relations that permeate host/guest relations are to be highlighted.

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[86] *Orten*, a shortening of *förorten*, literally meaning suburbs, is a term used in Swedish to talk about people racialized as non-white living in areas with high-rise concrete buildings (Kehl 2020a; Lacatus 2008).

Practicing hybridity

Clothes: Challenging norms of gender and nation

Building on the idea that clothes are central to the performance of a nation (Edensor 2002: 108), this section examines how clothes were used to create the image of Russia in the club. In the previous section, I did not have the opportunity to compare the descriptions and interpretations of my interviewees with what could be found in other sources. In this section, I aim to analyze both the interviews and posts about the party shared on Instagram and Facebook.

Baba Bomba's Instagram page features the organizers and participants donning a mixture of folk costumes, Russian and from other locations, such as Central Asia, clothes adorned with glitter, patterns, and prints, and even military paraphernalia. The choice of style and dress was a significant component of the parties, according to the interviews and the self-presentation on Facebook and Instagram. What differed between the interviews and the social media was that my interlocutors were less inclined to dwell on certain sartorial choices, such as the military attire present in some pictures, or photos where all people present wore traditional Russian and Ukrainian dresses. Instead, they foregrounded the spontaneity, cultural mix, and the ironic attitude adopted.

When asked what clothes they would wear, Misha and Sofia referred to the haphazard logic behind the choices:

> SOFIA: Whatever we could find at X's place. You know she has a lot of clothes actually… and also X's Russian mom brings a lot of weird stuff.
>
> KIRILL: What kind?
>
> SOFIA: I don't know [how] to describe. It's like she has a really bad taste that it looks... and she thinks that X really wears like super a lot of leopard. I don't know… weird outfits.

> MISHA: The thought process of our costumes was always… when we were coming X's before the show for the party. X would just pull out the bag and whatever pops up, you just put it on and you're trying to combine it with other shit that's already on the floor.
>
> SOFIA: Could be a hat from Kazakhstan or… I don't know…
>
> MISHA: Yeah, then Ukrainian embroidered shirts and then some leopard leggings, so it's crazy.
>
> SOFIA: the main goal was to look a bit you know...
>
> MISHA: …extravaganza.

The quote highlights that the process of selecting a dress was constructed not as a meticulously planned one. Furthermore, seen through the lens of irony, the clothes were described as "weird" and "other shit." This lack of planning, according to this discursive logic, resulted in a cultural mix. A hat from Kazakhstan was thus mixed with Ukrainian embroidered shirts, both elements of the national dress, cultural symbols laden with layers of meaning. Their meaning, quite specific to ethnic/national cultures was also combined with other heterogeneous elements, such as the leopard leggings, that had less of a specific national meaning attached to them and instead connected, unintentionally, with a wide range of meanings relating to class, gender, and sexuality. Whether the choices were thought-through or not is difficult to establish; more important is that this haphazard humorous practice resulted in a combination of disparate elements, the result of which was an example of cultural hybridity.

Scholars of nationalism and gender have pointed to the centrality of specific ideas of femininity and masculinity, as well as women's and men's bodies, to the nation (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Nagel 1998). To exemplify this, I will present two examples of how norms of heterosexual masculinity and femininity were subverted in the party's hybrid practices. Previous research has demonstrated that Russia's image, in line with these approaches, has been built around specific manifestations of masculinity – which is to say, heteronormative and, in recent years, increasingly homophobic ideas (Sperling 2014). For much of Russian history the question of Russian identity has been embroiled in debates about Russian men and their bodies. The task of modernizing and Westernizing Russia has, in both imperial and Soviet

times, included shaping the appearance of the ideal Russian male (Clements, Friedman, and Healey 2002, 10ff.)

Clothing is central for the expression of gender, sexuality, and national identity. Clothes serve as a marker of femininity and masculinity, reflecting that masculine and feminine norms of behavior are closely linked to notions of respectability. Historically, bourgeois ideas of respectability served to legitimize and define the middle classes as against the lower classes and the aristocracy (Mosse 1985). Respectability has been pointed out as a benchmark according to which "sexual practice is evaluated, distinctions drawn, legitimated and maintained between groups" (Skeggs 1997, 118). Respectability thus regulates access to formations of ethnicity and race, or "Europeanness" (cf. Krivonos and Diatlova 2020; Lönn 2018).

The tacky leopard print tights worn at the club, which Misha refers to, can be compared to the "leopard-clad mail order wives", a stereotypical image of the Russian woman in Sweden (Lönn 2018, 19, 140). Clothes for Russian speaking women are instrumental in making them appear (more) white and respectably feminine (Krivonos and Diatlova 2020). This element of clothing is queered, this time by being worn by a male-presenting disco participant, as seen in an Instagram photo. The party attire, containing multiple layers of meaning, is thus inscribed into a queer space of "extravaganza," which harks back to the contemporary American drag scene and its precursor, the ballroom scene. In relation to the notion of respectability, wearing leopard leggings thus signals not being afraid of ridicule for failing to conform to masculine ideals, expressed in styles of clothing in line with norms of respectable masculinity, be it heterosexual or "straight acting" or "straight-passing" queer masculinity. Due to a cultural devaluation of femininity (Hoskin 2017), feminine, or effeminate, ways of appearing or style, for example, wearing tacky clothes, decidedly contradict both European respectable femininity and respectable gayness/non-normative sexuality. Applying Esther Newton's (1979) thoughts on camp and drag, a sartorial choice that is at odds with ideals of respectability becomes a way to control the stigma of effeminacy, often applied to gay men in a patriarchal society, by embodying it in a performance, intended for the (in this case not only) gay audience. Ideas of respectable gayness have also become entrenched among Russian middle-class gay and bisexual men (Weaver 2020, 120), in line with rejecting gender transgressive forms of expression as deviant and embracing a lifestyle that is homonormative and non-confrontational. In a Russian(-speaking) context, subversive expressions of masculinity that border on extreme femininity acquire additional salience because non-masculine styles of dress

can be used to accuse men of "sexual perversion" and "betraying the nation" (Riabov and Riabova 2014).

These effeminate presentations of Russian masculinity can also be compared to how Russian queer expressions that border on "straight" masculinity have successfully been commodified. One of the most prominent examples is the fashion of Gosha Rubchinskiy, whose aesthetic is similar to elements of the sports casual style I have observed on *Baba Bomba*'s Instagram. Scholars have highlighted how his work is symptomatic of Russia's nationhood and its cultural and political connections to the West. Scholar of fashion Graham Roberts (2017) develops the idea that men's fashion is one area of Russian culture where the kind of hegemonic masculinity embodied by Putin is challenged and subverted. Rubchinskiy relies on extreme masculinities, including that of *gopnik*, a Russian term referring to the "bad boys" from the lower-class suburbs (Pilkington 2002). Similarly, Maria Engström (2021b, 130) argues that Rubchinskiy's successful uses of queer aesthetics reflects a colonial Western perspective, reducing Russia to a simplistic image of being "poor but sexy." This portrayal of Russia as a subaltern of the West, that is, as a "poor queer boy" (130), symbolizes also Russia as a "queer future of the world," both intriguing and risky. What is absent in these scholarly discussions of these fashion queer aesthetic projects is attention to class hierarchies and the centrality of the white ethnic Russian masculinity to these images. Being a renowned fashion designer, Rubchinskiy capitalizes on the alluring image of queer Russia without these images benefitting Russian LGBT or queer people. Further, while suggesting that these representations are colonial on part of the West, Engström's account does not consider the role of the fashion designer and "the ordinary Russian" whose aesthetics are commodified. In the visual aesthetics of the club events, the codes of masculinity and femininity are queered by the visitors with "mixed" ethnic and social backgrounds in a manner which, at least at face value, appears more useful for actual LGBT communities, by providing them with materials to create alternative—hybrid—national and sexual imaginaries.

In addition to the interview's discussion of the broader subversion and reappropriation of cultural symbols through bricolage, Sofia specifically recalled her preference for wearing a Ukrainian wreath. This example illustrates how expressions of femininity can differ from those at Russian "dating website" parties. Sofia recounted the former Ukrainian president, Victor Yanukovych, promoting Ukraine to foreign investors at the World Economic Forum in Davos, suggesting they visit in the spring because of the perceived beauty of Ukrainian women who would be adorned in short skirts and

flowers in their hair.[87] Sofia's choice to wear a Ukrainian wreath can be seen as a subtle gesture aimed at disrupting the stereotype of "beautiful Ukrainian women." This stereotype portrays young Ukrainian women wearing white embroidered shirts, with long hair and adorned with flower wreaths with ribbons. In this representation, "beauty" is attributed as a national characteristic to the bodies of Ukrainian women, who are constructed as symbols of national identity (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, 7) and are expected to "carry the burden of representation" of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997, 45). This can be compared to Dasha's quote about "beauty contests" in the other Russian-speaking club, where this stereotype would (ostensibly) be confirmed. In Sofia's case, clothing allows a connection with a transnational discourse on the Ukrainian image where images of cultures are circulated and negotiated. On the other hand, in addition to disrupting the image of Ukraine, it was also explicitly valorized by my interlocutors' practices who drew again on the *playful irony* articulation. When I asked whether the Ukrainian wreath is similar to the Swedish midsummer wreath, Sofia said that while there is a likeness, the is "more beautiful […] because [it has] the... flag [ribbons that adorn the wreath]." Misha echoed her words, pointing out that the Ukrainian one is "mostly flowers, and the Swedish [wreath] is just like just grass."

The reference to an "extravaganza" prompt places the transgression of boundaries onto the realm of ordinary/carnivalesque and gender/sexuality, rather than simply national cultures. Not just the organizers, but also the visitors engaged in dressing up, signifying flows of cultural exchange on several levels.

> MISHA: […] people picked up this style and started to dress up as well.
>
> SOFIA: And we also dressed up like.... [inaudible, laughter] open to you know, like, all kinds of different expressions.

Clothing, as an example of inviting people to be spontaneous, thus became a way to renegotiate the meaning of the nation and subvert norms of gender and sexuality. Challenging gender norms also necessarily meant a renegetiation of norms of sexuality. Together, they contributed to a formation of hybrid culture at the club.

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[87] Cf. "Yanukovych tells investors to visit in spring to watch women 'taking off their clothes' (2011). For a feminist analysis of Yanukovych's sexist language see also Martsenyuk (2012).

Music and dance: "We would always finish with hardbass"

The idea that the club events transcended fixity and hierarchies was also expressed in Dasha's descriptions of the party's playlists:

> DASHA: Often we brought with us a thousand million different tracks, because you never know what kind of audience you will definitely be, what they will want. […] there were very different vibes [at *Baba Bomba*].

The non-professional and spontaneous nature of the club evening, leading to a mix of cultures, is something that Misha recalls:

> MISHA: And like sometimes I'm like I don't know which one, which song, we're going to play next. So, you (points to Sofia) would come over, and like: Which one? We played this? Right? Like not much thought behind it, yeah. Sometimes it was good, sometimes it was bad.... Some people would like [be surprised].
>
> SOFIA: [giving an example of people would say] Is it supposed to be quiet between songs?

At another point, Misha mentions the club being invited to a well-known gay bar, which usually plays pop music and Eurovision hits. There, an invited DJ – a friend of some of *Baba Bomba* organizers – played trance, which turned out to be too much of "a technical genre." This contributed to a lack of people on the dancefloor.[88] The cultural specificity of songs with lyrics is thus highlighted.

During the interviews, the participants talked about the different kinds of music played. Replying to my question if Sweden was ever included, both Misha and Sofia say no, and mention instead a wide variety of different genres, artists, and specific songs. The following genres were named in the interviews: Ukrainian pop; old Soviet pop; old Soviet disco; music from East Germany; Soviet gymnastics counts; Ukrainian music, and Tatar music. A collection of the various music styles advertised on the ten Facebook pages

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[88] This can be compared and contrasted to Pilkington's study of uses of music among Russian youths during the late 1990s, who noted "the distinction between Russian songs as 'meaningful' and Western dance music as 'for feet' [i.e., it is possible to dance mindlessly to it]." "Western" music, especially genres without lyrics, allowed the youths to venture into "decentred soundscapes" and disconnect from the realities of their life, which was described in the "Russian" lyrics-heavy genres, such as rock (but also pop), where the lyrics and music are determined (Pilkington 2002, 198-200). This leads me to suggest that the disco's visitors and organizers placed special value in (the meaning of) lyric-heavy music.

publicizing the events, gives the impression of a similarly diverse and chaotic mix. The playlist, which I have reconstructed with the interview material, spans iconic, *estrada* figures like Alla Pugacheva Valerii Leontiev (from the Soviet times), through Tatu, as an example of the early 2000s pop scene, and DJ Smash and Natali as examples of Russian pop during the 2010s, up to Antokha MC, who represents the contemporary Russian hip-hop scene. Moreover, the West German disco and pop bands Dschinghis Khan and Boney M reflect a music exchange between "first" and "second" worlds. Music by Verka Serduchka and Sofia Rotaru attest to the permeability of the Ukrainian-Russian music markets since the 1990s. The inclusion of artists like Tatarka and SuperAlisa is indicative of music that is beyond a narrow conception of "ethnic" Russianness. Additionally, playing Timati, whose music is at the intersection of hip-hop and pop, and İntiqam and Ehtiram Rüstəmov show how ideas of "ethnicity" in popular music become entangled with notions of Russia (Yangeldina 2023). This curated selection illuminates the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the music at the party. Outlining a general direction of the music, Misha says:

> MISHA: So, we would, like, start from some melodic disco and transition into hip hop, and stuff, [Verka] Serduchka. And that would always finish with hardbass. Sometimes people would come up and ask when is hardbass coming?

The variation of songs and genres attests to the organizers' understanding that the image of Russia is to be articulated with a broad palette of not only visual but also sonic signifiers. This is evident in the choice of the songs across a broad geographical and temporal span.

In another comparison to the "dating website" club, Dasha draws parallels between the music of the nineties and Russianness, hinting at the need to wrest specific cultural artifacts, in this case a music video and a song, away from Russian heterosexual patriarchal culture. This highlights the similarities between a heterosexual audience at the "dating website" club – middle-aged and middlebrow – and *Baba Bomba*'s audience and organizers who would both enjoy Alla Pugacheva. Pugacheva has been popular among both heterosexuals and gay men in the former Soviet Union and across and beyond the Russophone world, known for combining "Slavic musical sensibility and Western musical aesthetics"[89] and her melodramatic, "flamboyant femininity bordering on parody" (Goscilo and Lanoux 2006, 20), which would provide

[89] See "Alla Pugacheva" (2023).

the chance for the public to (dis)identify (cf. Muñoz 1999) with her performances. Rasa Navickaitė (2012) analyzes a drag performance of Pugacheva in a Vilnius gay club, which is an example of a post-state socialist context that has retained influences from Soviet culture. Drawing on Kulpa (2011, 52–53), who asserts that performers in communist countries, such as Pugacheva, nationalize performances of a culturally specific gender and homosexuality and are "always already national/ised," Navickaitė argues that performances of gender, sexuality, and nation exist only in the negotiation of the history of Soviet oppression of homosexual people. It is not always clear whether the adoration for cultural artifacts is caused by the nostalgia for the Soviet era or for its dissident moments, as she points out. Hybridity thus arises out of a complex network of symbols imbued with history and crisscrossed by present Russian politics.

In the previous section, my interviewees mentioned that playing music would often be accompanied by dance – *khorovod* and hardbass:

> DASHA: We have always tried to explain to those who are unfamiliar with [this music] what [a] song is about – we can show a video, invite them to some kind of round dances [khorovody], or teach them how to dance hardbass.

Here I will first draw out the gendered aspects of the circle dance *khorovod* and hardbass and then go on to discuss how these became subverted at the party to articulate a new meaning of Russianness. *Khorovod* is a circle dance found in many European cultures under different names, stemming from a pagan Slavic folk culture. While traditionally it was a dance performed by peasants on festive and ritualistic occasions (Prokhorov 2002, 49–52), it is now devoid of many of its functions and is commonly danced by children.[90] Dasha and Sofia, who were responsible for "mingling" thus forced the crowd to hold hands with each other and move together. Its place among adults, at a club event in the different cultural context of Sweden, is a sign of the spontaneity and irony of the event, breaking with the tradition that "serious" dancing means doing so individually.

In contrast to this, *hardbass*, another example of music and dance that could be seen at the party, is more gendered and classed and features elements of an aestheticized Eastern European style.[91] As Ondřej Daniel (2019) suggests in his discussion of (ab)uses of hardbass from an intersectional

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[90] Similar to Swedish Midsummer dancing around the maypole.

[91] *Hardbass* is primarily an Eastern European electronic dance music (EDM) genre that originated in Russia during the early 2010s. (Daniel 2021, 158)

perspective, the use and circulation of this genre of music can be used to trace the effects of shifting intersecting representations of gender, race, age, class, and ability in hardbass music videos and among publics. Daniel notes that exaggerated masculinity is a crucial dimension in hardbass despite changes from modes of "mocked" to serious to "mocked" again (2019, 162). In some instances where hardbass has circulated, especially since 2016 when the hardbass aesthetic was commodified by entrepreneurs and received by the publics with higher class status, there has been "a clear exploitation of the image of the East[,] Eastploitation" (2019, 161–162). Here, as far as Daniel is concerned, class differences determine the exploitation of the image. Pointing to the commodified and depoliticized nature of the genre, Daniel suggests that hardbass becomes a way to mock and appropriate lower-class aesthetics by the "normcore," "middle-class" youth across Russia, CEE, and Western Europe (Daniel 2021, 167). The audiences for hardbass are trans-class, and they include working-class Russians who remain in Russia, middle-class Russians moving West, and middle-class Europeans. Predominantly with a male fan base, hardbass artists and fans "ironically mimic" lower-income social strata, specifically the "working class" *gopnik* cultures. Despite potential economic disparities compared to their "middle-class" parents, contemporary hardbass enthusiasts hold cultural and social capital, reinforcing their positions within the privileged "middle class." The genre's exaggerated portrayal of "Slavic unculturedness" is seen by Daniel as a marketing strategy that emerges as a form of (self-)exoticization (Daniel 2021, 170).

Applying Daniel's observations to my case, I argue that this ability of hardbass to appeal to several groups, and the ambiguities it harbors, is what has made it popular at the party. The practices of *ironic cultural mix* at the party, which already juxtapose a number of ambiguous instances of detournement (Daniel 2021, 164), such as that of hardbass, destabilize the image of Russia as an exoticized Other. Though they do so without fully negating it. In short, the hegemonic "Russian" masculinity present in hardbass, expressed in the black Adidas track suit, was combined with sequin high heel, which, as a counterpoint, might symbolize excessive Russian femininity (see the book cover). In doing this, the organizers and participants of *Baba Bomba* reiterated these essentialized images at the sartorial and sonic levels, building on clearly recognizable "ethnic" though not necessarily strictly "Russian" symbols. Ironic re-working of stereotypes is a central aspect of the party, which is explored further in a discussion of self-exoticization as an aspect of how the complexity of hybridity is navigated.

Navigating hybridity

The topic of self-exoticization came naturally in my interview with Dasha, as we sat and talked in an Asian buffet restaurant. Pointing to the ornated decorations on the walls, the furniture, soft string music, and the fish in the pond located at the entrance, Dasha was quick to remark that it is not only Eastern European culture that is commodified in Sweden. Sometimes, as in the case of accepting an invitation to play at Dragon Gate, *Baba Bomba* embraced the desire to multiply uses of difference ad absurdum, not unlike the uses of hardbass discussed above. As noted in the section above, Stam (1999) understands hybridity as being affected by power differentials, such as the intersections of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, to name a few. This section addresses the challenging aspects of hybridity slipping from a counter-hegemonic to a simply hegemonic practice (Kraidy 2002). This point was raised in the interviews. I will therefore delve into how these practices have been interpreted and are managed.

Self-exoticization

The uses of music, traditional and kitschy dress, as well as the visual material to advertise the parties on Facebook and Instagram, were central to the creation of an atmosphere of the party and the image of Russia. Responding to my question about the uses of specific artists, such as Little Big (Engström 2021b), Dasha is ambiguous as to the effects of such aesthetics:

> they do use a similar mix of symbols, but I don't know, it is always a question of what, how, and who [uses them]. This is a question of self-exoticization or self-fetishizing that needs consideration.

Answering my follow-up question about how this was dealt with at the party, she offers the following reflection:

> DASHA: …from the very beginning, we were aware that we used a lot of different symbols. But then again, somehow ... [judging by] those who came and how they dressed, and where they come from, or what kind of history they have… the [prevalent] feeling was that those who came, they themselves are also interested in somehow experimenting with their [identities]... Well, I have explained to you that I, for example, have my own "seeking your roots" thing, to discover for myself, a part of my cultural heritage even though I am from Sweden. It was so for many people. Because the context is not propaganda, but just a party, and that we are all right here now, and everyone has either an interest or some kind of knowledge in what we are doing, that it is

> somehow... No, we discussed it more or less every time, like, what are we going to wear today, is it okay what are we wearing?
>
> […] for example, the Caucasian evening. Then my friends from the Caucasus and I asked, should we wear this hat that our Caucasian friends gave me for my collection, or is it dumb or strange? So, we probably tried to look to those who have *tolkningsföreträde*: what do you think? So, we discussed with [others] I believe. […] And my Swedish friends, they also asked those who have such types of roots and citizenship and everything. The Swedes asked: okay if I wear the *sarafan* [a type of traditional dress that used to be worn in Russia] that your mother sewed? And I said – yes, she will like it a lot [that you wear something she has made].

Dasha, however, finds a way to manage the crossing of boundaries and power hierarchies. In the context of the club nights, one way to disentangle the multiple levels of difference might be to attend to ethnicity, which is what Dasha suggests they in fact did in this context: turning to those with the interpretative privilege (*tolkningsföreträde*).[92] Here, in contrast to the instances of spontaneity, which are central to how *Baba Bomba* functioned, a different approach is used. This approach features instead careful deliberation, asking others to decide on their own culture. As Dasha hints, this requires some notion of power to interpret, stemming from having a connection to the culture. Compared to the overall uses of the ideas of cultural mix, this more careful deliberation strategy showed the limit of the idea of hybridity as untainted by power. While the dangers of "overstepping" the boundaries of culture were present, they did not stop the interlocutors from experimenting and mixing different styles, symbols, and genres.

It is instructive to discuss the ways and outcomes of navigating hybridity against a sounding board of two other diasporic cultural projects, *Baba Bomba*'s more famous and large-scale German counterpart *Russendisko* and Russian balls in New York. *Russendisko* has already been analyzed by David-Emil Wickström (2020; 2014). *Russendisko* in the German context ends up being interesting only for Germans, while a separate music scene exists for Russian speakers (Wickström 2020, 106). Wickström reaches a negative conclusion regarding Othering at *Russendisko,* expressed in stereotyping the

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[92] "Interpretive privilege means that people belonging to an oppressed group have the priority to define what that oppression looks like, what is derogatory towards this group [...] People who do not belong to the group are still allowed to give their thoughts and opinions, but these do not have quite the same importance and weight as the opinions of those within the group" (D 2014).

complexly Russian identity for the Other, in this case ethnic German, which catered to

> a non-emigrant audience through its conscious play on stereotypes and by reaffirming the (non-emigrant) self in opposition to the Other: 'The Russendisko does not appeal to "We"-feeling, but to stereotypical perceptions of "them," "the Russians," "the Others," "the Foreigners"' (Wickström 2014, 53).

Wickström also links this trend to a general shift with German popular music away from an Arabian/Turkish-based orientalism to a romanticizing of Eastern Europe (55). Although on a very general level, *Baba Bomba* can be compared to *Russendisko,* as an example of an event which circulated CEE music, more specific attention to the uses of visual as/through expressions of gender and sexuality reveals differences. In contrast to the German clubs, the target group of *Baba Bomba* contained Russian speakers as well as Swedes and the club ended up bringing Swedes and Russian speakers together.

Another instance of where music and dance were used by the Russian diaspora to produce notions of Russia is described by Natalie Zelensky (2019, 178–205). Zelensky's study is a case in point where cultural hybridity works to entrench images of Russia as Other without challenging the supposed Western superiority and forms of exclusion entailed therein. Some of the differences with *Baba Bomba* become apparent when comparing her study of ball dances organized by the Russian diaspora in New York. These differences include the class composition of the attendees, with the events' invite-only system and expensive admission, and the goal to recreate a specific vision of Russia, namely, an idealized version of prerevolutionary Russian empire. Further, despite creating a "utopian realm through the dancing, listening body and a place that is continually reconceived and rearticulated in the self-fashioning that permeates the balls" (Zelensky 2019, 205), these events ended up upholding hierarchies of whiteness, wealth, and heterosexuality, something that Zelensky's analysis disregards. A comparison with the Russian balls studied by Zelensky reminds us that not all projects aimed at cultivating hybridity and a mixture of temporalities, possess the potential to create more open national imaginaries. Even if such events do provide an opportunity to partake in a long-gone cultural tradition, the invitation is extended to few and ends up cementing the ideas of Russian imperial might, premised largely on the idea of heterosexuality. As queer historian Carolyn Dinshaw mentions, temporal asynchrony may be employed for projects of national belonging that are not necessarily amicable to LGBT people and queers.

Multitemporality and nonlinearity are not "automatically in the service of queer political projects and aspirations" (Jagose quoted in Dinshaw et al. 2007, 191). Thus, compared to two other Russian diasporic music events, in Germany and the US, the club event in Stockholm works with these commodifications of difference by queering and de/reconstructing the stereotypical heteropatriarchal expressions, and putting to use commodified masculinities, femininities, and stereotypes about Russia.

Common for the idea of self-orientalization is the understanding that cultures are clearly delineated entities that often have an essential quality to them. However, as the analyses I have presented so far demonstrate, in the context of the club event, it becomes difficult to disentangle the multiple intersectional identifications of the party visitors and organizers and find a single origin of the cultural expressions. Self-orientalization should thus not be seen as opposing but as an expression of hybridity. An intricate notion of Russia at the party is subjected to both stereotyping and queering, primarily for self-perception and for the perception of others. The queered image is also intertwined with other ethnic markers from the post-Soviet and CEE regions. This parallel aligns with Wickström's observation of Balkanization. The uses of such an alignment can be twofold: as a means to exclude Russia from the symbolic space of Europe or to question the very concept of Europe as bounded and separate from Russia and vice versa.

Bringing together my discussion of clothing, especially Rubchinsky's fashions, and hardbass, I argue that these symbols functioned in a complex economy of meaning and as such remain open to interpretation. The circulation of classed, ethnic, national, gendered, and sexualized symbols among a transclass audience of Russian speakers and Swedes was undergirded by both openness and attempts to navigate it. On the one hand, as I have already shown, both interviews presented the club event as a space free from conflicts regarding the uses of culture and on an interpersonal level. More explicit strategies have been used, such as consulting with each other. In what follows I outline my interviewees' uses of so-called "problem-free" articulations.

A "problem-free" environment and its limits

When it came to a discussion of the club event's image the limits of a coherent articulation built around spontaneity and a mix of cultures began to emerge. While this does not mean that my interlocutors were blind to the power differentials, as described above, they nevertheless seemed contained and were managed within the existing framework of the cultural mix. The full-

scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has become an additional source of dislocation.

I have already shown, in the section on dressing up, how Misha, Sofia, and Dasha use the clothing and culture to create a mixed cultural space by hinting at how interaction was a crucial part of this performance. What is used to explain these decisions is the ironic approach to culture:

> MISHA: I can make fun of myself, and Russians can make fun of themselves. And we're not just like steel people. To me, that was actually a big part of the whole thing, like we could [say] we're not actually what they're trying to paint us [Russians] with [*sic*]. Yeah, we can be different, so that's fine.

> DASHA: But overall, [people would not complain] but say instead, "oh wow! we did not know that there are all these countries and these territories, all these peoples, and all this music."

Positioning oneself as making fun of oneself is seen by Misha as a way to combat stereotypes. The use of the word "weird" reflects one way to view the practices of hybridity at the club event. This phrasing simplifies the complex interplay of "playful irony as well as nonsense 'Eastploitation' aesthetics" (Daniel 2021, 160) that I have already identified at *Baba Bomba*. As such, it also temporarily suspends the power differentials that are inherent in the practices of hybridity. Another way to handle hybridity was presented in the interview with Misha and Sofia:

> MISHA: We self-censored in a way… If someone would do something extreme, we would stop.

> SOFIA: But I… I remember, I thought as long as you were fine with it because you're Russians, then [wearing] it would be fine.

> MISHA: I don't know this if that's a good thing – [you'd be walking on] thin ice. I mean we would be OK with a lot of things. […] I think we kind of controlled each other in a way that if someone would do something butt crazy, we would say.

When asked what that "extreme" would be, Misha and Sofia cite Putin, military, and OMON uniforms (special police units with recognizable black uniforms) or "the Russian hat" (as Sofia clarified later – it was *budenovka*, used during the Russian Civil War in the late 1910s). Thus, one strategy is to downplay differences by turning to the "mix of cultures" discourse and

positioning their own event as "just a party." Yet it also features instances of self-awareness; Dasha for example presents a hierarchy of who would be able to adjudicate on different cultural symbols. Misha then positions the responsibility within the group, "we self-censored in a way." This less overt strategy also presents a break from the spontaneous and careless approach demonstrated earlier in the interview.

Both interviews, in line with the idea of *a mix of cultures,* allow for a positing of the Self (the organizer) and Other (the visitor), as well as the "culture" within the same frame of "mixing," allowing the interlocutors to avoid (to a large extent) the problematic division of Self-Other among the lines of ethnicity, class, and gender/sexuality. Another strategy to fold the visitor into a category of Self was to place them, epistemically, along the knowledgeable/other division. The former were the "people who had interest in the region." Here we find the visitors to the club event as well as the owner of the place where *Baba Bomba* was put on (in that they used to live in Minsk and traveled to Uzbekistan). In the latter category would, perhaps implicitly, be the Östermalm people visiting the club event. In this articulation of "mix of cultures" the encounter with difference is downplayed, thus becoming described as an encounter with a mixed culture.

Choosing a name, (re)defining the nation

Working with several overlapping narratives and images of Russia, some with clear subversive features, others less so, *Baba Bomba* became part of a process of (re)negotiating the meaning of the Russian nation–as a moment in the Swedish discourse on Russia–in both the Swedish context and the global Russian-speaking context, more generally.

When I asked how the name of the club event came about, it was revealed that the creative name was a way to circumvent the centrality of "Russian":

> MISHA: There's a German movie called *Russendisko* [where the immigrants] play this like... trash kind of music. So, I had this idea that we should have something similar in Stockholm, *ryssdisco* – and this is the easiest way to, right, everyone recognizes the simple name... but then […] in one of the meetings we said – What are we going to call these parties? Then everyone decided: yeah, *ryssdisco* is too political. It's going to be too one-sided. We don't want to be a Russian party, we want to be this post-Soviet, everyone-is-welcome kind of party and that... Dasha came up with the name *Baba Bomba.*

> DASHA: But it was important for us initially, to say that we are not just a Russian disco.

Rather than opting for a variation on theme of *Russendisko*,[93] the organizers used another name. Dasha shares how the name *Baba Bomba* came about. While working in tourism, her younger colleagues mistook her age, thinking she was a university student. When she told them she was in her 30s, they were surprised and playfully nicknamed her "Baba Bomba," which translates literally to "woman-the bomb," a bombshell.

Going into the interviews with a focus on Russia, I was surprised to discover that post-soviet had currency in the interviews: Misha and Sofia used it to describe music, and Dasha used it to reflect on the origin of the events' visitors. This differs from how it was conceptualized in the promotion materials, which include the abbreviation "OSCE countries" (*OSSE-länderna*),[94] which is likely a typo of *OSS-länderna*, that is, CIS countries, a political organization that emerged soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. By bringing up these discrepancies between the geographical elements, the slippages and inconsistences in their use, I would like to show that their meanings are far from stable. Rather than relying on a state discourse, either Russian or Swedish, Dasha refers to Swedes' general understanding of Russia and suggests the need for an alternative articulation of Russia:

> DASHA: …like [we] know Russia, yes, but is Ukraine an independent country? Belarus is not part of Russia? And [about the fact that] in Russia there are 110 to 120 indigenous peoples that Russia colonized – people didn't really know about this.

The party then sidelined Russianness to include the other ethnicities. What emerges as a result is definitely not an ethnic Russian nationhood, *russkost*, but definitely not a civic *Rossiyskost* either, both already used by the Russian state discourse on who counts as a "proper" Russian. The naming *Baba Bomba* has helped avoid the tendency observed in cases when Soviet or CEE history is simplistically referred to as "Russian" and also when the specificity of the different parts of Russia is obscured. Worth pointing out here is the desire to avoid reproducing the rhetoric of the contemporary Russian state that uses safe "friendship of peoples" as ethnic diversity and harmonious

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[93] *Russendisko*, Oliver Ziegenbalg (2012) 1h 40m.

[94] OSCE stands for Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, an organization that has its origins in the 1975 Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) held in Helsinki.

conviviality (see e.g.,Edenborg 2017, 115ff.).[95] In doing so, the organizers also avoided the unreflected heteronormativity and metaphors of the family that are at the heart of such Russian hegemonic understandings of nationhood.

The party has implicitly shown alternative ways of how non-normative sexuality may be used in the process of constructing hybrid national images. This is particularly salient in the context of what Jennifer Suchland (2018) has termed the Russian heteronationalist project, pursued since 2014. This articulation of nationhood involves "refusing queerness (Wilkinson 2018) and claiming 'whiteness'" in its nation-building project (Edenborg 2017; 2020c). Suchland (2018, 1078) aptly summarizes:

> The turn away from Soviet multiculturalism and the cultural prominence of Russian Orthodoxy has intensified the racialization of the category Russian (*Russkie*) as white as well as the ethnicization of non-ethnic Russians. Indeed, in his work on race and racism in Russia, Nikolay Zakharov argues that 'Russia appears determined to become as 'white' as possible' (Zakharov 2015, 5).

In this way, the inclusion of both queerness and "non-whiteness" becomes a way to challenge Russian heteronormative nationalism.

Furthermore, the struggle with naming additionally hints at the emergence of a hybrid culture, the contours of which I have sketched in this chapter, and for which there is no name (consistent with other theorizations of hybridity). Citing Derrida, Kraidy describes this futile attempt to fix hybridity, to give it a name. Hybridity, in this understanding is

> that which no longer allows itself to be understood within […] (binary) opposition, but which […] inhabits it, resists it and disorganizes it, but *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution (Derrida 1972, 58, emphasis in original, cited in Kraidy 2002).

Toward the end of both interviews, the participants began to reflect on whether, and how, the party would look after the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Dasha talked about the "naivety" of the party:

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[95] As Hutchings and Tolz (2015, 135) summarize, the "friendship of the peoples" metaphor was coined by Stalin in 1935 and used continually until the late Soviet period; it emphasized the importance of achieving Soviet unity and the central role of Russians in it. Yet, despite its certain Russo-centrism, Stalin's slogan did not presuppose the transformation of the Soviet Union into a Russified nation-state and stressed instead the multiethnicity and multiculturalism of the community of peoples of the USSR.

> DASHA: As I walk[ed] around the city [in party clothes], I was wearing a hockey jersey "Russia in my heart," and no one complained, or at least said anything. On the contrary, [were] like, "I have a skullcap [*tubeteika*], and I have an embroidered shirt [*vyshyvanka*]..."

Here Dasha remembers an example of a cultural mixture, expressed in people showing up to the parties in clothes that belong to different geographical regions.[96] The radical openness and mix of cultures in terms of both clothes and music, which met with little backlash, Dasha perceived to be "even strange to me now, because in the last year also colonialism [has been taken up]." The hockey jersey, a "banal nationalist" (Billig 1995) representation of the nation because of its naturalized appearances at sports events, is seen from the point of the dislocated discursive field of 2022, as political. This is because evoking any element, however loosely connected to "Russia" in the Swedish discourse now also conjures this very nodal point that is steeped in an ongoing military conflict with Ukraine. Misha says, for instance,

> MISHA: [we did] nothing extreme. It's like we never played the [Russian national] anthem.
>
> KIRILL: Why?
>
> MISHA: It would get political then.
>
> SOFIA: Although Dasha has sometimes walked around in her, I love Russia, shirt, you know, and I think that was…
>
> MISHA: at that point [when *Baba Bomba* was still held], if you say I love Russia, you wouldn't be.... It wouldn't necessarily mean you love the regime, or that you love the president. It would be just exactly this. […]
>
> […] at that point in Sweden there was still the separation, people would separate what Putin did and Russians or Russian culture [are]. Now it's just all together. Now there's no separation. […] You can tell the difference by the fact that we were able to organize these parties… and no one was protesting, or no one was trying to sabotage or anything. And now it's impossible.

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[96] A skullcap [*tubeteika*] is often worn by men in Central Asian countries, such as Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, as well as in Muslim-populated regions of Russia (e.g., Tatars) and Azerbaijan, and an embroidered shirt [*vyshyvanka*] is part of a traditional dress in Ukraine and Belarus.

How "exactly" the expression of love is to be interpreted is unclear, but Misha's desire to claim love for Russia should be seen in the light of the complicated history of Russia and the naturalized character of nationalism. Tora Berge Naterstad (2022), discussing expressions of Russian nationalism in fashion, has suggested that it has not been acceptable to claim to love Russia, because it necessarily entails a declaration of love for at least one of four violent states: a grossly unjust tsarist empire; an unfree communist state; a lawless post-Soviet chaos and, finally, the exclusionary national project of Putin's Russia. For those who fall outside, there has been no place for pride in one's own roots (Naterstad 2022). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia has thus once more changed the limits of the possible, more than ever sharply delineating the realms of what is sensible, permissible, sayable, and visible in public. The reliance on spontaneity, central to how the club events were organized in the past, is seen as impossible to practice, now and in the near future.

My interlocutors have described the party as a non-professional, spontaneous, safe environment with a mix of cultures, to which they have kept some ironic distance and as non-political precisely because of its "cultural" goal and character. In theoretical terms (Laclau 1990, 33–35), of course, this was precisely within the realm of *the political* – as opposed to *the social*. Laclau proposes to think of the social as the terrain of sedimented discursive practices. The political, by contrast, is defined as the moment of the institution of the social as well as the moment of the reactivation of the contingent nature of every institution. The horizon of the possible is to a large degree already circumscribed within the "social" realm. Whatever is not anticipated, throws out of joint the dominant discourses, and shakes up sedimented meanings. Bhabha's (1990a, 208) distinction between the pedagogical and performative modes of nationalism is useful here. In "performing" the nation (Russia) in a way that stresses the difference over unity, in geographic, ethnic, sexual, and cultural forms, the pedagogical can also be affected. In line with both discourse and postcolonial theory, I suggest, that the uses of music and national symbols at the club event reactivated sedimented social practices – i.e., practices that have gained their objective status because they can be anticipated based on their repetitive nature. Additionally, with the help of queer theory, I have argued that fixed ideas about national gender and sexuality were disrupted not just on an individual level, but at the level of the Russian diaspora as well.

The organizers, at the time of being interviewed in late 2022, positioned themselves in ways that reveal the existence of a monolithic idea of Russia,

which I understand to be the outcome of the strengthened articulation of the image of Russia around its central elements, such as war, Putin, and Ukraine. The club events allowed for the emergence of hybrid images of Russia in a landscape that was sedimented since 2014, yet while the parties were held, the connections between the elements of Russia and Putin have been flexible enough to allow for alternative articulations. With the change in the discursive landscape since February 2022, it is impossible to repeat the event the way it used to be organized – seizing the opportunity to construct, practice, and navigate hybridity, has been pushed into the past. The concluding parts of both my interviews stress the need for re-evaluating the meaning of Russianness and its cultural uses in Sweden and beyond; perhaps postcolonial and decolonial frameworks may provide the necessary impetus.

Conclusion

This chapter analyzed how hybridity has been constructed, practiced, and navigated during the club nights of *Baba Bomba* and what role sexuality and gender played in these constructions of hybridity. In doing so, I drew on two main understandings of hybridity: first, as a way to disturb the temporality and space of the Russian nation, and second, as a way to conceptualize the position of Russia vis-à-vis Sweden in the discourse on non-normative sexuality. Extending the findings of the previous chapters, I showed how the club events exist in the space between discourses of Sweden and Russia and challenge both of these discourses by mobilizing non-normative sexuality. In both Russian and Swedish discourses, discourses of hetero- and homonationalism respectively (Edenborg 2023), non-normative sexuality is incorporated in opposing ways. However, what remains a constant in both discourses is how the Muslim Other remains outside the boundaries drawn in both contexts.[97]

The party's hybrid approach and the expressions it engendered challenge the homogenizing picture of Russia, which I had identified in Chapters 1 and 2. While most images of Russia in the Swedish discourse tend to center around Moscow and St. Petersburg (except Sochi and Chechnya) and bound to its national borders, the parties of *Baba Bomba* gathered an array of cultures. Although the desire to eschew the umbrella

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[97] The Muslim Other (Edenborg 2023, 40, 47), however, is by no means the only subject position onto whom homophobia is displaced in both contexts. In the Swedish context, as I argued in Chapter 1, the heterosexual Russian occupies this position and in the domestic Russian discourse it is "the ordinary people" who need to be protected from "LGBT propaganda."

term "Russian" was not fully realized, despite adopting a name that seemingly has little to do with ethnic/political Russianness, embracing the geographic and cultural diversity has imbued the element "Russia" with alternative meanings. The presence of other cultures was not limited to the trite Soviet trope of "friendship of the peoples."

Sexuality of the Russian LGBT people is inseparable from processes of racialization. The Russian LGBT in Swedish media is a Russian in close proximity to whiteness. The media had few tools to deal with more radical examples of difference, such as in the case of reporting on tortures of Chechen gay men. Certain instances of everyday welcoming of Russian LGBT to Sweden also relied on the presumed whiteness of the invitees. The club nights, held in a Swedish context on the margins of the Swedish nation, in a diasporic space frequented by Russian speakers, destabilized these neat demarcations of queerness along lines of ethnicity as "white." In their practice, the club organizers stressed that non-ethnically Russians can also be non-heterosexual. From this position of being marginalized twice-over, in Russia and in Sweden, the organizers and participants used their sexuality to negotiate images of Russia in Sweden by queering and hybridizing them. Their hybrid approach to cultures as always already heterogenous, expressed in incorporations of symbols of ethnic and sexual difference, contributed to a negotiation of the image of Russia in Sweden.

The meaning of Russia was reassembled and hybridized by drawing on a variety of cultural impulses. This hybrid image, exceeding the sum of its components, remained highly contingent, and as such sensitive to the power differentials. The unequal power relations became highlighted in discussions of appropriateness of cultural borrowings and representations during the party and reflected the dislocatory effect of the Russian 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Parallel to this refusal of queerness by the Russian nation that pursues a heteronationalist project (Suchland 2018), some cultural production sponsored by the state has relied on the aesthetic and visual incorporations of queer expressions into Russianness (Engström 2021a), neutralizing the potential of aesthetics for queer resistance. Contrary to the parallel processes of Russian state co-optation of queer aesthetics, all the while excluding LGBT people, and ethnic consolidation, the club event succeeded in challenging Russia's self-image as exclusively white and hostile to LGBT people. For the Swedish context, it contributed in turn to a transformation of Russia's image by presenting a hybrid and queerly plural vision of Russia.

Conclusion

Contesting binaries

Sexuality is not only political, but geopolitical. Rather than mere descriptions of the "homofriendly" here and the "homophobic" there (Lalor and Browne 2023), geopolitical discourses of non-normative sexuality possess normalizing and naturalizing power. Ideas about non-normative sexuality are one of the central parts of national images, yet the intersection of non-normative sexuality and nation have only recently been explored in research. Ideas of non-normative sexuality were central for formations of national images of Russia and Sweden between 1991 and 2019, as this study demonstrated. Swedish discourses on Russian non-normative sexuality were found to be contingent yet historically sedimented and their degree of polarization grew throughout the period, paralleled by growing geopolitical tension between Russia and the West. This polarization was undergirded by assumptions of these two national discourses. On the one hand, the Swedish exceptionalism that retools the Western discourse of LGBT rights as norm by linking to a national history of exceptionalism, which has historically taken forms of welfare, moral, and gender exceptionalism. On the other hand, Russia as a "traditional" homogenous and heterosexual nation. Not only national images of Russia and Sweden have unfolded in this binary landscape. So have, as noted in previous research, images of countries in CEE and the Caucasus (Luciani 2022; Shirinian 2017; Plakhotnik 2019) and the Nordics (Jezierska and Towns 2021; Larsen, Moss, and Skjelsbæk 2021). Serving as a reflection of global LGBT politics, Russia and Sweden manifest examples of the binary between the LGBT-friendly West/the EU and the homophobic "traditional values" of Russia. The temporal and affective positioning of Russia in Swedish discourse is an example of how other local forms of activisms are made unintelligible, eliminating alternatives to the liberal model of LGBT rights and thus rendering it the only possibility (cf. Luciani 2022, 155ff.).

By juxtaposing the hegemonic discourse, explored in the first half of the book, with counter-hegemonic articulations in the second half, I found non-normative sexuality to have a dual role in the formation of national images. Non-normative sexuality can be conceived as both a tool in upholding the

binary sexual- and geo-political order and as a key site for challenging this order, prompting formation of social and political possibilities. The binary concepts of difference, which abound in academic, political and laypeople's accounts of national sexualities, can be productively complicated by attending to the ways sexuality, in counter-hegemonic practices and articulations in Sweden, actively complicates the representational model of visibility, and geotemporal and emotional landscapes, of which images of Russian non-normative sexuality are a part.

The Swedish media circulated assumptions about the subject positions of Russian and LGBT as if not mutually exclusive, then at least in conflict with each other (cf. Kehl 2020a). Russian LGBT people have been assigned by the Swedish media the subject position of the "normal homosexual," the gay rights holder. They thus exist in Swedish hegemonic discourse on the condition that they strive to and eventually become liberated from an oppressive Russian context. This reveals that national images are structured along normative ideas of intelligibility, manifesting as expectations of representation, visibility, and recognition.

Media and popular culture are crucial sites to the construction of the nation. Although hardly entirely separate from institutional politics and NGO-ized LGBT activism, exploration of these arenas proved fruitful to shed light on more banal forms of the uses of sexuality in the Swedish context. Analyses of the art projects and club events have brought into focus how the artists and the organizers challenge the normative schemes of intelligibility with participation of Russian LGBT people. The currency of homonormative visibility for Russian LGBT people and LGBT politics is marginal. Rather, in and through these counter-hegemonic practices, LGBT people emerge as queerly refusing to conform to expectations or norms dictated by both the Russian and the Swedish contexts. I advocated *queer recognition* of these attempts of Russian LGBT to remain unintelligible, which would allow sexually non-normative subjects to live their lives and sexuality without either being perceived as victim or folded into prefabricated respectable forms. Hybridity within the space of the club events, not limited to ethnic heteronormative hybridity, drew on subversive powers of sexuality and gender to queer the image of Russia. In embracing cultural hybridity, the organizers of and the visitors to the club nights disarticulated ethnic heterosexual (at times homosocial) Russianness as a privileged shorthand for representing Russia for foreign audiences. In counter-hegemonic discourse, LGBT people were offered alternative subject positions by being evacuated from the spaces

circumscribed by the strict national binary of Russia/Sweden and instead were placed on local/national and national/transnational levels.

In counter-hegemonic articulations, queer feelings were embraced, messing up the alignment of happiness and love that are attached to LGBT people in the West and facilitate their easy entry into symbolic and physical spaces of the Swedish nation, which understands itself as progressive. It further upsets the binary of Sweden with its acceptance of LGBT, on the one hand, and hate and the feeling of danger that characterize the exclusion of LGBT people in Russia, on the other. Examples of queer joy, in embracing sexuality rather than love, backward feelings (Love 2009) of hesitation, uncertainty, and melancholia, in refusing to be progressive and happy and, lastly, spontaneity and surprise, strategically embraced, make possible the suspension, if only temporarily, of the workings of power and temporalities of the Russian and Swedish nations.

(Re)articulations of the image of Russia beyond print media exemplify the ways the resulting totalities of meaning are never final and are always open to rearticulation, as highlighted by post-structuralist theories of discourse. Sexuality has had a central role for such rearrangements of symbols in the making of national images. In keeping with the work of the queer scholar of the diaspora Gayatri Gopinath (2018, 170), uses of sexuality in representational practices, in aesthetic and everyday realms, constituted a queer optic that allowed me to capture the entwined nature of the forces that produce visibility of certain practices and subjects while consigning others to invisibility. This queer optic, in turn, enabled me to grasp the queer relationalities between bodies, temporalities, and geographies that are produced and proscribed in discursive conditions undergirded by the overlapping histories of nationalism, sexual exceptionalism, and imperialism. Representations which capture instances of creating and dwelling in vibrant life-worlds, located in queer and hybrid spaces, askew ideas of progress and development, thereby undermining both Russian heteronationalist and Swedish homonationalist (Edenborg 2023) national projects.

Toward queerly plural images

Hegemonic discourse has stripped non-normative sexuality, as well as Russia and Sweden, of its complexity. In Swedish print media, articulations of binary difference with Russia have entrenched the existing discursive order. To draw out the implications of these arguments further, by articulating Russia with homophobia, Swedish media detaches homophobia from Swedishness.

Homophobia was portrayed as something that belongs to Swedish past and Russian present. Spatially, homophobia was situated in close proximity to Sweden, externalized *to* Russia, rather than as a social structure that also currently exists within Swedish society. Sweden is simultaneously presented as homofriendly, building on articulations of non-normative sexuality in terms of human rights, love, and normative arrangements of visibility. One principal problem here is that such constructions of Sweden thus conceal discrimination and violence inside Sweden, presenting it as isolated cases. The media, further, collapse the complexity of the Swedish LGBT experience to instances of visibility and liberation, with a disregard for queer experiences off the grid.

The counter-hegemonic articulations attempted to restore some of this complexity to Russian non-normative sexuality and thus to the image of Russia. While not denying that Russian LGBT people face hardships and violence in light of the discriminatory legislation, a queerly pluralizing approach employed in this book highlighted the nature of these struggles as determined simultaneously by opposing national discourses and their role in the creation of fixed geopolitical imaginaries. In exploring counter-hegemonic articulations of non-normative sexuality, taking place on the margins of the public sphere, images of Russian LGBT individuals, who are located queerly in relation to both Russian state and hegemonic structures of Western LGBT activism, emerge. These subjectivities should thus be viewed not simply as "normal homosexuals" (Weber 2016) – able to hold gay rights, but also as "perverse homosexuals," out-of-line with the temporal direction of progress. By focusing on "perverse homosexuals" in the counter-hegemonic articulations, I mean those Russian LGBT people who choose to position themselves sideways vis-à-vis the logics of outness, visibility, and recognition that serve as the organizing norms in Sweden. Unlike "the LGBT victims of the Russian state," and "the LGBT refugee," which become the hegemonic subject positions in Swedish media, some LGBT Russians refuse to "choose rights" or fold themselves into existing fields of intelligibility. They thus appear as temporally and emotionally "perverse," not wanting to conform to Western concepts of LGBT activism. From this queer vantage point, Russian LGBT emerge "as *either* normal *or* perverse while at the same time being normal *and* perverse" (Weber 2016, 196ff.). To clarify, they are simultaneously *either* "normal" in Western discourse, as long as they are visible, clashing with the state and putting their body in harm's way to protect their rights, *or* "perverse" in Russian discourse, seeking to disrupt the national project of belonging to the Russian nation, while at the same time they are,

in Swedish discourse, "normal" for wanting rights and "perverse" for not wanting rights or visibility in line with Western normative ideals of LGBT activism.

Although mainly focusing on the Russian image and suggesting a more diverse approach to Russian non-normative sexuality, my arguments should also be read as suggesting more complex and plural images of Sweden. Queer in this instance should be seen as necessarily excessive, refusing the forces of normalization in order to be put in the service of the nation. Rather than collaborating with images of the nation that end up co-opting them, queer in *queerly plural* is to serve as a critique of the orders of gender and sexuality and formations of state and nation that rely on and uphold them. This dissertation has suggested that we should pay greater attention to a rich(er) variety of ways of being LGBT, activisms, visual expressions, and practices of solidarity. These queer ways, which may not always be intelligible, immediately sensible or politically useful, are a way to move beyond binary labels of either "homofriendly" or "homophobic" countries and toward complex articulations of *and/or*, which would allow to further contest sexually non-normative subjects' inclusion and exclusions within nations.

Contributions to gender and sexuality studies

This and the following sections will present this study's empirical contribution to two scholarly fields: gender studies and Russian studies. In doing so, I will also offer some suggestions about relevant avenues for future research.

The findings in this thesis contribute to theoretical debates about visibility and recognition by drawing on theories that query normativity and intelligibility inherent in homonormativity. Attesting to limiting effects of visibility in both Russian and Swedish contexts for the lived expressions and representations of non-normative sexuality, the results are an invitation to ponder alternative formations of sexual politics. The questions that it has explored and invites us to think further upon is whether queer opacity, "alternative visibility," or some other configuration, is needed as a political solution to the hegemony of LGBT rights and visibility. Future research might further explore what sexual politics might look like if we see beyond the power-laden but highly naturalized ideas of LGBT intelligibility and visibility as precursors of emancipation.

To gender and sexuality studies, especially in a Swedish/Nordic context, the study has empirically contributed with an analysis of the uses of images of Russia for the construction of images of Sweden, showing how it is influ-

enced by histories and dynamics on national, regional, and global levels. I expanded the geographical scope of previous research, which so far has mostly focused on West/ Europe and its relations to the Muslim Other by concentrating on Russia as the second Other of Europe, occupying, one can say, an in-between position. Queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory can be applied in combination with local terms and in dialogue with local contexts in order to probe the intersections between non-normative sexuality and nation. Continuing earlier explorations of Swedish self-image, the dissertation highlighted the importance of sexuality for the Swedish national self-image in times of the neoliberal turn and in the context of Swedish/ Nordic branding.

Swedish sexual exceptionalism continues to evolve on the international and domestic arenas, and thus the findings of this book are relevant for future research that may explore how ideas of Swedish and Nordic exceptionalism evolve in their entanglements with non-normative sexuality. Some studies already point out that despite being a central part of the Swedish self-image, LGBT exceptionalism is currently subject to homophobic challenges from right-wing nationalist groups (Liinason 2023; Lagerman 2023). Still others demonstrate that homonationalism is employed strategically in activism and advocacy in Nordic and Western contexts (Liinason 2022; Novitskaya 2023). Such deployments nuance the subject positions of Russian and other LGBT people while strengthening existing homonationalist imaginaries.

Adding to research on the role of the Muslim Other, and besides showing that the image of Russia as Other is used for constructions of sexual exceptionalism, I have further argued that visibility and homonormativity are central to the construction of boundaries of LGBT-friendliness in Sweden, not only when it comes to foreign Others. There are various sexual Others who might be made invisible when the image of the middle-class cisgender individual or a happy same-sex couple is made to represent a Swedish sexual citizen. The question is then, who else, besides the foreign Other, is included and excluded?

Contributions to Russian studies

There is an urgent need to focus on the role of non-normative sexuality and gender in studies of Russian nation and nationhood. To Russian studies, the study has contributed with applications of queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory to show how these theories are central for understanding the articulation and circulation of the Russian image transnationally. In line with

recent developments of Russian studies, which incorporate Russophone studies, I pointed to the dual role of non-normative sexuality in articulations of the image of Russia abroad, in diasporic spaces and in foreign media and cultural (discursive) spaces. This echoes recent research that questions dominant discourses about Russian sexuality in the fields of queer cultural and media studies of Russia (Miazhevich 2022) and their circulation beyond national borders in literary scholarship (Doak 2020; Utkin 2023). Similarly focusing on the ways non-Russians and Russians abroad use Russian culture, I complicated the image of the Russian nation as a heterosexual and mono-ethnic entity with stable borders.

Complicating the ethnic Russianness was another contribution of this study. While in the Swedish context representations of non-ethnic Russianness were featured to a limited extent, their presence should be understood as a call for more attention to Russian ethnicity and its "whiteness." More research on lives of non-ethnically Russian LGBT people in Russia and abroad, in Western and non-Western contexts, would disrupt the hegemonic discourse that presently characterizes how Russian LGBT people are viewed globally.

The new Russian legislation (see more in the next section) that intervenes in regulation of sexuality is a catalyst of research on lives of LGBT Russians, both "in exile" and inside Russia. These developments raise questions of how Russians' sexuality is played out in entanglements with material realities and digital cultures. How are the protean notions of non-normative sexuality enabled and constrained by the affordances in these realms? Research has so far been limited to studies of Russian lesbians and gay men in larger cities, and even that research was conducted in conditions that have dramatically changed in recent years. More attention is needed to trans* Russians, who have built vibrant support networks (Kirey-Sitnikova 2020). Regional activities and queer lives also need to be explored to show how quotidian lives of LGBT people and activists resist within diminishing spaces that make possible practices of freedom. A number of podcasts have emerged as a challenge to the visual hegemony of LGBT expression, while the YouTube series Queerography (*Kvirografiia*) has sought to challenge the metronormative West-centric conceptions of how LGBT lives in Russia should be lived. These forms of everyday queer lives, LGBT activism and their online presence, have only marginally been explored (Andreevskikh and Muravyeva 2021; Andreevskikh 2018). Studies of more institutionalized forms of Russian LGBT activism, in exile and online, are also needed in order to further query the efficiency of Western activist strategies.

Beyond a narrow focus on Russian non-normative sexuality, this study is also a contribution to research that may be interested in Russians' practices of resistance against the discourses of the Russian state and Western visions more broadly. Drawing on the understanding of Russian nationhood as queerly plural and hybrid, future research may look into how Russians re-signify the elements of state discourse to carve out spaces for themselves within Russia and position themselves globally. In this thesis, I have suggested that the proliferating diasporic contexts are among privileged sites for elements of Russianness to be clearly articulated and emphasized, opening up for creative re-signification that troubles divisions along the lines of sexuality, gender, nation, and ethnicity.

Leveraging the insights of postcolonial theory to understand the colonialism of Western LGBT rights discourse, discussed above, this dissertation took as its starting point the attempt to locate Russia in the context of global coloniality and as a colonial agent. In so doing, it has hoped to contribute to ongoing discussions in that sub-field of Russian studies. While it might be too early to say what Russian postcolonial studies might look like and what narratives they should privilege (Koplatadze 2019; Morozov 2020), this study has demonstrated that such conversations are inevitable. The decolonial option has been employed as a mode of activism and as an academic approach to disrupt imaginaries of an ethnically monolith Russia and shed light on the ways recent and current history is bound up with a violent colonial project of modernity (Tlostanova 2010; 2018). Some research has already highlighted the utility of post- and decolonial approaches for studying femininity (Gradskova 2019), masculinity (Yusupova 2023) and sexuality (Wiedlack 2023; Dorogov 2022) in Russian-speaking contexts. Further interrogations can decenter the West- and Eurocentrism of Russia's national project and its image in the world, particularly in its connection to ideas of gender and sexuality. This points to the need to re-think Russia not as simply a straggler with respect to LGBT and human rights, but as an empire in the process of acquiring a new shape. Grasping the role of non-normative sexuality along with ethnic plurality is central for how these changes will unfold.

What has changed and ways ahead

The context of this research has changed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Launched in February 2022, it introduced a shift in the security in the region, leading to human suffering on a grand scale. Although the media

material analyzed concerns the period until 2020, the impacts of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine leave their traces on this study, especially in Chapter 4.

The geopolitical escalation mirrors the developments highlighted in the introduction, wherein Russian authorities have exploited the full-scale invasion of Ukraine to enact new laws to heighten the securitization of politics and to curtail public political engagement. In December 2022, a ban on "gay propaganda" among Russians of all ages was implemented. Subsequently, in July 2023, legal and medical gender transition was prohibited, and by the end of November 2023, the "international LGBT movement" was officially designated as an "extremist organization" in Russia. This legislation constricts the expression and lives of LGBT people in profound ways.

Some Russians have chosen to leave the country, but most continue to live in conditions of economic precarity, lack of political representation, a closing down of the public sphere and diminishing opportunities for expression. A brief moment of "queer renaissance" in Russian popular culture serving to neutralize queer expressions through populist aesthetics (Engström 2021b) has passed. Russian music and film now communicate clearer messages of nationalism, although possibilities for rearticulation have not completely closed, which can be seen in the examples of the continued politicization of Russian popular culture and music (Morozov, Reshetnikov, and Gaufman 2022). At the time of finalizing this thesis in December 2023, the image of Russia in Sweden is increasingly securitized, with non-normative sexuality displaced by a broader gamut of political concerns, while possibilities for alternative articulations seem few in both Russian and the Swedish contexts. At the same time, Russian feminist, queer, and antiwar spokespersons are part of the "Russian voices" in Swedish media and cultural spaces.

I take this ongoing securitization of Russia's image in the world, and not least in Sweden, to be an invitation for critique. After all, violent conflicts and antidemocratic and nationalist visions of the world have been integral to the current politically (il)liberal and economically neoliberal global order. Even in times of armed conflict, analyses of the role of gender and sexuality are central. This relevance is underscored by the framing of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in civilizational terms and the elevation of LGBT rights to geopolitical concerns. The task of research might then be not so much to "propos[e …] a way out, but rather a survival guide in wading through" (Manalansan 2018, 1288) the current messy and violent conditions, and in doing so to prefigure alternatives to mainstream LGBT rights agendas and modes of activism. In attempting to stay immune to the drawbacks of

(hetero)nationalism and homonationalism, imperialism and neoliberalism, these critiques might challenge us to imagine alternative futures.

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Summary

This study explores how ideas of non-normative sexuality affect and are affected by the formation of national images. With the help of queer, feminist, and postcolonial theory and relying methodologically on poststructuralist discourse-theoretical analysis with a queer sensibility, I analyze the images of Russia constructed, negotiated, and circulated in Swedish news media, music videos, arts, and club events. Representations of the image of Russia in the Swedish context are studied with attention to notions of space, temporality, and emotion, offering ways to disrupt binary conceptions of Russia as homophobic and Sweden as *homonational*. I also problematize the *representational model of visibility* (Edenborg 2017) by destabilizing the relationships between representation, visibility, and recognition of LGBT people and thus suggesting alternative ways to conceptualize LGBT politics. The arguments across the chapters demonstrate that non-normative sexuality has been central to the Swedish hegemonic and counter-hegemonic constructions of the image of Russia, on the one hand, and the self-image of Sweden, on the other.

The analysis of Swedish hegemonic textual and visual discourse on Russia in the first half of the dissertation demonstrates opposing constructions of Sweden and Russia in relation to non-normative sexuality in the mainstream media and examples of popular culture. Russian LGBT people are positioned as a "normal homosexual" (Weber 2016, 105), a rights-holder in need of salvation from homophobia in Russia. The intelligibility of these sexually non-normative individuals as LGBT people is determined by participating in visibility or alignment with LGBT symbols, such as the rainbow.

In chapter 1, the discourse on Russian non-normative sexuality in the five largest daily newspapers is analyzed. I demonstrate how, throughout the period 1991–2019, Russia is portrayed as a temporal and affective Other while, in geographical terms, as a close neighbor. In Russia, there is no future for LGBT people, it is said to be a place of backwardness, loneliness, homophobia, and danger. These articulations of Russia have worked to uphold a specific iteration of global *homonationalist* (Puar 2007) discourse, a discourse of Swedish sexual exceptionalism, which builds on a history of Swedish exceptionalism since the 1930s, taking forms of welfare, moral, and gender

exceptionalism. *Swedish sexual exceptionalism* is constructed in affective and temporal terms of responsibility and progress in contrast to Russia. These representations, stripping Russian LGBT lives of complexity by putting them in subject positions structured along binaries, often ignore the rich history of the LGBT movement and cultural production in Russia, thereby communicating to the Swedish reader skepticism about life in Russia.

Chapter 2 continues to probe Swedish hegemonic discourse on Russia. It studies visual representations of Russian sexuality in print media, whose textual discourse has already been analyzed in Chapter 1, and in examples from popular culture – two YouTube videos, "Propaganda!" by Måns Zelmerlöw and "*Folkkär*" by Kamferdrops feat. Frej Larsson, and contextual descriptions of the Stockholm Pride campaign GoWest2013 and Melodifestivalen 2009. It suggests that the need to "save Russia" is articulated through specific articulations of *visibility* (Edenborg 2020b), which circumscribe the field of *intelligibility* (J. Butler 2004a), as well as through camp visual aesthetics, which reinforce the idea of Swedish exceptionalism by circulating messages of love—something I have interpreted as a *political emotion* (Ahmed 2004). Operating with a narrow understanding of visibility, these articulations sideline Russian LGBT individuals and disregard the existence of Russian queer visual aesthetics in favor of bolstering the Swedish self-image.

The second half of the dissertation delves into examples of counter-hegemonic articulations. It focuses on practices that mobilize alternative conceptualizations of space, temporality, and emotion, to disturb hegemonic discourse. It finds that queer imaginaries of space and temporality can lead to a destabilization of boundaries, yet for that both hetero- and homonormativity have to be abandoned. Queer, feminist, and postcolonial sensibilities, which serve both as inspirations for the artists and organizers *and* as analytical lenses in this dissertation, allow for a reconfiguration of representations of Russian non-normative sexuality, Russian LGBT people, and, consequently, images of Russia.

Chapter 3 examines two visual arts projects, *State of Mind* by Axel Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg, and *At the Time of the Third Reading* by Axel Karlsson Rixon. With the help of queer theory's critiques of linear historical progression and attachment to positive emotions, the chapter considers how LGBT people are visually represented beyond traditional textual and visual media. The artists represent Russian lesbian, bisexual, and queer women's ways of occupying space (Massey 2005) and temporality (Halberstam 2005). The chapter argues that art presents a chance for an alternative mode of *recognition* (J. Butler 2009) of Russian LGBT

people in Swedish visual discourse, what I call *queer recognition*. This mode of recognition can arise if visibility is de-centered, and once ways of being and *feeling backward* (Love 2009), sideways (Freeman 2010) and in the space of in/exteriority (Yurchak 2006) to hegemonic national discourses of non-normative sexuality, are foregrounded.

Chapter 4 explores the construction and performance of a *hybrid* (Bhabha 1990a) image of Russia with the help of non-normative arrangements of gender and sexuality at *Baba Bomba Diskoteka*, a series of club events held in Stockholm from 2017 to 2019 by a group of Russian-speaking friends. Through a discourse analysis of interviews with organizers of the club events supplemented by visual and textual material available online, the chapter focuses on the uses of clothes, music, and dance with the aim of reconfiguring of the norms of national gender (Yuval-Davis 1997; Nagel 1998) and sexuality (Puar 2007; Suchland 2018). The chapter traces the uses of non-sexuality to position themselves and create a queer and hybrid space wherein the hegemonic images of both Russia and Sweden are resisted.

The concluding chapter outlines this study's results and its contributions to the fields of gender and sexuality studies and Russian studies. The analysis of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic articulations points out the double role of non-normative sexuality in the formation of national images. Sexuality can be conceived as both a tool in upholding the binary sexual- and geopolitical global order and as a key site for the formation of alternative social and political possibilities. This complex role of sexuality is elucidated by juxtaposing the analyses of hegemonic discourse, presented in the first two chapters of the thesis, with examples of counter-hegemonic discourses, in the thesis' second part. Binary concepts of difference, which abound in academic, political and laypeople's accounts of national sexualities, can be productively complicated by attending to alternative configurations of space, time, and emotion. Non-normative sexuality in counter-hegemonic representations in the Swedish context offered ways to complicate the notions of Western sexual politics, which underpin both the hegemonic discourse of Swedish sexual exceptionalism and ideas of Russia as ethnically homogenous and heterosexual.

Södertörn Doctoral Dissertations

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2. Xavier Fraudet, *Politique étrangère française en mer Baltique (1871–1914): de l'exclusion à l'affirmation*, 2005
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How do ideas of non-normative sexuality affect the way countries are perceived? How are ideas of non-normative sexuality affected by national images?

To answer these questions, the dissertation focuses on discourses on Russian non-normative sexuality in Sweden from 1991 to 2019. The first two chapters draw on texts and images from the five largest Swedish newspapers, as well as examples from popular culture. The second part of the thesis focuses on photographic and video art projects by Axel Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg, as well as a series of Stockholm club events called *Baba Bomba Diskoteka*. Paying attention to temporality, space, and emotions as three central elements in understanding non-normative sexuality, the analysis moves beyond binary ideas of "LGBTQ-friendly here and homophobic there" making a case for queerly plural images of nations and sexualities.

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