ORCA – Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/128198/

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Brock, Maria and Edenborg, Emil 2020. 'You cannot oppress those who do not exist': Gay persecution in Chechnya and the politics of in/visibility. GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 26 (4) , pp. 673-700. 10.1215/10642684-8618730

Publishers page: http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/10642684-8618730

Please note:
Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.

"You cannot oppress those who do not exist": Gay persecution in Chechnya and the politics of in/visibility

Authors:

Maria Brock, *School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University,* Cardiff.

Emil Edenborg, *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, Stockholm.

To appear in: *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*

Date of acceptance: 03 Januart 2020
To be published: Issue 27.1 (January 2021)

This is a PDF file of an article which has been accepted, but is not yet the definitive version of record. This version will undergo additional copyediting, typesetting and review before it is published in its final form, but we are providing this version to give early visibility of the article. Please note that during the production process errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

Journal pre-proof

Abstract: Reports in April 2017 regarding a state-initiated wave of homophobic persecution in Chechnya attracted worldwide outrage. Numerous witnesses spoke of arrests, abuse and murders of gay men in the republic. In response, a spokesman of Chechnya's president Kadyrov claimed that "you cannot oppress those who do not exist". In this paper, with the anti-gay purge in Chechnya and in particular the denial of queer existence as our starting point, we will examine more deeply processes of erasure and disclosure of queer populations in relation to state violence and projects of national belonging. We discuss 1) what the events in Chechnya tell us about visibility and invisibility as sites of queer liberation, in light of recent discussions of LGBT visibility politics; 2) what the episode tells us about the epistemological value of queer visibility, given widespread media cynicism and disbelief in the authenticity of images as evidence; and 3) what role the (discursive and physical) elimination of queers plays in relation to spectacular performances of nationhood. Taken together, our findings contribute to a more multifaceted understanding of the workings of visibility and invisibility and their various, sometimes contradictory, functions in both political homophobia and queer liberation.

Journal pre-proof

Introduction

In spring 2017, reports about a wave of state-initiated homophobic persecution in Chechnya attracted worldwide outrage. On 1 April, the Russian Kremlin-critical newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported that more than a hundred Chechen men who were accused of sexual relations with other men had recently been detained by local law enforcement and security authorities and brought to secret prisons where they were electroshocked, beaten with sticks and in some cases killed, in a campaign of what was called “prophylactic purges” (Milashina 2017a). Subsequent reports by critical Russian media and LGBT organizations painted a gruesome picture of a large number of men suspected of being gay being detained and tortured, and in some cases killed, either at the hands of the Chechen security services or by male family members after being released to their families. Later reports concluded that also lesbians and trans women were targeted (Proyekt Kvir-zhenshchiny Severnogo Kavkaza 2018). The purges of 2017 were followed by a second wave of persecution in late 2018-early 2019 (Russian LGBT Network 2019a).

When asked about the first reports, Al’vi Karimov, press secretary of Chechnya’s president Ramzan Kadyrov, dismissed them as “lies and disinformation” intended to vilify the republic. In a statement that made international headlines, he claimed that

> you cannot detain and oppress those who simply do not exist in the republic (…) If such people had existed in Chechnya, law enforcement would not need to worry about them, as their own relatives would already have sent them to a place from whence they would not return (Meduza 2017).

Similarly, on an interview with HBO, president Kadyrov himself stated:

> We don’t have those kinds of people here. We don’t have any gays. If there are any, take them to Canada. Praise be to God. Take them far from us so we don’t have them at home. To purify our blood, if there are any here, take them (…) They are devils, they are for sale, they are not people (*nel’udi*)(Washington Post 2017).

Journal pre-proof

In this rhetoric, queers are doubly erased in a violent paradox: the speakers insist that not only are there no queer people, but even if there were queer people, there would be none, as they would be dead or have fled the country already.

The claim that people who engage in same-sex relations are not simply behaving immorally or contradicting "traditional values", but in fact *do not exist* in a specific location or community is in itself not new or unique to Chechnya. Weeks before the news about the Chechnya repressions broke, the mayor of Svetogorsk, a Russian town with 15,000 inhabitants near the Finnish border, publicly announced that his town did not have a single homosexual, not even passing ones from the West, and invited other Russian politicians to come and learn about how his town had achieved such, as he described it, "amazing results" (gazeta.ru 2017). Before the opening of the 2014 Winter Olympics, Sochi's mayor proclaimed that there were no gays in his town (Raibman 2014). If we look outside Russia, Iran's former president Ahmadinejad famously said during a speech at New York's Columbia University that "In Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country" (Goldman 2007). During the 2019 European Parliament election campaign, several local town councils in Poland declared their cities to be "LGBT free" (Goclowski and Wlodarczak-Semczuk 2019). The denial of homosexual existence is also an established trope within conservative Christian congregations in the United States, such as when a top leader of the Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints in 2016 declared that Mormons do not discriminate against LGBT people because "there are no homosexual members of the church" (Wong 2016).

Journal pre-proof

This raises important questions about anti-LGBT oppression and the politics of visibility. On the one hand, to deny the existence of a certain population, in this case people engaging in same-sex relations, an act of radical invisibilization. At the same time, such a denial may also have, whether intended or not, a spectacular dimension, as it draws attention both to the speaker (being praised, denounced or ridiculed) and to the category of people whose existence is being denied. Indeed, in the case of Chechnya, while the violence took place in secret, the exposure of the anti-gay campaign made Chechnya and Kadyrov (and to a degree, Russia) more visible in the form of international notoriety. That a state makes such a denial at the same time as it

is pursuing an organized campaign to violently harass, scare, torture and kill those very people whose existence it denies, points at the interconnectedness of discursive and bodily erasure (Taylor 1997). The fact that the repressions involved on the one hand forced *erasure* (in the state's denial of queer existence), and on the other hand forced *disclosure* (when the victims, as we will see, were exposed as queer on the basis of telephone records or witness reports, and in some cases forced to public repentance) points to the ambivalent functions of visibility in projects of state homophobia (Edenborg 2019a). Simultaneously, it suggests that invisibilization of certain gendered and sexualized bodies may be performative in bringing about a certain idea of the nation (Baer 2013).

In this paper, with the anti-gay purge in Chechnya as our starting point, we examine the workings of queer visibility, and more specifically erasure and disclosure of queer populations, as part of violent projects of national belonging and state consolidation. The study makes a theoretical contribution to critical debates about visibility and its place in queer politics, especially beyond Western contexts (Ross 2005; Ritchie 2010; Moussawi 2015; Wilkinson 2017). We ask three questions. First, given how central themes of visibility and "coming out" have been to Western-style LGBT activism and solidarity actions, as well as to queer theorizing, does the denial of queer existence accompanying state homophobia have implications for how to understand *visibility as a site of queer liberation politics*, its possibilities and dangers? Second, against the background of the cynical skepticism expressed by Chechen and Russian authorities and in much Russian-language media generally concerning the veracity of testimonies and images presented as evidence of the atrocities, how can we understand the *epistemological status of queer visibility* (in the form of narratives and/or images) in the current media landscape? Third, what role does the erasure of queers (as subjects within the community) and their simultaneous hypervisibilization (as demonized Others) play in relation to *spectacular performances of nationhood?* The discussion draws empirically on Russian media reporting and international English language coverage of the 2017-2019 events in Chechnya, visual material in the form of video-recorded witness accounts and interviews, as well as reports by Russian and international human rights organizations. However, ultimately our aims are theoretical rather than empirical. We proceed by providing a brief background of the events in Chechnya 2017-2019, locating them in several contexts: the socio- and geopolitical

Journal pre-proof

situation in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, Russian state homophobia, and a more global surge of “traditional values” discourses observable in many parts of the world in the 2010s. Then, we examine, in turn, the three aspects of visibility mentioned above: the double-edged sword of visibility, the meanings of queer visibility in an increasingly cynical media environment, and the relation between queer (in)visibility and spectacles of nationhood.

Chechnya’s anti-gay purge: local, national and global contexts

While many details are difficult to corroborate, Russian critical news media (primarily *Novaya Gazeta*, but also *Meduza*, *Radio Svoboda*, *Dozhd’* and others), Russian NGOs (primarily the Russian LGBT Network) and international human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) provide a relatively coherent account of the events which unfolded in Chechnya starting in in early 2017. Their descriptions are to a large extent based on interviews with victims, the majority of whom have remained anonymous for fear of violent repercussions should they come forward. According to these accounts, in late February 2017 a man was detained by the Chechen police for suspected drug use. Searching through his phone, the police found material indicating sexual contacts with other men, and through such “snowballing” based on social media and phone contacts, other men were detained (Milashina and Gordinenko 2017). During the following weeks, dozens of men suspected of “non-traditional sexual orientation” were brought to secret detention centers, where they were beaten with sticks and pipes, kicked and electroshocked, as well as subjected to verbal abuse (Human Rights Watch 2017). Among the detained were representatives of the Chechen muftiate and a well-known TV personality (Milashina 2017a). After detention ranging from a few days to several weeks, most of the men were released to their families, and in some cases forced to confess and repent to elder male relatives, at the risk of being killed (Kost’uchenko 2017; Milashina 2017b). Thus, while the local Chechen authorities played an important role, it was clear that LGBT repressions were embedded in – and relied on - familial and social relations, including so called “honor culture”. According to the first reports, at least three men were confirmed killed (Milashina and Gordinenko 2017). In early 2019, it was reported that a second wave of repressions had begun in

Journal pre-proof

December 2018, detaining 40 people, at least two of whom were killed (Russian LGBT Network 2019a). At the time of writing, the ultimate number of casualties is unknown. By April 2019, the Russian LGBT Network had helped more than 150 people flee from Chechnya, most of whom had left Russia (Russian LGBT Network 2019b, see also Kondakov 2019b).

While the first reports only mentioned male victims, it was subsequently reported that also lesbian women and transwomen had been targeted. The apparent focus and over-representation of men, rather than indicating more accepting attitudes to lesbians in Chechnya, attest to men's relatively larger freedom of movement and socialization when compared to women (Gessen 2017). Indeed, in 2017 Chechen authorities stepped up their "women's virtue campaign" aiming to ensure that women wear headscarves in public and submit to their men. An online group had, apparently with the authorities' approval, posted photos of women and called for their punishment (Human Right Watch 2018). Igor Kochetkov of Russia's LGBT Network confirmed that over the space of 2 years, 37 lesbian and 2 transwomen had turned to the organization for help escaping Chechnya (Mirmaksunova 2019). He also confirmed that the second anti-gay campaign of late 2018 led to women being detained, tortured and raped. However, the 'double oppression' experienced by lesbian and gender non-conforming women in Chechnya means that it has been virtually impossible to speak to female victims of the campaign, who fear additional retribution from their families, so that in consequence many were forced into further silence (Khazov-Kassia 2017, Rim 2019). Their situation can thus also be seen to once more highlight the frequent invisibility of lesbian and transwomen in queer politics based on the liberation-through-visibility framework.

Journal pre-proof

President Ramzan Kadyrov's close affiliate Magomet Daudov (nicknamed Lord), speaker of the Chechen parliament and described as the second most powerful man in Chechnya, had reportedly played a central role in initiating the purge, and several witnesses reported that he was personally present at the detention centers (Milashina 2017b). Chechen authorities flatly denied the allegations, as well as the very existence of people with "non-traditional sexual orientation" in Chechnya. After first dismissing the reports, Russian federal authorities promised to investigate them. In May 2018, at a meeting with the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the head of the Russian

Ministry of Justice claimed that the investigation had found no evidence of crimes, and that "we could not even find any members of the LGBT community in Chechnya" (Russian LGBT Network 2018b). Meanwhile, international organizations such as EU and UN, as well as some governments, including Canada, UK, Germany and the US expressed concerns and urged Russia to act to stop anti-gay violence in Chechnya. In November 2018, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) activated its "Moscow mechanism of the human dimension", setting up an international investigation of state-orchestrated crime against humanity in the Chechen Republic in response to the reports of LGBT rights violations.

Whereas some have viewed the events in Chechnya primarily in the context of an "archaic" tribal culture, traditionalist attitudes among its population and increased Muslim religiosity, in order to understand why the anti-gay campaign was unleashed at this particular moment it is vital to take into account the social, economic and historic context in which homophobic politics emerges. Homophobia and patriarchal attitudes are no doubt widespread and institutionalized in Chechen society, and the practice of "honor killings" is well-documented. However, what happened in early 2017 cannot be understood as a spontaneous eruption of popular homophobia but must be viewed in the context of specific political developments, locally, nationally and globally.

What is now Chechnya was incorporated within Tsarist Russia as a result of the colonization of the Caucasus which began in the late 18th century. In Soviet times, Chechnya formed part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, and it is currently a federal subject within the Russian Federation, although with contested status. The republic, which has a population of 1.4 million, the majority of whom are Muslims of Chechen ethnicity, has been plagued by two bloody wars between separatists and the Russian federal government (1994-97 and 1999-2009). Since Ramzan Kadyrov was installed as president of Chechnya in 2007 through a decree signed by Vladimir Putin, the semi-autonomous republic has essentially been turned into a personal dictatorship, albeit with the important caveat that Kadyrov's reign is conditioned on the Kremlin's tolerance. Locally, Kadyrov's authoritarian leadership is legitimated by reference to Chechen national consolidation, economic reinvigoration and promises of delivering stability, fighting terrorism, and putting an end to decades

Journal pre-proof

of devastating violence. What is referred to as "Chechenization" – the partial transfer of power from the Kremlin to local Chechen allies (Hughes 2005) – has significantly strengthened the power of Kadyrov in comparison to previous Chechen leaders. The Kadyrov regime draws legitimacy from the republic's Islamic leadership and has actively cultivated Chechnya's Sunni Muslim identity, while denouncing Salafists and supporters of the Islamic State as dangerous extremists. Suspected Muslim extremists, along with human rights activists, journalists and ordinary citizens who express disapproval with the regime, have been among the targets of human rights abuses committed by the Kadyrov regime. International rights monitors have repeatedly accused the Kadyrov regime of forced disappearances, abductions, unlawful detentions, torture, tactics of intimidation and public humiliation, creating a climate of fear where many of the abuses never come to public attention at all (Human Rights Watch 2016). Thus, the 2017 gay persecution was not entirely novel but broadly appeared to follow established patterns of human rights violations in Chechnya.

In Russian national imagination, Chechnya and more broadly the North Caucasus have historically been narrated as Russia's own Orient, first in 19th century literary representations that were exoticizing and often eroticizing, later as a target of the Soviet Union's modernity project (which shared many of the vices of Western modernization), and, in the post-Soviet period, as a haven for separatism, tribal violence and an exporter of terrorism (Layton 1995; Russell 2008; Gentry and Whitworth 2011). Chechnya is still a projection surface for both racist Othering and mythologization (such as the fascination for female suicide bombers called the "black widows"). Describing Russia as a "subaltern empire", which on the one hand feels subjugated and inferior to the "West", and on the other hand enacts its own civilizing mission towards its "East", Madina Tlostanova (2011) argues that Chechnya serves as a "secondary colonial society" onto which Russia's inferiority complexes are projected. Against this background, it is indicative that president Putin and other Russian politicians explicitly referred to Muslim and especially Chechen traditionalism as an argument for introducing a federal ban on "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships", which was adopted in Russia in 2013. Mirroring discourses prevalent in Western Europe and the US about endemic homophobia in Muslim communities, Russian politicians expressed worries that LGBT visibility would provoke Russia's Muslims to violence (Edenborg 2017, 95).

Journal pre-proof

Crucially, Chechnya's anti-gay campaign must be viewed within the context of Russian state homophobia, similarly and concurrently tied to a 'rediscovery' of traditional values which some have identified as being an integral part of a process of 'conservative modernization' (Trenin 2010, Muravyeva 2017). In the 2010s, the Kremlin, eagerly supported by the Orthodox Church, conservative politicians and pro-family organizations, has enacted a project of stigmatization and targeting of queers (Healey 2018; Kondakov 2019a; Edenborg 2019b). In state-aligned Russian media, lesbian, gay and trans people are depicted as a threat to the nation (variously represented as endangering Russia's demographic growth, its children's safety and/or its political stability), as enforcing "politically correct" minority norms upon the heterosexual majority, and as Trojan horses operating on behalf of Western states (Persson 2015). The anti-queer project is part of a broader turn towards embracing "traditional values" as a guiding concept for the Russian regime. This shift is not only inward-looking but also has an external dimension: as part of its efforts to reestablish itself as an important actor on the world stage, Russia is now profiling itself as an international protector of conservative values (Moss 2017; Wilkinson 2014; Edenborg 2018; Essig and Kondakov 2019). While the specter of the "gay Other" in many ways serves primarily symbolic purposes in terms of regime legitimation, scapegoating and nation-building, the official sanctioning of homo- and transphobia certainly has had severe lived consequences for many queers in Russia, as indicated by an apparent surge in anti-gay violence especially in the regions (Kondakov 2017).

In addition to the local and national context, the repressions in Chechnya coincide with a global pattern of state homophobias. Across the world, LGBT rights are increasingly contested and securitized in the name of "traditional values", in countries as different as Hungary, Egypt, Indonesia, the United States, Tanzania, Armenia and Brazil to name only a few (Bosia and Weiss 2013; Langlois and Wilkinson 2014; Thiel and Lavinas Picq 2015; Altman and Symons 2016). Bosia (2013) argues that contemporary state-sponsored homophobia must be understood as a purposeful political strategy related to processes of state-building, national reconstruction and consolidation of political elites. The securitization and policing of gender and sexual deviants is entangled in counterhegemonic, anti-imperialist politics and part of efforts to entrench national sovereignty in communities seen as menaced by globalization

Journal Pre-proof

and Westernization (Amar 2013). Also, political homophobia cannot simply be understood as a counter-reaction to LGBT advocacy. While such projects explicitly situate themselves in opposition to LGBT activism, and especially to Western states that position themselves as "global defenders of tolerance" (Brown 2006) and use "gay tolerance" as an international litmus test for good statehood (Weber 2016), anti-gay mobilization is often preemptive and occurs despite the absence of a strong domestic LGBT movement (Weiss 2013). Indeed, queers often function as "deviant ghostly bodies", haunting the national heterosexual body by being highly visible in official discourse but absent in public life (Murray 2009).

The double-edged sword of queer visibility

Western and West-inspired LGBT and queer politics have traditionally aspired to create and increase visibility for gay, lesbian and trans subjects. To be open and visible in public has been seen as a precondition for the marginalized to achieve rights, providing a platform from which to increase awareness of their conditions, and for changing social injustices and negative attitudes. Based on his research on LGBT politics in Central Europe, Philip Ayoub (2016) stresses the continued centrality of visibility. He shows that in this region, increased visibility of sexual minorities and of transnational liberal norms of sexual diversity has been central for LGBT activists' ability to place demands on their states concerning rights and protections, as well as to change social attitudes. While acknowledging that visibility often provokes contestation, Ayoub argues that this rarely leads to the demise of the movement or sustained backlash in the public sphere.

At the same time, some researchers argue that visibility is not necessarily a benign vehicle for advancing the position of excluded groups but many also be associated with vulnerability, exposure and insecurity (Roberts 2012; Edenborg 2019c). Wendy Brown stresses this ambiguity: "while to be invisible… may occasion the injuries of social liminality, such suffering may be mild compared to that of radical denunciation, hysterization, exclusion or criminalization " (2005:87). Researchers have pointed at the security dilemma of weighing a demand for public visibility with the risks that exposure brings for queer and trans subjects (Sjoberg 2012; Richardson

Journal pre-proof

2017). As Cai Wilkinson (2017) argues, in many cases security depends on whether one passes as straight and gender conforming. Research on queer communities in the Global South have questioned the applicability and desirability of Western visibility politics (Ritchie 2010; Charania 2017), pointed at alternative forms of organizing and resistance (Moussawi 2015) and shown how queer people invent creative forms of being visible and invisible, for example by adopting "visibility schemas" (Cisneros and Bracho 2019) or "contingent invisibility" (Newton 2016). Moreover, mass outings of suspected homosexuals in Uganda (Gander 2014) and inflammatory trials in Egypt (Amar 2013) also highlight visibility as a "double-edged sword" (Oluoch and Tabengwa 2017). Instances where states and vigilante groups use mobile phones, dating apps and social media profiles to track down queers – as did the Chechen security forces – point at the potential risks of digital visibility (Tudor 2018).

In particular in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, some researchers have argued that Western-inspired identity political strategies are not easily transferable to contexts where notions of public and private have been shaped by legacies of socialism and where sexual identity formation does not necessarily center around discrete binary homo/hetero categories (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011; see also Slootmaeckers 2017). In her ethnographic research among lesbian women in Russia, Francesca Stella (2015) points at how, in contrast to participation in visibility-enhancing Pride marches, in some cases invisibility is seen as enabling and subversive, allowing for solidarity and the creation of queer spaces (see also Sarajeva 2011). Similarly, Iskander and Karsavin (2017) argue that in the Russian Federation, queer visibility, as it emerged after perestroika with the development of a gay subculture, proved to be a "trap" when confronted with the national-conservative shift of the 2010s. According to them, as invisibility often seems preferable to visibility for queers in the Russian Federation, Kadyrov's statement about the absence of queers in Chechnya is not performative as much as descriptive:

> While this may read as a cruel act of erasure by Kadyrov, it is an accurate description of a certain strain of queer subjectivity in the present day. The roots of this invisibility can be found in the Soviet era, where in order to avoid arrest, homosexuality was less an identity than an activity of contingent relation (Iskander and Karsavin 2017).

Journal pre-proof

However, queer historical research partly challenges this picture, showing that both in the Soviet era and late-Tsarist Russia, people did construct homosexual subjectivities in ways that were not reducible to criminalizing and stigmatizing discourses (Clech 2018; see also Healey 2001).

Initially, the news from Chechnya appeared to confirm fears about how the creation of queer visibility may provoke violent backlash. In its first reports, *Novaya Gazeta* wrote that the news that Nikolay Alekseyev, a Russian LGBT activist who for several years organized Moscow Pride, had filed applications to hold Pride marches in several cities in the North Caucasus, had been the igniting factor of the Chechen purge (Milashina 2017a). In subsequent reporting, however, it was revealed that the Chechen anti-LGBT campaign had started several months before those applications were filed (Milashina and Gordinenko 2017). Masha Gessen (2018) criticized *Novaya Gazeta* for feeding homophobic sentiments by putting the blame on LGBT activists themselves.

Given the fact that the purge preceded the news of Alekseyev's Pride march applications, and more broadly against the background of a total absence of openly gay personalities, LGBT activism or a queer subculture in Chechen society, the 2017 events can hardly be described as a straightforward backlash to queer visibility, at least not "at home". Rather, the events rather seem to represent a case of "preemptive" or "anticipatory" countermobilization as described by Weiss (2013). The earlier cited statements by Chechen officials clearly show that the figure of the "queer menace" was present as a haunting specter or folk devil in the national imagination. As Gessen (2018) argues (referring to Russia in general, but her comments pertain to Chechnya to an even higher degree), the invisibility of queers, and the fact that, according to opinion polls, few people have any homosexual acquaintances[1], not only make it possible to claim that "such people do not exist here", but make queer people the ideal scapegoat. As Baer (2013) argues, though queer visibility is often viewed in Russia as a threat that must be quelled, ironically queer *invisibility* in the form of hidden networks of disguised homosexuals is

[1] In a poll published in May 2019, 89% of Russian reported that they did not have any homosexuals among their acquaintances (Levada Center 2019).

Journal pre-proof

perceived as perhaps an even larger danger, which must be exposed and rooted out. To the extent that the Chechen purge represents a reaction to queer visibility, the enemy against which it mobilized was rather the imagined figure of “the West-supported LGBT activist seeking to destroy us from within”, hypervisibilized in the Russian public sphere during the 2010s, than any actual activities by LGBT organizations, legal changes or societal transformations in a more LGBT-friendly direction.

Without doubt, the exposure of the anti-gay purge and Kadyrov’s statements of denial had the effect of making queers in Chechnya *more visible* than ever, to audiences in the Russian Federation as well as globally. Such visibility appears to have been critical for raising money for efforts to help people escape from Chechnya, as well as for the (still limited) actions that have been taken by international organizations and other states to put pressure on Russia. At the same time, the revisibilization of Chechen queers raises some questions. Scholars have shown that queer visibility in the public sphere is often circumscribed in specific ways, regulating which subjects appear as “lovely sights” and which remains invisible (Haritaworn 2015). Western LGBT identity politics entails certain scripts for queer visibility which appear to structure much media coverage of Chechen queers, offering a limited range of possible subject positions. Thus, many Western and critical Russian media representations of the Chechen purge offer conventional depictions of “queer martyrs” which Wiedlack (2017) argues is an archetype of gay representation, simplistically represented as opressed victims being unable to live an openly gay life in the home country, and therefore in need of being saved by the West (see also Ritchie 2010). For example, some of the initial reports in Western LGBT media, speaking of “gay concentration camps”, “the likes of which haven’t been seen since the Holocaust” (Reynolds 2017) clearly followed this pattern. While being able to seek asylum in Western countries is a life-and-death matter for many queers, and there may certainly be people who desire to lead an “openly gay life” in Chechnya, this model has limitations. A binary scheme of on the one hand emancipated, “out” and visible gays (already in the West or trying to escape there) and on the other hand oppressed, unhappy and invisible gays (involuntarily kept in the closet), risks obscuring queer subjectivities and forms of oppression that do not fit these categories, of subjecthood . Persecution of Chechen lesbian and trans women were often ignored

Journal pre-proof

in the international and Russian media reports. Moreover, some local forms of queerness that appear to be prevalent in the Chechen context are difficult to accommodate within the gay visibility model. One example is men who have same-sex relations while living as heads of heterosexual families, who may or may not identify as homosexual but for whom "coming out" is not desirable and who would neither be included in nor necessarily benefit from increased "gay visibility". For example, one man anonymously interviewed by the newspaper Meduza stated that he identified as gay, but neither his wife, children or relatives knew, he was not interested in "yelling" about being gay or "organizing Pride parades". He claimed to have lived a rather secure life with occasional sexual contacts with other men until he was detained during the 2017 campaign and forced to flee to Moscow, telling his wife he had been offered a job there (Kost'uchenko 2017). Judging from the anonymous testimonies in the media reports, it seems clear that for many of those who were targeted in 2017, neither the options of "living openly" nor escaping to the West are realistic or tenable, not least because it would put their families in immediate danger. Thus it is also important to remember that each target of the purges is embedded in a greater context of familial and social obligations and –relations, members of which may themselves become perpetrators or collateral victims.

On the basis of the 2017-2019 events in Chechnya, one cannot make generalizing or categorical conclusions about the desirability or potential dangers of visibility politics. However, the analysis does suggest that we should acknowledge and further examine the ambivalent effects and multiple facets of visibility in relation to the politics governing queer lives, in various local contexts. Following Hammami (2016), who draws on Judith Butler's ideas of grievability, we believe that rather than subscribing to overly simplistic and one-dimensional ideas of visibility as liberating *or* endangering, we should ask how some representational regimes may enable violence, by presenting certain lives as disposable or non-existing, whereas others may constrain possibilities of solidarity, by privileging the Western model of gay emancipation and presenting some queers as recognizable while overlooking other forms of queerness (see also Edenborg 2019a).

Seeing is not always believing: queer visibility and media cynicism

Journal pre-proof

In her work on precarity and media framing (2010), and on the performativity of public assemblies (2015), Butler emphasizes the political power of the appearance of bodies in public. In her view, the 2004 exposure of US torture in the Abu Ghraib prison and the 2011 global dissemination of images of the Tahrir Square protests are two different examples of how mediated images of previously invisible bodies may challenge and rearrange the limits to what can be seen and heard in public, possibly expanding the notions of who and what ”the public” and “the people” include. Speaking of street protests, Butler suggests that the appearance of bodies visible to world media coverage exercises a performative right to appear, signaling that these particular bodies exist, that they require protection and need to be counted as part of the people. As she puts it: “only through an insistent form of appearing precisely when and where we are effaced does the space of appearance break and open in new ways” (2015:37).

At a first glance, this seems like an good description of the media exposure of the 2017 events in Chechnya, which began with the reports by *Novaya Gazeta* on 1 April and resonated in Russian critical media and internationally, drawing attention to the existence of Chechen queers and their precarious situation, inspiring demonstrations and manifestations of support, as well as condemnations by several state leaders. However, there is no straightforward relation between seeing and believing, and even less between images and political action. The same stories and images from Chechnya that led to outcry (internationally and among parts of Russian society) were simultaneously often met with doubt and suspicion. Russian federal authorities, while promising to investigate the reports, repeatedly expressed doubts about their veracity based on the absence of witnesses willing to come forward openly (Russian LGBT Network 2018b). Many seemed to dismiss the reports from Chechnya as simply another example of Western demonization of Russia, and there were even Russian LGBT activists who claimed that the stories were purposefully invented for political reasons (Sulim 2017). Also in the cases where images actually appeared, such as the photos published in *Novaya Gazeta* of the detention centre in Argun, showing for example the presence of “Lord” at this site (Milashina 2017b), or when a witness in fact did come forward, as Maksim Lapunov in a filmed interview spoke about having experienced the 2017 persecutions (Milashina 2017c) these images were often met with disbelief.

Journal pre-proof

Adi Kuntsman has examined how media digitalization changes practices of witnessing violence, enabling new forms of exposing previously invisible violence, but also producing an increased level of suspicion towards media images. In the words of Kuntsman: "the same image can become an object of shifting feelings: it appears once as truthful and heartbreaking evidence, and once as a skillful and evil deception; once as an outcry and once as entertainment" (2012, 4). If images and stories of violence and death propose to media audiences specific ways of engaging with "distant sufferers", producing a "politics of pity" through their emotional resonance (Chouliaraki 2008; 2010; see also Wiedlack 2017), in this highly suspicious age, images are not treated as neutral, but always as allowing for the possibility of their having been staged or manipulated. This represents a qualitative shift from how Roland Barthes (1993) described the effects of the photographic image as having an *authenticating* function, as a powerful proof that something has actually taken place, for example in the way a photo of a former slave constituted "extended, loaded evidence" (ibid., p.115) that slavery indeed existed.

In light of the post-2016 frenzy around "fake news" and "post truth" in the US and Western Europe , it important to stress that in Russia, widespread cynicism and a relativist relation to truth are not new phenomena but key characteristics of the post-Soviet media environment (Brock, 2018). Natalia Roudakova's work on cynicism and cynical media regimes in Russia (2017) is pertinent here, as she describes a media environment where everything is potentially staged or a lie, where anything can be stated or denied, where concepts are decoupled from their moral connotations and everything can be laughed at. The cynical media regime stems, she argues, from the late Soviet period and the "epistemic shake-up" of the fall of communism where one official value system was replaced with another overnight, and is today eagerly exploited by those in power, not least to discredit journalism and especially investigative reporting. Thus, the Russian public sphere operates according to a logic where every claim, for example that "Putin is undermining democracy" will be dismissed with counterclaims such as "there was never any democracy to begin with" or some version of "what-aboutism", pointing at how e.g. Western leaders are doing the same.

Journal pre-proof

Ramzan Kadyrov's statements cited in the beginning of this article, which shocked many international observers, were indicative not only of the acceptance of homophobia in the Russian public sphere, but also of this cynical media regime. The Chechen leader is of course aware of the impossibility of the total absence of queer people in the republic (his own security forces were currently targeting them specifically), and he knows his audiences are also aware of this, still he performatively conjures the "truth" of a Chechen nation whose absence of gays is one of its defining features. Kadyrov can be confident that, just like many will see the absurdity of his claims, many will also dismiss the reports about anti-gay violence as politically motivated. In such a discursive atmosphere, no line exists between sincerity and mockery, and the power of public representation, as theorized by Butler, is significantly diminished.

An example illustrating this cynical media regime and the weakening of images' claims to truth, as well as how the invisibility of queers can and has been exploited by the authorities, was the disappearance of Chechen pop singer Zelimkhan "Zelim" Bakaev. In August 2017, the 25-year old singer's family reported him as missing after he had travelled from Grozny (the capital of Chechnya) to Moscow, where he usually resided and from where he had been trying to forge a music career (for example by participating in Russia's TV talent show *Novaya Fabrika Zvezd*). What followed were conflicting accounts: one version was that he had left home after a fight, another that he had travelled abroad. What is undeniable is that since he had been reported missing there was minimal activity on his social media accounts, and of uncertain authorship. In September, after the Kremlin's Human Rights officer Tatyana Moskal'kova visited Chechnya to investigate allegations of kidnapping and torture of gay men, a two-part YouTube video appeared of Bakaev seemingly in a hotel room in Germany, telling a friend how happy he was to be living there. Further inspection led many commenters to discard the clips as staged, as both the energy drink he was drinking and furniture of the room were Russian-made and not easily available in Germany. After the video appeared, there was no information or signals from the singer himself. If one looked for information on the singer online, contradictory accounts appeared: much Russian language media pointed to proof that the singer "had been found" thanks to the video (e.g. RIA Novosti 2017), whereas in the West he was widely reported as having been killed in the anti-gay purges (usually citing "sources" as well as the prolonged lack of

Journal pre-proof

news or direct correspondence from him, e.g. Lobanov 2017). Clearly, a handsome, talented and publicly known (though by no means famous) young singer had the potential to become a symbolic figure of how gay Chechens have been killed or tortured by the regime. This was clear both in how Western media reported his disappearance and presumed death so widely, and in how keen Chechen authorities were to deny that he had been harmed. Indeed, the testimonies from men being detained during the 2017 purges point to an obsession of the Chechen authorities with male celebrities suspected of being gay: several reported to have been questioned about Bakaev's sexuality specifically (Russian LGBT Network 2018c).

In January 2018, Kadyrov stated on Chechen state television that Bakaev's family had killed the singer and then blamed the authorities for the killing, since there was "no man in the family" who dared take responsibility for the fact the they had "dealt with" Bakaev (referring to the singer by the female pronoun). In line with a now well-established pattern, Kadyrov based his denial on the absence of evidence to the contrary:

> …now they are saying it is because of Kadyrov's order, Kadyrov took him. Did you see this order? Did you see him detained? At least, do you have any proofs to claim it? Did I claim it on TV? (Russian LGBT Network 2018c)

The Bakaev case suggests that media cynicism and in particular the decreased epistemological status of images may limit the effects of making something previously invisible visible in queer politics. Whereas Butler (2015) seems to suggest that the act of public appearance of invisible populations itself undermines and shakes up dominant powers' control over the public sphere, and Barthes (1993) views photographic images as having a "scandalous effect" of authentication, the Bakaev case suggests that the effects of revisibilization are more ambivalent. Here, existing as well as absent images were invoked as proof or, to the same effect, as absence of evidence, and the same video was regarded by some as verification of Bakaev being found, by others as further evidence of his disappearance. Even more disturbingly, Kadyrov's statements suggest a mutually reinforcing relation between bodily and discursive erasure, each enabling the other. If we follow the logic of Kadyrov – and by extent of the Russian Ministry of Justice, which also used the absence of LGBT

Journal pre-proof

people willing to come forward to deny that the anti-gay purge had taken place (Russian LGBT Network 2018b) – since the singer had disappeared or been killed there was no physical evidence that could implicate the regime in the crime. In other words, the very effects of anti-queer violence (the absence of LGBT people due to their death, escape or forced hiding) was taken as evidence that the violence itself was a hoax.

Queer (in)visibility and spectacles of the nation

Research on political homophobia suggests that media scapegoating, anti-LGBT legislation, court proceedings and physical violence targeting queers often have spectacular functions, operating as a visible signal to the population (and sometimes to external audiences) about what sexual behaviors and gender expressions are desirable, about what direction the state is taking and about the imagined content and boundaries of national belonging. There are many historical and current examples, ranging from the 1950s "Lavender scare" in the United States (Johnson 2006) to inflammatory trials held in the 2000s in Malaysia, Egypt and elsewhere (Weiss and Bosia 2013). In the Russian Federation, the 2013 "homosexual propaganda" law clearly served such signaling purposes (Edenborg 2019c; Kondakov 2019a). In some cases, anti-queer violence itself took spectacular forms, such as when the Russian vigilante group "Occupy Pedophilia" circulated films of torture and possibly murder of gay men (Essig 2014).

Although the violence in Chechnya took place in hidden locations and was not publicized before *Novaya Gazeta*'s exposure, it nonetheless entailed spectacular aspects. Several of the victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch (2017) attested that as they were being tortured and humiliated, representatives of the Chechen authorities, from the earlier mentioned "Lord" to lower-rank officials, repeatedly visited the detention centers to watch and observe the violence. One man described how torture was turned into a show-like performance:

Journal pre-proof

> We were like a bunch of monkeys in a zoo (…) They [captors] bring in all those people, point their finger, and go like 'look who we've got here, a bunch of fags!' (Human Rights Watch 2017)

The act of releasing the men to their families with instructions to "shame" them, and the ritual of "confession and repentance" to elder male relatives that some subsequently had to perform, indicate that exhibition, display and spectacle were important elements of the anti-gay purge which persisted even after the release of the victims.

The spectacular and theatrical characteristics of the purge emerged very clearly in the case of Movsar Eskerkhanov, who in late September 2017 spoke out in Time Magazine about his experiences of anti-gay persecution in Chechnya prior to his arrival in Germany several years ago (Shuster 2017). On 13 November 2017, however, Eskerkhanov appeared on Chechen state television, accusing the Western journalists of making him publically confess to homosexuality by promising to help him get residence permit in Germany, a promise which was never fulfilled.

> They disgraced me in the face of the Chechen people and the Chechen authorities, they put me up to it. Therefore I ask for forgiveness to the people of Chechnya, the leadership of Chechnya, to Chechens living in North Caucasus and in Europe (BBC Russia 2017).

As a response to Eskerkhanov's public repentance, Djambulat Umarov, Chechnya's Minister for National Policy, Foreign Relations, Press and Information, declared that the apology was accepted: "If Allah accepts repentance, then why should we not accept it?" (Caucasian Knot 2017). While we do not know the circumstances that made Eskerkhanov record the later video, the televised act of his public apology and the Chechen authorities' forgiving – when taken together – constitute a highly scripted ritual that draws on a religious vocabulary of repentance and redemption as well as a nationalist language of honor and shame. As a public spectacle, the ritual works performatively to produce Chechen society as honorable and heterosexual, and as piously Muslim.

Journal pre-proof

In her study on violence, torture and forced disappearances in Argentina during the military junta, Diana Taylor (1997) argues that state terror may function as a public spectacle, intentionally designed to look like theatre. For her, this is not only true of the manifestly visible state violence that takes place in the streets or on television, but also of state-organized disappearances and torture taking place in secret rooms. Such forms of "invisible" state terror serves, she argues, as a cautionary message to those on the outside, demonstrating to the population that the regime has the power to control it, turning the people into a docile and controllable social body. If we extend Taylor's argument to the 2017 events in Chechnya, it suggests that torture and disappearances targeting gay men, even when the actual violence took place in hidden locations, may be understood as an instrument to terrorize the population into political obedience, loyalty to the Kadyrov regime, and sexual conformity.

Indeed, a certain sociopolitical climate is created by such "hidden spectacles", as they function as an underside to the public display or celebration of certain exclusionary values (heteronormativity, specific forms of religiosity etc). Terror operates, Taylor argues, on the entirety of the population, allowing those who do not fall victim to it to engage in various forms of denial of the existence of the violence. Such blindness becomes a form of collusion with the regime, making the forcibly disappeared become invisible again and thereby allowing further violence to occur. This "percepticide", as Taylor calls it, illustrates how invisibility can become naturalized through an insidious chain of spectacle, terror and disavowal.

However, the spectacular aspects of nation-building are not only made apparent in the exclusion of certain populations, or celebrations of violence. While terror clearly serves as a form of public spectacle whereby the political community is imagined in particular ways, and physical violence against individual bodies must be linked to efforts to produce a new authentic national body – in this case constituting the Chechen nation as a community of "traditional values" – nations need to be imagined and reimagined continuously in order to sustain themselves, and to serve as sites of identification for its population. Speaking specifically of *national* identification, Slavoj Žižek insists that "the element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship towards a Thing, toward Enjoyment

Journal pre-proof

incarnated" (Žižek, 1993:111). He sees this enjoyment as the key to understanding a community's coherence in opposition to other communities; each society attempts to cover over its inherent antagonism by "outsourcing" it onto various others. Returning to spectacle, the nation is brought about in moments of mass enjoyment or celebration, themselves orchestrated to bring about moments of collective identification. Indeed, identification relies on such moments of heightened positive affect, functioning as sites "for the mutual construction of that which has traditionally been labelled 'inner' (from phantoms to fantasy) and that which has been thought of as 'outer' (political reality, historical facticity" (Taylor 1997: 29).

The discussion has already referred to the violent, despotic nature of the Kadyrov regime. This aspect is tied indelibly to popular celebrations of the Chechen nation, as well as to a foregrounding of the president's authoritarian masculinity. Indeed, Kadyrov is placed at the center of a political field, taking on the role of an embodiment of Chechenness. Following the vein of other historical and contemporary leader figures, chief among them Vladimir Putin, but also the patriarchal structures of Chechen leadership, Ramzan Kadyrov relies on displays of hypermasculine charisma in order to suture a political field that is otherwise characterized by cynicism towards established politics, or indeed threatening to disintegrate (Brock, 2016). Like Putin, he is also a leader of many public guises, such as "the merciless warrior in fatigues who leads special operations to kill anti-government rebels; the jolly Caucasus baron who spars with Mike Tyson and shows off his private zoo; the family man and observant Muslim who has banned alcohol, ordered that women wear head scarves in public buildings, and boasts that his six-year-old son has memorized the Koran" (Yaffa, 2016). He publicly combines displays of devoutness and calls for level-headed responses to political crises with shows of physical prowess and outbursts of rage and obscenity.

Such a seemingly contradictory image serves a purpose. Theodor W. Adorno, who like Sigmund Freud argues that the bond underlying group identification centers on the figure of the leader (Freud 1921/1955), suggests that in order to appeal to the narcissistic aspects of identification, the leader must operate on multiple levels, in order to convey an "impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido" than the rest of the community (Adorno 1951/2001:142), while "at the same time work

Journal pre-proof

[ing] the miracle of appearing as an average person, just as Hitler posed as a composite of King-Kong and the suburban barber" (ibid:141). Additionally, there is an element of political strategy to this demeanor. Kadyrov's image does not receive as much criticism as one might expect from the Kremlin. He acts as an alter ego to Putin (similar to the ways in which the Caucasus serves as Russia's "Orient") and as a way for the latter to show that, "anytime he wants, like Freddy Krueger, he can put on a clawed glove, a glove covered in spikes, and use it as a weapon" (Alexei Venediktov, quoted in Yaffa 2016).

The spectacular element of Kadyrov's reign is not limited to publicizing his personal exploits (before getting banned from social media in 2018, he had over 1.6 million followers on Instagram). He is also deeply aware of the importance of national spectacle alluded to earlier. Journalist Joshua Yaffa lists several days of national celebrations during his visit to Chechnya in 2016, and concludes that "[h]ardly a day passes in Grozny without a dance performance by a local troupe or an athletic competition featuring Chechen sportsmen"(Yaffa 2016), during any of which Kadyrov himself might make an appearance. Such a constant reiteration of the greatness of Chechnya unconsciously points to the perceived fragility of a nation still in the grip of decades of violence and corruption, and the repression of critical voices from the opposition. Spectacle serves to steer attention away from a permanent state of crisis, and towards an image of a stable Chechen nation, with Kadyrov at its head. In this way, spectacles at once embody what is perceived as society's basic values, and depoliticize by glossing over fractures and social antagonism (Kellner 2003).

Kadyrov's performance of powerful and at times violent masculinity seems to require an erasure of the feminine or the "feminized". Like Taylor argues in respect to Argentina, the elimination or suppression of the feminine (including the homosexual male) serves to stabilize a patriarchal version of nationhood (1997:17). Returning to how nations are constructed fantasmatically, one can see how national imaginaries attempt to engulf other categories within the symbolic, such as gender or kinship relations, so that a threat to the stability of these positions can become a threat to the nation as a whole. This tendency is enhanced during episodes of national insecurity or crisis. A strong and stable Chechen nation is positioned as needing to regulate sexuality and gender relations, and to rid itself of queer subjects. If we apply Taylor's

Journal pre-proof

statement that "perhaps the invisible can be traced through the performative traditions that produce the sense of nation" (Taylor 1997:30) to the fate of Chechen queer subjects, we see how Kadyrov's patriarchal, hypermasculine spectacle of leadership is tied to, and enables the oppression of non-normative sexualities without in fact having to name them or make them visible. Conversely, the erasure of queer and feminine bodies from the public sphere serves to render visible the national body as heterosexual and masculine.

Conclusion

With the 2017 anti-gay campaign in Chechnya as our point of departure, and in particular the statements made by Chechen officials that the absence of queers in Chechnya made persecution impossible, this paper examined the workings of queer visibility as part of violent projects of national belonging and state consolidation. First, we discussed the purge in Chechnya in relation to visibility as a strategy of queer liberation. Public visibility, we suggested, is not a one-way path to liberation but rather a doubled-edged sword, connected also to insecurity and vulnerability. However, rather than a straightforward "backlash" to queer visibility, LGBT activism or legislative advances, the Chechen purge was constructed in opposition to the imagined specter of the "West-sponsored gays seeking to undermine our community", hypervisibilized in media discourse in the Russian Federation in recent years. We argued that Western schemes of "gay liberation through visibility" risk obscure local forms of queerness and suggested that, rather than simplistically understand visibility as itself either liberating or endangering, we should critically examine the multiple and contradictory effects of different regimes of visibility. Second, we discussed the exposure of the Chechnya events and the visibilization of previously invisible queer bodies, in light of theories of media cynicism and weakened epistemological status of images. We suggested that the political power that lies in the act of public appearance, as theorized by Butler (2015), is limited in a media landscape characterized by disbelief and a cynical relation to truth. We showed that, in the Chechen case, the same image was interpreted both as evidence for the gay purge and for it being an invented story. Furthermore, we pointed at instances where the absence of queers coming forward in the public sphere to testify, itself (partly) a result of homophobic

Journal pre-proof

violence, was taken as evidence that the violence had not taken place. Third, we examined how the erasure of queer bodies (discursively and physically), as well as their hypervisibilization, relates to spectacular performances of nationhood. We showed that while the violence took place in hidden locations, it involved several theatrical aspects, such as video-recorded acts of public repentance, which functioned like rituals to construct the Chechen nation in specific ways. We suggested that the violence and torture of queers was an invisible underside to the spectacular project of Chechen nationbuilding, built on hypermasculine authoritarianism, and centering on the figure of president Kadyrov. While the invisibility of queers made the purges easier, they were not unexpected or in contradiction with the way the nation was visibly performed, but rather an extension thereof. The elimination and invisibilization of feminized queer subjects thus worked performatively to reproduce the Chechen nation as a heteropatriarchal community of belonging. While the visibility framework of queer politics should be supplemented by more attention paid to the limits of categories of subjecthood, and of language more generally, as well as the effects of forced silence and discursive absences which haunt national bodies, we insist on the continued analytical value of the notion of visibility. Taken together, our findings contribute to a more multifaceted understanding of the workings of visibility and invisibility and their various, sometimes contradictory, functions in both political homophobia and queer liberation.

Acknowledgements
The authors wish to thank Markus Thiel, Vlad Strukov, Cai Wilkinson, Alexander Kondakov and two anonymous reviewers for providing valuable feedback on earlier versions of this article. All mistakes are our own.

References

Adorno, T.H. 1951/2001. *The culture industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture.* Abingdon: Psychology Press.

Altman, D. and Symons, J. 2016. *Queer Wars: The New Global Polarization over Gay Rights*. Cambridge: Polity.

Journal Pre-proof

Amar, P. 2013. *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics and the End of Neoliberalism.* Durham/London: Duke University Press.

Ayoub, P. 2016. *When States Come Out: Europe's Sexual Minorities and the Politics of Visibility*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Baer, B. J. 2013. Now You See It: Gay (In)Visibility and the Performance of Post-Soviet Identity. In N. Fejes and A.P. Balogh, eds. *Queer Visibility in Post-Socialist Cultures.* Chicago: Intellect.

Barthes, R. 1993. *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage.

BBC Russia. 2017. Chechenets-gei, pervym otkryvshii litso, izvinils'a pered Kadyrovym. 14 November 2017. http://www.bbc.com/russian/news-41985998.

Bosia, M. J. 2013. Why States Act: Homophobia and Crisis. In M.L. Weiss and M.J. Bosia (eds). *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Brock, M. 2016. The Hyperrealities of Putin and Trump: Why it is worth paying attention to the public personas of political leaders. *Baltic Worlds* 9, no.4, 83-87.

Brock, M. 2018. (2018) Political satire and its disruptive potential: irony and cynicism in Russia and the US, Culture, Theory and Critique, 59:3, 281-298

Brown, W. 2005. "Freedom's Silences". In *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Brown, W. 2006. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Butler, J. 2010. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.

Journal pre-proof

Butler, J. 2015. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Caucasian Knot. 2017. Chechen authorities respond to Movsar Eskerkhanov's coming-out. 16 November 2017. http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/41502/.

Charania, M. 2017. Outing the Pakistani queer: Pride, paranoia and politics in US visual culture. *Sexualities* 20, nos.1-2, 41-64.

Chouliaraki, L. 2008. The mediation of suffering and the vision of a cosmopolitan public. *Television & New Media* 9, no. 5, 371-391.

Chouliaraki, L. 2010. The mediation of death and the imagination of national community. In Roosvall, A. & Salovaara-Moring, I. 2010. Eds. *Communicating the nation: National topographies of global media landscapes*. Gothenburg: Nordicom.

Cisneros, J., & Bracho, C. 2019. Coming out of the shadows and the closet: Visibility schemas among undocuqueer immigrants. *Journal of homosexuality* 66, no. 6, 715-734.

Clech, A. 2018. Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic: Tema or the Shared Forms of Late Soviet Homosexual Subjectivities. *Slavic Review* 77, no. 1, 6-29.

Edenborg, E. 2017. *Politics of Visibility and Belonging: From Russia's "Homosexual Propaganda" Laws to the Ukraine War*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Edenborg, E. 2018. Homophobia as Geopolitics: 'Traditional Values' and the Negotiation of Russia's Place in the World. In Mulholland, J., Montagna, N. and Sanders-McDonagh, E. (eds) *Gendering Nationalism: Intersections of Nation, Gender and Sexuality*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Edenborg, E. 2019a. Theorizing Visibility in Global Queer Politics. In Bosia, M.J., McEvoy, S., & Rahman, M. (eds). *Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Journal pre-proof

Edenborg, E. 2019b. Russian LGBT Politics and Rights. In Haider-Merkel, D. (Ed.). *Oxford Encyclopedia of LGBT Politics and Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Edenborg, E. 2019c. Russia's spectacle of "traditional values": Rethinking the politics of visibility. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, online first, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2018.1560227.

Essig, L. 2014. "Bury Their Hearts": Some Thoughts on the Specter of Homosexuality Haunting Russia. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 3, 39-58.

Essig, L., & Kondakov, A. 2019. A Cold War for the twenty-first century: Homosexualism vs. heterosexualism. In Mole, R. (ed). *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*. London: Routledge.

Freud, S. 1921/1955. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Standard Edition, 18. London: Hogarth, 69-143.

Gander, K. 2014. Ugandan newspaper Red Pepper publishes 'top 200' homosexuals list. *The Independent*, 25 February. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ugandan-newspaper-publishes-200-top-homosexuals-list-9152442.html.

Gazeta.ru. 2017. Mer Svetogorska priglasil Milonova v "gorod bez geyev". 1 March 2017. https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2017/03/01/n_9745157.shtml.

Gentry, C. E. and Whitworth, K. 2011. The discourse of desperation: the intersections of neo-Orientalism, gender and Islam in the Chechen struggle, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no.2, 145-161.

Journal pre-proof

Gessen, M. 2017. The Gay Men Who Fled Chechnya's Purge. *The New Yorker*, 3 July 2017. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/03/the-gay-men-who-fled-chechnyas-purge.

Gessen, M. 2018. Keynote speech at the "Queer Russia: Gender, Sexuality and race" Symposium, Davidson College, 16-17 February.

Goclowski, M. & A. Wlodarczak-Semczuk 2019. Polish towns go "LGBT free" ahead of bitter European election campaign. *Reuters*, 21 May 2019. https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-election-poland-idUKKCN1SR0XV.

Goldman, R. 2007. Ahmadinejad: No Gays, No Oppression of Women in Iran. ABC News 24 September. http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3642673.

Hammami, R. 2016. Precarious politics: The activism of bodies that count (aligning with those that don´t) in Palestine's colonial frontier. In Butler, J., Gambetti, Z. & Sabsay, L. (eds). *Vulnerability in resistance*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Haritaworn, J. 2015. *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places.* London: Pluto Press.

Healey, D. 2001. *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia. The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Healey, D. 2018. *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hughes, J. 2005 'The Peace Process in Chechnya', in Sakwa, R. (ed.) *Chechnya: From Past to Future*. London: Anthem Press.

Human Rights Watch. 2016. "Like Walking a Minefield". Vicious Crackdown on Critics in Russia's Chechen Republic. https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/08/31/walking-minefield/vicious-crackdown-critics-russias-chechen-republic.

Journal pre-proof

Human Rights Watch. 2017. "They Have Long Arms and They Can Find Me". Anti-Gay Purge by Local Authorities in Russia's Chechen Republic. https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/26/they-have-long-arms-and-they-can-find-me/anti-gay-purge-local-authorities-russias.

Human Rights Watch. 2018. World report 2018: Russia. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/russia.

Im, R. 2019. The unbearable silence of Chechnya's lesbians. *openDemocracy*. 29 May 2019. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/the-unbearable-silence-of-chechnyas-lesbians/

Iskander, A. & Karsavin, M. 2017. Language under house arrest: Foregoing a mere politics of visibility, queer Russian poets seek new forms of agitation and proletarian solidarity. *The New Inquiry*, 15 September 2017. https://thenewinquiry.com/language-under-house-arrest/.

Johnson, D. K. 2006. *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kellner, D. 2003. *Media spectacle*. London: Routledge.

Khazov-Kassia, S. 2017. Kasta Nevidimykh. Radio Svoboda. 19 September 2017. https://www.svoboda.org/a/28738872.html

Kondakov, A. 2017. *Prestupleniya na pochve nenavisti protiv LGBT v Rossii.* Saint Petersburg: Renome.

Kondakov, A. 2019a. The Censorship 'Propaganda' Legislation in Russia. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, State-Sponsored Homophobia 2019. Geneva: ILGA.

Journal pre-proof

Kondakov, A. 2019b. Chechnya, Detention Camps In. *The Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) History.* Cengage Gale, 315-318

Kost'uchenko, E. 2017. "Vy ego ub'ete ili my ego ub'em. Vybiraite, chto luchshe". Monolog gomoseksuala, sbezhavshego is Chechni. *Meduza*, 16 April 2017. https://meduza.io/feature/2017/04/16/vy-ego-ubiete-ili-my-ego-ubiem-vybirayte-chto-luchshe.

Kulpa, R., & Mizielinska, J. 2011. *De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives.* London: Routledge.

Kuntsman, A. 2012. Introduction: Affective fabrics of digital cultures. A. Karatzogianni and A. Kuntsman (Eds.). *Digital cultures and the politics of emotion: Feelings, affect and technological change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Langlois, A. and Wilkinson, C. 2014. Not such an international human rights norm? Local resistance to LGBT rights. *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no.3, 249-255.

Lavinas Picq, M. and Thiel, M. 2015. *Sexualities in World Politics. How LGBTQ claims shape International Relations*. London: Routledge.

Layton, S. 1995. *Russian literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levada Center 2019. Otnosheniye k LGBT-l'ud'am. Levada Center, 23 May 2019. https://www.levada.ru/2019/05/23/otnoshenie-k-lgbt-lyudyam/.

Lobanov, V. 2017. Singer Still Missing After Chechnya's Anti-Gay Purge. Human Rights Watch. 7 November 2017. https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/07/singer-still-missing-after-chechnyas-anti-gay-purge

Journal pre-proof

Meduza. 2017. "Nel'z'a pritesn'at' togo, kogo net". V Chechne kommentiruyut publikatsiyu o presledovaniyakh geyev v regione. https://meduza.io/feature/2017/04/01/nelzya-pritesnyat-togo-kogo-net.

Milashina, E. 2017a. Ubiistvo chesti. *Novaya Gazeta*, 1 April 2017. https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/01/71983-ubiystvo-chesti

Milashina, E. 2017b. V Chechne idut profilakticheskie raboty. *Novaya Gazeta*, 23 April 2017. https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/24/72263-v-chechne-idut-profilakticheskie-raboty

Milashina, E. 2017c. Maksim pervyi, no ne edinstvennyi , kto osmelitsya podat' zayavlenie v SK. *Novaya Gazeta*, 16 October 2017. https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/10/16/74221-maksim-pervyy-no-ne-edinstvennyy-kto-osmelitsya-podat-zayavlenie-v-sledstvennyy-komitet

Milashina, E. and Gordinenko, I. 2017. Raspravy nad chechenskimi geyami. *Novaya Gazeta*, 4 April 2017. https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/04/72027-raspravy-nad-chechenskimi-geyami-publikuem-svidetelstva

Mirmaksumova, A. 2019. "Chtoby ubit' zhenshchinu, mnogo ne nado". Rasskaz chechenki-lesbiyanki, bezhavshey iz Rossii. *Nastoyashchee Vremya*. 18 February 2019. https://www.currenttime.tv/a/chechen-lgbt-refugee-monologue/29769095.html?fbclid=IwAR3zCSHJd9aGwC2j3FO2ppXaTO_g-CF4xfe-p3jwLrkIbdtGqAlQelODOGc

Moss, K. 2017. Russia as the Saviour of European Civilization. Gender and the Geopolitics of Traditional Values. In R. Kuhar, R. and D. Paternotte, eds. *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Moussawi, G. 2015. (Un) critically queer organizing: Towards a more complex analysis of LGBTQ organizing in Lebanon. *Sexualities* 18, nos.5-6, 593-617.

Journal pre-proof

Muravyeva, M. 2017. Conservative Jurisprudence and the Russian State. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69:8, 1145-1152.

Murray, D. 2009. Homo Hauntings: Spectral Sexuality and the Good Citizen in Barbadian Media. In D. Murray, ed. *Homophobias: Lust and Loathing Across Time and Space*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Newton, N. 2016. Contingent Invisibility: Space, Community, and Invisibility for Les in Saigon. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no.1, 109-136.

Oluoch, A. – Tabengwa, M. 2017. LGBT Visibility: A Double-edged Sword. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). *State Sponsored Homophobia 2017: A World Survey of Sexual Orientation Laws: Criminalisation, Protection and Recognition.*

Persson, E. 2015. Banning ”Homosexual Propaganda”. Belonging and Visibility in Contemporary Russian Media. *Sexuality & Culture* 19, no. 2, 256-274.

Peters, J. D 2001. Witnessing. *Media Culture Society* 23, no. 6, 707-723.

Proyekt Kvir-zhenshchiny Severnogo Kavkaza 2018. Nasiliye nad lesbiyankami, biseksual'nymi i transgendernymi zhenshchinami na Severnom Kavkaze v Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Moscow: Heinrich Böll Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/Research-by-theQWNC-Group.pdf

Raibman, N. 2014. Mer Pakhomov: V Sochi geyev net. *Vedomosti*, 27 January 2014. https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2014/01/27/mer-pahomov-v-sochi-geev-net.

Reynolds, D. 2017. Report: Chechnya Is Torturing Gay Men in Concentration Camps. *The Advocate*, 10 April 2017. https://www.advocate.com/world/2017/4/10/report-chechyna-torturing-gay-men-concentration-camps.

Journal pre-proof

RIA Novosti. 2017. Propavshego chechenskogo pevtsa Bakaeva nashli v Germanii. 24 September 2017. https://ria.ru/20170924/1505453064.html

Richardson, J. 2017. Not Seen and not Heard: The Security Dilemma of In/visibility. *Critical Studies on Security* 5, no.1, 117-120.

Ritchie, J. 2010. How do you say "come out of the closet" in Arabic? Queer activism and the politics of visibility in Israel-Palestine. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 4, 557-575.

Roberts, N. E. 2013. The plight of gay visibility: Intolerance in San Francisco, 1970–1979. *Journal of homosexuality 60*, no.1, 105-119.

Roozendaal, B. 2018. The Chechnya LGBT crisis – one year on. *EU Observer*, 12 March 2018. https://euobserver.com/opinion/141268.

Ross, M. B. 2005. Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm. In E.P. Johnson and M. G. Henderson (eds). *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 161-189.

Roudakova, N. 2017. *Losing Pravda: ethics and the press in post-truth Russia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Russell, J. 2008 Terrorists, bandits, spooks and thieves: Russian demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11, *Third World Quarterly* 26, No.1, 101-116.

Russian LGBT Network. 2018a. On the funds spent by the Russian LGBT network to help the victims of the LGBT persecutions in Chechnya in 2017. 31 January 2018. https://lgbtnet.org/en/content/funds-spent-russian-lgbt-network-help-victims-lgbt-persecutions-chechnya-2017.

Russian LGBT Network. 2018b. Ministr yustitsii RF zayavil v Zheneve o tom, chto ne neshlo LGBT v Chechne. 16 May 2018. https://lgbtnet.org/ru/newseng/ministr-yusticii-rf-zayavil-v-zheneve-o-tom-chto-sledstvie-ne-nashlo-lgbt-v-chechne.

Journal pre-proof

Russian LGBT Network. 2018c. On Ramzan Kadyrov's claim on his non-participation in the disappearance of Zelimkhan Bakaev. 18 january 2018. https://lgbtnet.org/en/content/ramzan-kadyrovs-claim-his-non-participation-disappearance-zelimkhan-bakaev.

Russian LGBT Network, 2019a. V Chechne nachalas' novaya volna zaderzhanii LGBT. 14 January 2019. Retrieved from https://lgbtnet.org/ru/newseng/v-chechne-nachalas-novaya-volna-zaderzhaniy-lgbt

Russian LGBT Network 2019b. Dva goda presledovanii LGBT v Chechne v datakh. 1 April 2019. https://lgbtnet.org/ru/newseng/dva-goda-presledovaniy-lgbt-v-chechne-v-datah

Sarajeva, K. 2011. *Lesbian Lives: Sexuality, Space, and Subculture in Moscow*. PhD dissertation, Stockholm University.

Shuster, S. 2017. "They Tell Me a Demon Lives Inside Me": A young man targeted in Chechnya for being gay discovers Europe offers no safe haven from his tormentors. *Time Magazine,* 25 September 2017. http://time.com/chechnya-movsar/.

Slootmaeckers, K. 2017. The litmus test of pride: analysing the emergence of the Belgrade "Ghost" pride in the context of EU accession. *East European Politics*, 33(4), 517-535.

Sjoberg, L. 2012. Toward Trans-Gendering International Relations?. *International Political Sociology* 6, no. 4, 337-354.

Stella, F. 2015. *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia: Post/socialism and Gendered Sexualities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Sulim, S. 2017. "Priznat's'a v Chechne, chto ty gei, mozhet byt' smertel'no opasno". Chto govor'at posle publikatsii "Novoi gazety" o zaderzhaniyakh i ubiistvakh gomoseksualov v Chechne. *Meduza*, 3 April 2017.

Journal pre-proof

https://meduza.io/feature/2017/04/03/priznatsya-v-chechne-chto-ty-gey-mozhet-byt-smertelno-opasno.

Taylor, D. 1997. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Tlostanova, M. 2011. The South of the Poor North: Caucasus Subjectivity and the Complex of Secondary "Australism". *The Global South* 5, no.1, 66-84.

Trenin, D. 2010. Russia's Conservative Modernization: A Mission Impossible?. *SAIS review of international affairs*, *30*(1), 27-37.

Tudor, M. 2018. *Desire Lines: Orientation, Space and Digital Media Use among Queer Men in Contemporary Russia*. Huddinge: Södertörn Doctoral Dissertations, forthcoming.

Washington Post. 2017. Chechen leader says there are no gay people in his country. https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/chechen-leader-says-there-are-no-gay-people-in-his-country/2017/07/14/6b4bb79c-68b7-11e7-94ab-5b1f0ff459df_video.html?utm_term=.bdfaa94b601b.

Weber, C. 2016. *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Weiss, M. L. 2013. Prejudice before Pride: Rise of an Anticipatory Countermovement. In M.L. Weiss and M.J. Bosia (eds). *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Weiss M.L. and Bosia, M.J. 2013. *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Journal pre-proof

Wiedlack, K. 2017. Gays vs. Russia: media representations, vulnerable bodies and the construction of a (post)modern West, *European Journal of English Studies* 21, no.3, 241-257.

Wilkinson, C. 2014. Putting "traditional values" into practice: The rise and contestation of anti-homopropaganda laws in Russia. *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3, 363-379.

Wilkinson, C. 2017. "You're too much!": Experiencing the Straightness of Security. *Critical Studies on Security* 5, no.1, 113-116.

Wong, C., 2016. Mormon Leader: "There Are No Homosexual Members Of The Church". *Huffington Post*, 1 March 2016.

Yaffa, J. 2016. Putin's Dragon, *The New Yorker*, February 8 & 16 2016 issue.

Žižek, S. 1993. *Tarrying with the negative: Kant, Hegel, and the critique of ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Journal pre-proof