The Photographic Representation of the Russian LGBT community's current situation

María Paloma Velázquez
BA(Hons) Photography
2014
In June 2013 the State Duma (the lower chamber of the Russian parliament) of the Russian Federation in Moscow, confirmed and signed by current president, Vladimir V. Putin, passed a legislation that bans “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships” (Nissen, 2014, para. 1) to minors, commonly known as the Anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual (LGBT) law. Russia being traditionally known as a post-Soviet, conservative country that has an abstract view and implementation of democracy has now officially become a human rights oppressor, causing worldwide indignation (Nissen, 2014, para. 2). This essay aims to discuss a comprehensive view on the present situation of this minority community facing everyday life and a general understanding of the politic, theoretical and religious background behind such legislature through the work of Russian and international artist photographers such as Anastasia Korosteleva, Slava Mogutin and Mads Nissen. Photography; a strong and direct medium in media has become a key channel for artists as well as Russian citizens to depict and express the struggle these people have to face in their home country. As the state’s own workers judiciously edit the media in Russia, it has become a fight that those who do not take part in, can hardly understand.

The Russian Federation is a constitutionally democratic semi-presidential republic where the head of the state is the president (Bacon, 2010, p. 98), who rules with but independent from the relatively weaker parliament, that is the legislature force. The president nominates the prime minister, who is currently the former president, Dmitry A. Medvedev, and is head of the executional sector alongside the presidential administration and the government, both of which he appoints and has the right to dismiss anytime. This institutional structure partly explains why the consolidation of democracy is failing. Also, being the capital republic of the Soviet Union up until 1991, the transition as a post-Communist country from totalitarian dictatorship to democratic presidency was not an easy procedure and is still ongoing, as there has not been a real regime change after adapting democratic ideologies following the fall of the USSR.
It is also important to note that most national broadcast media, including some regional broadcasting, belong to the state or are owned by state-friendly companies (Bacon, 2010, p. 156-158). Whilst some oppositional voices and published critical newspapers are tolerated, any signs of individualist contentions cause them to revert to measures they believe are sufficient. The state sees the media as an object of intervention and thinks that strengthening control over it is essential to national security (Bacon, 2010, p. 111). Bacon’s work (Bacon, 2010, p. 159) posits that Russia ranks second according to the International News Safety Institute, in the number of journalists killed on duty between 1997 and 2007 (Bacon, 2010, p. 159). These deaths were instantly tied to criticism of media freedom, although in many cases it is difficult to draw a clear conclusion in journalists’ deaths as being the result of their work.

In spite of the freedom of worship being constitutionally guaranteed in Russia, the state religion and carrier faith of people is the Orthodox Church. Orthodox Christianity has a strong idea of restoring traditional values and morals, including the conservative family portrait of a straight, heterosexual married couple with their own children (“Orthodox Statement on Homosexuality”, n.d.). It also promotes changelessness and timelessness where the doctrine of faith does not ever change. The Russian heritage is so closely associated with Orthodoxy that even today it is an important part of national identity. Being Russian, hence being Orthodox is a common view among most ethnic Russians (Bressler, 2009, p. 343) and as the Orthodox Church strongly disapproves of homosexuality, most citizens supported the banning of 'gay propaganda' as soon as it was announced.

The law set administrative fines for LGBT propaganda for 4.000 to 5.000 Russian rubles for individuals (around £67-£83), which is around 1/6 of an average monthly wage (“Russia Average Monthly Wages”, n.d.) and up to 800.000 to 1 million rubles for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), corporations or other legal entities (around £13.400-£16.700). Harsher fines are permitted for propaganda on the Internet and other media networks as well as for foreign citizens. Foreigners
can also be arrested and imprisoned for 15 days as well as facing deportation. On top of all this, the State Duma introduced a draft law in September 2013 making 'non-traditional sexual orientation' a cause for denying custody to LGBT parents. This means that the anti-gay propaganda law should apply within the family as well, so it is justified to remove children from parents living in LGBT relationships or from couples being suspected of engaging in such behaviour. This homophobic wave countrywide has caused social discrimination, harassment, violent attacks and 'hate crimes' from religious and extreme nationalist groups and has resulted in several suicides and emigrations (“The Facts on LGBT Rights in Russia“, n.d.). The emergence of a larger LGBT resistance movement is also uprising, as activist groups hold frequent demonstrations and protests despite being arrested and abused by police forces as well as anti-gay extremists (Fedorova, 2013).

According to Aristophanes's Classical theory on homosexuality, the world was once made up of conjoined beings, some of mixed sex, others of two men or two women, and when Zeus divided these beings into separate individuals, sexuality was determined by the search for one's missing half, either of the same or different sex (Morland & Willix, 2005, p. 101). LGBT implies everyone who is part of a non-normative sexuality, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual, meaning distinctive from heterosexuality and its dominant sexual norms. This social constructionism is what created the norms, ergo, identity categories and lead to the fundamental act of repression. Sexuality is part of this socially constructed identity, that within the limits of physiology and the surrounding culture changes over time. One of the ideas of Queer Theory is that gender is a performance, a costume everyone puts on, only in drag performances this is worn backwards (Morland & Willix, 2005, p. 8). However, homosexuality was not always a criminal or mentally disordered state. In fact, it has been argued that the labelling of homosexuals as identities has only been common from the last decades of the 19th century (Morland & Willix, 2005, p. 98). Before it became a general social stigma and attracted a sense a shame, in Greek mythology homosexual activity was idealized and celebrated and within
women can be traced back to the 6th century BC to the literature of Sappho (Morland & Willix, 2005, p. 100).

A good starting point to understand why homosexuality is seen as a crime against nature, hence a crime against the church and the state, is Michael Foucault's idea, that because sexuality has such an intimate and biological character, it is the aspect of humans that is most open to the exercise of power relations in modern society (Dyer, 1993, p. 25). Even though someone's sexuality should not imply anything else about their personality, some still feel the need to reassure themselves about their position as a human, projecting their own sense of values onto the world and stereotyping those who in their opinions do not 'belong' to society, making them feel as outcasts (Dyer, 1993, p. 14).

This notion and feeling is what Mads Nissen's images reflect in the Photo Essay: The Dangers of Being Gay in Russia (“Homophobia in Russia”, n.d.). Nissen is a Dutch photographer who travelled to Russia in 2013 to document the homophobia in the country. His photographs portray the intimate and sometimes tragic moments of gay couples and activists in St. Petersburg. He also documented the oppositional side, the young ultra-nationalists and skinheads who violently try to stop LGBT people from openly expressing themselves at public protests or even private rallies. Small captions to each image introduce the subjects and describe their situation. The use of natural lighting and warm toned colours allow the viewer to enter the lives of these individuals, while looking at their picture and understanding all the tension and sadness behind their beings.
This photograph (Figure 1) portrays a young gay couple, Pavel and Kirill, who hold each other’s hand in public, which is something most LGBT people would not dare to do. Although Pavel has been attacked six times in the last year for being gay, he and his boyfriend still insist on being able to show their affection and their right to be open about their sexuality (Nissen, 2014). This image reflects the beautiful light and the vulnerable, almost Pieta-like position that the two lovers hold each other. Placing them in a shadowy spot is a metaphor of their true selves being forced to hiding in the dark, while the symbolism of the flower on the right refers to the common link of homosexuality with femininity, also resembling the growing force of the LGBT movement and activism.
On this second image (Figure 2), as oppose to the previous one, we can see an Orthodox priest and his wife walking past and smiling at a gay activist who has been hit with an egg at a rally (Nissen, 2014). The cruel grin on both faces reflect hatred and superiority, clearly demonstrating how even religious clerks treat LGBT people in a humiliating and ridiculing manner. Christianity is meant to promote humanity and generosity towards mankind, but instead the Church marginalises homosexuals, relegating them to the peripheries of society. This image is also a perfectly captured one because of how it illustrates today's society with the observers in the background. Witnessing the violent attacks and injustice encourages them to record it on their phones and cameras, instead of intervening.
The work of both Slava Mogutin and Anastasia Korosteleva take a more abstract approach on the same subject, making use of other attributes of photography as visual art. Mogutin's series, 'In The Name of Love' (Figure 3) is an autobiographical piece. He was forced out of Russia in the 90s, due to persecution for his gay activism as a controversial and homosexual writer (Fedorova, 2013). The level of intimacy and self-exposure in his work is much greater, as some of the Polaroids' depict his friends and himself too. His lavishly coloured and composed photographs are very dreamy and romantic, resembling male imagery from the Classical antiquity. His Greek sculpture-like figures are strong, masculine man, whose probable sexual orientation is only given away by the rich, vivid colours, the gloomy lighting, and in some of the images, the kitschy props and clothing. This piece is a good example of how masculinity and femininity are traditionally defined in heterosexuality, assuming that gay men and lesbian women are not 'real men' or 'real women', giving space for an in-between gender that differs from the rigid, heterosexual characteristics (Dyer, 1993, p. 36).
Anastasia Korosteleva's photographs, on the other hand, concentrate on the womanly aspect of Russian homosexuality. Her series, 'Girls' (Image 4), that also featured in the finals of a Nokia photo competition, reflect today's Russian youth culture in its imperfect completeness, which she is an integral part of. Her tender, idealistic portraits of a pair of unknown girls, whose faces have been burnt in, emphasise the fear of LGBT individuals (especially lesbians) who often want their identities to stay hidden because of the threats they have to confront subsequently. It can also be interpreted as a metaphor for violent attackers who see no limits when it comes to the insult and abuse of LGBT people, the burnt in faces representing the deaths of many homosexuals after coming out publicly. Besides, her images could signify the notion of 'coming out' as a construction of the gay self, the first step in becoming an honest, complete identity or in this case, the fear of it.
Ultimately, the Russian Federation is giving a very hard time to its LGBT community, restricting its physical and mental freedom and criminalizing it by the passing of the anti-gay propaganda law. The roots for such discrimination lie in the formal (and present) political ideologies and institutions, tied together with the extremely conservative religious beliefs that most Russian citizens carry. Although the Russian media coverage on the issue is sparse and mostly state supportive, the international world news and media networks are expressing their deep concerns on the endangerment of human rights of LGBT people (The Council for Global Equality, n.d.). The role of artists, and photographers in particular is to raise awareness of all the action that is going on both against and in favour of these individuals. They have the power through liberal publications and online media to fight the inequality by using and sharing their images as a notion of protest. By transmitting that LGBT is just as natural as the currently accepted norms of heterosexuality and its gender order, a further step could be taken, eventually leading to the acknowledgement of this essential truth by every nation.
Bibliography


**List of figures**

**Figure 1.**

**Figure 2.**
A priest from the Russian Orthodox Church smiles with his wife, left, as a one of the gay-activists was hit by an egg at a rally in St. Petersburg. Nissen, M. (2014). *Photo Essay: The Dangers of Being Gay in Russia*. Retrieved from http://www.newsweek.com/being-gay-russia-just-got-harder-228592

**Figure 3.**

**Figure 4.**