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An innocent provocation or homoerotic challenge?
Mediations of the '*Satisfaction'* video parody in the Russian mediascape

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Abstract

Within Putin's conservative nation-building agenda, the Russian mediascape excludes or marginalises non-heteronormative sexualities' voices from the official discourse. However, certain manifestations of non-heteronormative sexualities infiltrate public space through convergent traditional and new media (Jenkins, 2006) and the performativity of non-heteronormative sexualities in popular culture. This paper claims that these convergent media-enabled representations of NS can challenge, inform, mediate or authenticate the establishment discourse. It focuses on a particular case of a sexually provocative video with homoerotic undertones (mimicking a popular music hit *'Satisfaction'*) produced by male cadets from the Ulyanovsk Institute of Civil Aviation and uploaded onto YouTube in January 2018 (allegedly without the cadets' permission). The paper examines its mediation from the grassroots to semi-official peripheries, to mainstream media (TV) and back again (focus group data), highlighting a dramatic change in the official coverage as well as a lack of hegemonic consensus regarding representations of non-heteronormative sexualities.

Introduction

Even though homosexuality was decriminalised in Russia in 1993, it is still presented as a foreign threat to Russia's civilising mission (Baer, 2009; Mole, 2018). Furthermore, Russia's increasingly conservative nation-building agenda[1] complicates representations of non-heteronormative sexualities. This is particularly so in light of the 'anti-gay law' passed by the Russian Duma in 2013, which marks a cornerstone in the representation and visibility of non-heteronormative sexualities in Russia. This law ('For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values') makes the distribution of 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' among minors an offence punishable by fines.

Echoing the establishment's stance, Russia's contemporary mainstream mediascape is characterised by a nationalist-populist discourse and explicit homophobia (Persson, 2015). It tends to either silence or rigidly frame sexual minorities' alternative voices from an official viewpoint, as demonstrated in the dilemma over a display of transgenderism at the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest (Miazhevich, 2017). However, there are still some 'permissible' representations—such as performative non-heteronormative sexualities in popular entertainment culture, and the 'parading' of gay-friendly places during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics (Hutchings et al., 2015). There is also a merging and flow of content between new and traditional media platforms—'convergent media' (Jenkins, 2006), which supports a multiplicity of voices and provides space for discourses on non-heteronormative sexualities.

The term non-heteronormative sexualities (NS) is used here to encompass a wide, diverse range of phenomena including homosexuality, transgenderism, transsexuality, camp and other variations of sexualised aesthetics. The paper claims that the ongoing proliferation of alternative non-heterosexual subcultures enabled by this convergent media can challenge, inform, mediate or authenticate the establishment discourse, using the case study of a viral video, *'Satisfaction'* (16/01/2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fx-ArI4Jc-8), in which male cadets from the Ulyanovsk Institute of Civil Aviation parodied Benny Benassi's 2002

[1] E.g. President Putin's 2014 *Valdai* speech reinforced an active restoration of paternalistic attitudes and the message that alterity will not be tolerated.

pop hit, wearing just underwear, belts, academy caps and boots. It considers the circulation of the discursive representations around this video on three different levels—grassroots (YouTube, offline focus groups), semi-official media (tabloids) and state media (TV), thus offering a new perspective on post-Soviet NS discourses. By reviewing all these sites, this paper examines how convergent media-enabled representations of NS are infiltrating the apparently monolithic establishment discourse.

Using a Laclauian model of hegemony modified for the post-Soviet context, the paper shows that the national consensus position on NS is extremely unstable and prone to collapsing into contradictions. The insights into a set of discursive representations at the official, semi-official and grassroots levels highlight the mediascape's complexity and expose the existing multiplicity of voices and consecutive disjunctions of viewpoints on NS within the social spectrum in Russia. The paper first outlines the premise of this research, the specificity of the Russian mediascape and the theoretical framework. The methodology and analysis sections trace the circulation of meaning from the grassroots to the official level and back, using elements of discourse analysis on media texts and three focus groups conducted in Russia in 2019. The conclusion brings the key findings together and outlines avenues for further research.

Theoretical framework

Post-Soviet sexualities and popular culture

The fall of the USSR led to a reconsideration of sexuality in Russia. A previous absence of publicly acceptable manifestations and discourses of sexuality (a famous statement declared that 'there was no sex in the USSR') was followed by a short-lived period of sexual liberation following the removal of censorship in the 1990s (Borenstein, 2008). The (ideology of) glamour of the early 2000s, endorsing style over substance (Goscilo and Strukov, 2010), provided further affordances to the expression of sexualities in the form of homoerotism, excessive theatricality and aesthetics. This is exemplified in contemporary Russian popular music (where sexual and aesthetic excess was traditionally more readily tolerated), which has an abundance of (undisclosed) gay performers (Amico, 2014).[2] However, the 'diffusion' of 'global gay' culture (Martel, 2018) was constrained due to such conflicting discourses as the spread of AIDS, a threat to traditional morals, virility and reproduction signified by the crisis of masculinity and the loss of superpower status (Baer, 2009; Kon, 1995).

The recently accelerated 'conservative turn' has firmly interlocked discourses of normality, sexuality and heteronormativity, mainstreaming them in official media. For instance, there is a grounding in biopolitics (procreation) and hetero-normativity in the dating show *Let's Get Married* (Channel One). Then, homosexuality is regularly portrayed as an alien influence intertwined with the anti-western sentiment or a 'deviance' in line with the Soviet medicalised discourse (*Vremya Pokazhet* talk show, Channel One). Whilst the 2013 law has created a conundrum for the state media, whereby NS can be manifested visually but not acknowledged or verbalised as such[3], semi-official media (alternative TV channels) display a higher plurality of representations of NS (although frequently for comedic purposes).

Finally, phenomena such as camp (with its deliberate bad taste, flamboyance and ironic distancing, Sontag (1964)), neo-camp (Engstrom, 2019) and other aesthetic manifestations characterised by transgression, ambiguity and excess have successfully infiltrated Russian popular culture and even mainstream media (e.g. the use of global gay aesthetics in the

[3] This includes camp imagery of key TV presenters (e.g. *Fashion Verdict*, Channel One).

primetime comedy show *KVN*, Channel One), complicating the representations of NS. The next section clarifies the peculiarity of the Russian mediascape, providing additional context to the mediation of the *'Satisfaction'* video.

Russian media system

As Dunn (2014) asserts, the Russian mediascape comprises a two-tier system: the first includes state TV and newspapers with a federal reach and the second covers tabloids, oppositional media and new media-enabled platforms (which allow greater self-expression, at times acting as a safety valve). A complex system of direct (e.g. legislation) and covert controls (e.g. the state's mimicking and appropriation of grassroots resistance tactics) was outlined by Deibert and Rohozinski (2010). However, a detailed analysis of the Russian mediascape with its rapidly shifting regulatory framework, such as proposal of a 'sovereign internet' (Russia, 2019) is beyond the scope of this paper.

Until recently, the *interaction* between these two tiers was limited. However, the declining popularity of first-tier media (especially among younger generations) has prompted a number of strategic changes. The federal media now affords greater agency to media professionals to articulate the state agenda and employs an 'agitainment' approach—a concerted, 'centrally sanctioned communication of ideologised political messages delivered in accordance with an entertainment logic' (Tolz and Teper, 2018, p. 216). This has revamped political talk show genre, which has a more sensationalist register and attempts to engage online celebrities and enable some cross-fertilisation between the tiers. Urgant's evening TV show (Channel One), featuring guests such as the controversial YouTube comedian Danila Poperechnyi[4] illustrates a new dimension of this 'managed co-optation' of influential alternative voices. Despite this 'permeation' between the tiers, the multidirectionality of flows is distinctive, as the state media remain the main 'producer' of major media events (Tolz and Teper, 2018), and spontaneous grassroots resistance is rarely covered (Toepfl, 2011) or limited to a few 'managed' voices (e.g. a corruption scandal involving Church construction (Ekaterinburg, 2019)).

The *'Satisfaction'* video is particularly unusual, as it is one of the few cases when (an originally apolitical) grassroots product was rapidly propelled to the 'top' state media level, acquired political connotations leading to a U-turn in the establishment's originally declared position, and resonated with a significant part of the Russian public, eventually becoming apolitical again. The 'scandal' around *'Satisfaction'* became a signifier 'of a transient moment of cultural production' (Dinnen, 2016, p. 900), when an experimental output not intended for public consumption entered an online field loosely guided by a set of laws triggering Russian state media's reaction and various forms of public resistance to that response.

Unlike Raybovolova and Hemment (2019), who use *'Satisfaction'* to explore the changing Russian media system and the event's trajectory using a social drama approach, this paper explores its mediation process and the circulation of meanings. It examines the video from the point of view of cultural processes and explores the discursive representations of NS triggered by this grassroots production. The paper position itself closer to Stuart Hall's production-reception model (1991) as the journalists and audience re-articulate the messages related to the video. In this respect, Martin-Barbero's interpretative framework (1993), examining how media texts relate to, and become part of, social and cultural practices, brings the data from three different sites (official, semi-official and grassroots) together.

[4] The rifts between the tiers are clear cut, as Danila was reprimanded by his online followers for appearing in the show.

The circulation of meanings in a situation of 'weak' hegemony

Adopting a cultural studies perspective, Martin-Barbero (1993) focused on the power struggle between subaltern and dominant societal groups, foregrounding the role of communication and (actively) participating audiences. Consequently, the notion of mediations presupposes various cultural processes associated with the dialectic of the centralisation of and resistance to power. In other words, '[m]ediations could be considered as a social interface, a place from which it is possible to perceive and understand the interactions between the space of production and the space of reception' (Scolari, 2015, p. 1098). Although Martin-Barbero explored mediations with reference to Latin American modes of traditional media use and various genres[5] before the arrival of digital technologies, the premise remains the same. The digitally enhanced multidirectional flows reveal further how the general public resist and/or redesign media technologies and processes, subverting and/or appropriating media messages.

During the process of 'active reception', the public can retrieve, replicate, reconstruct and reconfigure elements of popular culture.[6] The process of re-signification is mutual: popular culture is altered, counteracting mainstreamed agendas, while mass cultural expression is modulated and modified by popular culture. This process of interpretation and interaction is complex and multidirectional, with both resisting and hybridising tendencies. This ongoing struggle for dominant meanings between subordinate and dominant groups resonates with a wider framework of Laclauian hegemony.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 135) see hegemony—a temporary fixation of meaning or power—as being redistributed across a plurality of 'nodal points' or 'chains of equivalence' that partially (and provisionally) fix dominant meanings within a complex system of differences and antagonisms. In this, consensus management (hegemony) is enabled not only by 'the presence of antagonistic forces' but also by 'the instability of the frontiers which separate them' (ibid., 136). In a situation of a *weak* hegemony' (Author), such as Russian state-controlled media, the chains of equivalence are almost completely absent. Thus, the establishment struggles to establish itself within these chains and instead submits to imagined pressure from above, while the productive value of difference and antagonism becomes disruptive to the (artificially instilled) consensual power balance. Therefore, state media narratives become characterised by a rigid reiteration of the establishment's position and a low level of discursive hybridity, with only a few positions evident, in limited combinations.

It is expected that the 're-signification' of the same media text circulating between two tiers of Russian media will reveal the actual plurality of public views and (a lack of) consensus regarding 'traditional values' and representations of NS. Any dramatic shifts in the establishment's position, as well as significant inconsistencies in the mediated public discourse, highlight the artificial nature of any societal consensus on the matter.

Methodology

Using this theoretical framework, the paper explores mediations of the video and the contestations of meanings related to it at three levels: from grassroots, via semi-official sources, to the state media and back. The elements of *Fairclough*'s discourse analysis (1995) are used to analyse both visual and textual data, focusing on aspects such as the plurality of voices, omissions and artificially imposed absences during the circulation of meanings, tropes and lexicon used to discuss the sexually provocative *'Satisfaction'* video, which triggered a nationwide debate. The key disjunctions and inconsistencies identified in attributed meanings

[5] Telenovela taps into deeper cultural layers, triggering audience's reactions on various levels (emotions, identifications, etc.) and locations (such as conversations with friends) going beyond the medium and the logic of production.

[6] The lack of uniformity and complexity in national (both mass and popular) culture identified by Martin-Barbero (1993) is now further convoluted by the transnational flows complicating regional processes and national identity politics.

signify ruptures in the hegemonic consensus on NS. Due to the volume of data, only the main discursive strands will be discussed here.

The close reading of the selected state media texts by the key providers (news by *Vesti.ru* and two TV talk shows by *Channel 1* and *Rossiya 1*) is supplemented by an insight into semi-official media coverage (the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*) and cross-referenced with grassroots views. Due to space constraints, online data (online flash mobs and comments) are only briefly mentioned, with the focus groups' viewpoints constituting the core of the grassroots data analysis. Three focus groups of 7 or 8 participants were held in St Petersburg in March 2019. The randomly selected respondents[7] represented a broad spectrum of society (demographic, education, ethnicity, professional background and geographical origin), ensuring representativeness of the data (although caution should be taken in extrapolating it).

Free-flowing discussion (in Russian) was encouraged via a set of vignettes featuring (often transgressive) Russian pop cultural manifestations, which could be 'read' as NS. The '*Satisfaction'* video was one of these cultural products, together with an episode of the series *Nasha Rasha* (the project akin to British sketch comedy *Little Britain*) featuring a homosexual couple, recent queer music video clips by Russian pop singers. Only those parts of the transcripts where the video was discussed are used in this analysis. The focus groups are labelled G1, G2 and G3.

Analysis

Mediations of the video by the first-tier media

Voices and themes in the news

This video, where cadets lip-synched to a song and danced suggestively, parodying the moves in a hit music video, could have been decoded in a number of ways. However, the bureaucrats' interpretations fell in line with (what was perceived as) the ideologically 'correct' understanding of the depiction and was largely framed as *immoral* behaviour. Officials linked to the RosAviation derided the video as disgusting (*vozmutitelnye s'emki*), an ugly incident (*bezobraznyi sluchai*) and 'an insult to all of the aviation staff' (http://73online.ru/readnews/56258). Following suit, Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency called it 'outrageous', presumably implying a clash with moral values (https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2976668#). This original official reaction was accusatory, punitive and disproportionally harsh. The officials' generic declarations can be attributed to a lack of satisfactory jargon around sexuality and 'desiring' subjects, as well as a pre-emptive shifting of blame. Nonetheless, their decision to construct the narrative around (im)morality showed a predisposition towards the prescribed 'traditional values' rhetoric, coupled with its low internalisation.

The most telling (and widely circulated by the federal media) statement, at that stage, was issued by a rector called Krasnov, who compared it to the 2012 Pussi Riot scandal, declaring that the cadets had 'desecrated a cathedral of science' (https://www.vesti.ru/videos/show/vid/742492/#). By drawing parallels between this (transgressive) performance with Pussi Riot's infamous punk prayer in Russia's main cathedral, he displayed a grave misunderstanding of the context and the actors involved. To start with, Pussi Riot was perceived as the 'enemy' within (a western-influenced anarchic and unpredictable part of Russian culture). Aviation cadets, in contrast, are significantly closer to

[7] A research centre (http://cisr.ru) in St-Petersburg assisted the project's Research Associate (RA) with the recruitment of participants using their sociological surveys' database. The template for the focus group discussion was designed by the lead researcher, Galina Miazhevich and the RA, Maria Brock (an AHRC-funded project, ref AH/R00143X/1).

the cultural heart of the nation, due to their associations with patriotism, the cult of the soldier and aviator, the legacy of WWII,[8] etc. Equating these two groups undermined the very core of Russia's post-imperial aspirations linked to its military pride and strength[9]. By associating the cadets with Pussi Riot, Krasnov unintentionally evoked the discourse of 'vulgar', 'rotten' western values, conflicting with the state's line of 'traditional' values. Finally, by comparing a private video produced as a bit of fun activity in the students' residence with Pussi Riot's pre-planned public event, the rector magnified the issue (unintentionally), politicised it and moved the discussion onto an entirely different plane. Whether this was an attempt to show his vigilance and pre-emptively 'cover his back' or interpret the case in line with the state's rhetoric, it backfired, culminating in a set of unintended consequences.

Alongside that, both the original state and (some immediate) grassroots reactions were around homoerotism or the 'homosexual aesthetics label' assigned by journalists (Raybovolova and Hemment, 2019). For instance, the invited experts by *Vesti*—the sexologist Lebedev sisters—pointed out the provocative nature of the cadets' behaviour and 'signs of homosexuality', drawing parallels to Napoleon's attraction to younger military males and asserting the 'shakiness of young men deprived of female attention'. This idea of the fragility of masculinity contradicted the idea of military strength, the narrative of a strong Russia and alluded to a degree of homosexuality in the air forces and army (https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2976668#).

Vesti's news coverage revealed a pronounced confusion about how to label this 'scandal'. In the same report they called it an 'erotic dance in underwear', describing 'sex shop-like outfits' and then evoked several references to homosexuality ('they seem to be ok without girls' and '*goluboi ogonek'* (blue entertainment show; '*goluboi'* is slang for gay). However, the report also contained a whole set of terms which rather refer to excessive sexuality or sexually liberated behaviour, such as brothel, den (*priton*), bacchanalia, cesspool of deviations and 'BDSM attire' (the latter warranted clarification). This, together with the sarcastic tone adopted by the presenters highlighted post-Soviet confusion and embarrassment around public expressions of previously private matters (sexuality), as well as a lack of appropriate vocabulary and literacy to discuss it.

Thus, overzealous military officials, journalists and experts constructed a 'moral panic' discourse and (counterproductively) foregrounded a homosexual element. For instance, the RosAviation formed a committee to look into the case and conduct psychiatric assessments, with a view to recommend the cadets' expulsion (https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2976668#). This echoed the Soviet legacy of treating homosexuality as a deviance or disease (today, the colloquial term for a 'straight' male is '*natural'* or 'normal'). Although the video was conceived as a private parody which had, allegedly, been leaked (Observer, 2018) the cadets' twerking dance moves were depicted as an offence to the state, the armed forces and the nation. This intrusion into 'the public's "private" sphere' (Raybovolova and Hemment, 2019) inevitably caused a public backlash (e.g. online petitions and the subsequent flash mobs discussed below). Public opinion started to form in opposition (below) to an increasingly irrational establishment position, which had turned a humorous entertainment video into a serious transgression and a deliberate provocation.

Channel One: *Vremia Pokazhet talk show*

[8] E.g. Governor Morozov's stated that cadets insulted the 'veterans' and needed to be assessed by a medical committee (http://tass.ru/obschestvo/4878422).

[9] Although the cadets were from a civil aviation, the online comments revealed the interlinkage and/or sustained confusion of the cadets with the military.

Adeptly responding to this tide of public resistance, the state media's framing of the issue changed. The next day (17/01/2018) it suddenly stopped alluding to the cadets' homosexuality and the video's homoerotic aesthetic. The presenters of Channel One's TV talk show *Vremia Pokazhet* articulated a ban of sorts: 'They are young idiots, and when it comes to taste and style, they have messed up. They definitely shouldn't have posted this online. I suggest we don't discuss any of it and move on to the main issue'. This prohibitive and authoritarian statement was immediately followed by a contradictory message of collaboration which aimed to transfer power to the public, inviting the audience to decide the cadets' fate: 'we, as a group of people of different ages, represent the country's public opinion. Do we as a country believe that they should be severely punished—expelled?'. This 'invitation' to the audience to decide the cadets' fate is similar to illusion of managed democracy created to resolve the dispute over above-mentioned church construction (Ekaterinburg, 2019).

They steered the discussion towards the cadets' naivety instead of immorality, transferring responsibility to Russian society at large. By moving the focus from the cadets to the system (the failure of their education or parents, the mass media's influence), they not only diverted attention away from the homoerotic component but also avoided any debate about the crisis of masculinity, which would have contradicted the line of the strong state or discipline in the armed forces. Alongside this depersonalisation and generalisation of the issue, the presenters introduced a curious argument involving a flux of values after the fall of the USSR: 'We must remember that we are in a very difficult situation because, after the collapse of our old state we haven't figured out what system of moral values we need to build'. This strategy was presumably used to deflect attention away from the fact that it was the state media and officials who had initially politicised and escalated the case.

Rossiya 1: *60 Minutes talk show*

Rossiya 1, Russia's second most popular TV channel, staged a similarly awkwardly 'moderated' discussion (18/01/18). Although the male presenter called it a 'moral dancing scandal' from the start, signalling an ethical and value-driven angle, he did not specify the nature of this dilemma. Instead, he clumsily introduced the term 'BDSM' as a subculture, 'unusual sexual practices… perhaps with the use of some whips', and both presenters (who are husband and wife) paused for a moment, smiling uncertainly. This was followed by a voiceover of quotes from the British press about the 'incident' in 'Putin's college'. This unnecessary introduction of a western perspective fomented the vitriolic anti-western sentiment (which is beyond the scope of this paper), politicised the incident and exacerbated the video's scandalous nature (especially for those unfamiliar with the clip).

The video had to be seen in order to be evaluated, so an edited clip was shown. It represented a randomised sequence of cadets' twerking movements which amplified its obscenity and distorted the humorous element. The fact that it was shown, but not in the original form, highlights an *inability* to interpret the state policy (what can be displayed and when, under the 2013 legislation). Furthermore, instead of showing the video once, the doctored clip was incessantly replayed during the talk show, turning the whole discussion into a farce.

Despite an ostensibly wide range of invited experts, their comments did not represent a wide spectrum of societal views. Instead of reiterating the patriotic rhetoric, the presenters seemed to deliberately undermine officials' viewpoints. Unusually, when interviewing Krasnov via a phone link, the male presenter criticised the rector's words for being too harsh, almost ridiculing what would previously have been considered an authoritative declamation. After the call, the female presenter adopted Krasnov's lexicon ('the punishment will be on a case by case basis and commensurable with their grades'), joking about how they had decided

if they would 'all wear the same pants'. Another official figure—Anishenko from *United Russia* party—who proceeded to give his (prepared?) speech about the cadets' improper conduct, was cut short by the presenter.

None of the viewpoints were integrated into any kind of unity. Instead, they were left fragmented, unfinished and even misinterpreted, either on purpose (to steer the discussion towards depoliticising the situation) or unintentionally, due to the officials speaking in riddles, uncertain how to proceed with their arguments in a rapidly changing context. This was exacerbated by the in-studio screen being divided into three segments: one showing the looped 'doctored' video clip, the other an official (Krasnov), and the third zooming in on the grinning guests. This juxtaposition of the supposedly vulgar and obscene video alongside a figure of authority and power and studio speakers pulling faces (sceptical or sneering) all on the same screen highlights the disparity (and impossibility of mediation) between the popular and official realms.[10]

Both talk shows demonstrated an absence of real polemic, as the experts' voices were not commented on (even the critical ones—'it's like obscurantism in the Middle Ages'), or were just repeated by the presenters, sometimes sarcastically, rather than being weaved into a discursive whole. The media demonstrated a uniform (orchestrated?) omission of the cadets' voices, which could have complicated the 'master narrative'. This staging of the narrative in a particular way (from criticising to pardoning) and the recirculation of certain topics between channels and programmes (e.g. 'BDSM attire') problematised the allegedly agentive nature of the media professionals. Despite having greater freedom to experiment with certain ideas and formats (Tolz and Teper, 2018), they still seemed constrained in how to re/frame topics, or which voices they could broadcast.

Finally, there seemed to be coordinated support for the cadets (in the state media) by public figures who usually hold extremely conservative views. This included the controversial politician V. Zhirinovsky, who stated it was merely an intergenerational conflict and that the video had been filmed in their home, which 'no one has the right to spy on' (*podgliadyvat'*). V. Milonov—a notorious proponent of the 2013 legislation—blamed the education system rather than fostered the 'propaganda of homosexuality' aspect of the video; and a prominent media figure, V. Soloviev, criticised officials rather than the cadets. This coherent uniform backing of the cadets by an implausible set of public figures amplified the superficial nature of this display and demonstrated that even rigid conservative views can be fine-tuned, depending on the situation.

Thus, the dynamic of the state media's position progressed from reprimand to mainstreaming a reverse frame of support for the cadets' escapade. Instead of counterproductively drawing attention to homosexuality's supposed threat to morals, the media 'blamed' post-Soviet societal upheaval and (educational) system mismanagement. The next section explores the nature of grassroots' resistance to this narrative, as well as further changes in mediations of the video.

The second-tier media: re-mediations and resistance

The plurality of voices within the second tier was naturally higher. For instance, the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* contextualised the video by positioning it within contemporary music flows and twerking. Interestingly, its conservative commentator Skoibeda also appreciated the cadets' bodies, sexy moves, and sense of humour (17/01/2018). Due to space constraints here,

[10] The female presenter's muddled stance regarding the video's homoerotic element signals the same impossibility of mediation. She (mistakenly) thought the committee formed to check the 'adequacy' of the cadets would test if the video breached the 2013 legislation. At the same time, she identified the video as erotic ('enjoying' viewing the male bodies and commenting that 'many people noticed the guys are in a great physical shape'), implicitly endorsing the cadets' heteronormativity.

I will omit most semi-official mediations of the video and consider a range of grassroots-level online opinions and offline focus group responses instead.

Predictably, online remarks were more diverse and polarised. They emerged shortly after the video was released, picking up on aspects such as aesthetics, morals, disrespect of the military, as well as those generally missed by the first-tier media, such as corporeality, desire and pleasure (e.g. in the video's eroticism). They also expressed genuine confusion about which law the 'dancing cadets' had broken (thus highlighting the perceived irrelevance or even ignorance of the 2013 law). Although the second-tier media displayed a similar take on corporeality, its discussion of the cadets' semi-naked bodies was more pronounced and prolific.

The looming threat of the cadets' dismissal led to a flash mob challenge, where similar video parodies emerged, featuring various demographic groups (students of various institutions, professionals, pensioners and housewives), branching out to neighbouring countries like Belarus and Ukraine (Observer, 2018). While this could be read as a distinct sign of societal solidary, a protest against state control by the plural publics (Gessen, 2018) or a response to 'Kremlin homophobia', Borenstein (2018) argued that support for LGBTQ rights was not the dominant stance.

Borenstein challenged the transgressive role of the video and its potential for LGBT, claiming that its supporters, or 'the pro-Satisfaction camp' were 'implicitly motivated by two key features: heterosexual privilege and the persistence of gay invisibility'. This performance of (presumed) heteronormative males 'broaden our understanding of drag', turning it into a 'casual, humorous drag', since it made fun of gayness, adopting it for the hedonistic articulation of fun, pleasure and frivolity (ibid). Similarly, La Rocca and Rinaldi (2020:39) suggest that when gay masculinities 'fulfil flamboyant or camp stereotypes they get easily used as tool of normalizations' becoming a set of 'acceptable' representations 'allowed' within the heteronormative mainstream.

As the online comments and focus group responses discussed below showed, public support and understanding of this video was more diverse. Only some of the alternative voices were pro-LGBT. Other motivations ranged from expressing solidarity with the cadets to attempts to increase personal popularity or 'catch up with the hype'. For some groups it became a way to have fun, connect with global entertainment culture (global music videos, tropes and dances), exhibit their right to individualistic self-expression (the desire to relax, enjoy or be famous), or draw attention to the rights and needs of the elderly (Observer, 2018).

Rather than covering this flash mob phenomenon (potentially amplifying and empowering it), state media's participation in this 'mimicking war' was limited to parodies by two federal TV show hosts—Channel One's V. Urgant (20/012018), who danced dressed ironically in camp 'home attire' with three other media personalities, and NTV's V. Takmenyov, who concluded his programme by twerking (20/01/2018). This subversive diversion[11] further diluted the flash mob endeavour, infusing it with: (a) confusing connotations—part of a tactic of the media bombarding the public with contradictory messages, and (b) infotainment elements—a reformed cultural practice of 'cynical humour' (Roudakova, 2017).[12]

Interestingly, the video's entertaining aspect was picked up by both tiers but to different ends. Although the state media (*Vesti* news) linked the video to a similar genre of 'funny military music videos' (Dinnen, 2016), stating that a similar clip had been made by the British military in 2015, it was used to explain the cadets' imitativeness rather than to downplay the scandalous nature of the clip. Online viewers thought it poked fun at popular music culture,

[11] For other establishment's subversive tactics (such as a video by a youth group 'Kremlin cadets' singing in military uniform about patriotism and duty) see Raybovolova and Hemment (2019).

[12] This hollow or 'passionless' mockery, devoid of the performer's emotional attachment e represents a relatively new Russian phenomenon (Roudakova, 2017, p. 183). The same presenter had previously used this technique to devalue societal issues like the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

like the song's original video, and drew parallels with the similar homoerotic aesthetic employed in Russia, such as military teams in Channel One's entertainment show *KVN*. Disagreement about the comedy aspect of the video became the key issue in the focus group discussions, which I turn to now.

Focus group responses[13]

The clip was met more or less uniformly with laughter, making the 'humorous' aspect of the video the starting point of the discussions. Some participants saw it as a joke—either a light-hearted act created for fun and pleasure or in order to amuse and shock via its excess ('*epatazh'*, G3). All of the groups, G1-3, used the youth slang term '*prikol*', meaning a joke, prank or funny trick, which implied a simple naïve act in line with current stand-up performances ('not surprising, as they are brought up on shows like this', G2). When it was 'read' at face value, it was perceived more as an obscenity ('idiotic', G1) or gibberish ('although I have not seen it, it looks like nonsense' (*beliberda*), G3) and left others 'speechless'(G2). Although commenting on a humorous aspect of the video, the respondents did not clearly articulate why it constitute a spectacle (whether it is poking fun at this popular song or rigidity of their everyday life, signifying cadets' silliness and embodying mockery of gays or 'gay drag' (Borestein, 2018)).

Other themes interweaved in the conversation included corporeality, homosexuality, morality, freedom of expression, the 2013 law, and media influence. The theme of body and corporeality was an immediate reaction to the video: 'the guys are great', 'they are moving nicely' (G1), 'great body control' (*vladenie telom*), (G3), 'if only I could do the same… they are young and heathy' (G2). Corporeality was linked to their age and the visual satisfaction of watching the young bodies' dance moves (or dissatisfaction: 'I don't feel nice when looking at this', G3). The appropriateness of displaying semi-naked *male* bodies was questioned in G3. The state ideas of BDSM attire did not resonate with the public.

Interestingly, respondents refrained from using explicit references to homosexuality, although they did allude to it. Possibly, this was because (homo)sexuality is still perceived as an unsuitable topic to discuss in public, or due to a lack of adequate vocabulary. For instance, 'it's a little bit shocking (provocative)' or 'they are obsessed (*zatsiklitsia*) with this banana' (G3), 'if it was performed by bodybuilders or strippers, it would be ok' (G2). At times, interpretations were made with a binary heteronormative framework in mind—'girls, did you like it'? (male participant, G1), an uncertainty about how to understand it (a role reversal, as these were 'typical female positions', G2), or how to interpret it ('boys were taught ballroom... now the dances are too fast... maybe it's just a different time', G1). One participant was completely oblivious to the transgressive nature of the video: 'it's something like aerobics' (G3).

In turn, explicit comments were more often of a homophobic nature: 'turned the military barracks into a gay bar' (G1), 'I was in the army… this is disgusting' (G2), 'I think their superior would evaluate it differently' (G1). One participant deemed the video 'not as bad as "a woman with a beard" [Conchita Wurst] or same sex marriages' (G2), while another treated it as a deviance: 'if you take it with a pinch of salt, then it's ok, if you start looking from the point of view of sexuality then it's a deviation and the boys are not right in their heads' (G1). Curiously, none of the respondents commented on the initiation rituals and other

[13] Above all, the focus groups exposed an incoherence of the information field, as there were people who had not seen the clip (but everyone was aware of the video and the flash mobs). First, each focus group demonstrated some confusion about who was involved (e.g. pilots, cadets, school pupils, students at Suvorov's college, or customs workers) and a low awareness that it was a parody of a popular music video. Second, some participants changed their stances, for instance, becoming more aware that the video was a joke, an innocent provocation (G1), rather than a manifestation of 'immorality ('raspushennost').

practices underscoring fluidity of masculinity in the army which, according to Ward (2015), fall within the heteronormative discourses of straight masculinity.

The respondents expressed their concern about morals differently. The degree of perceived (in)appropriateness was clear in their emotional reactions, which was especially pronounced in G2: 'unpleasant feeling when watching this', 'irritating', 'they need to go and do some physical labour [cut wood] or do push ups', I would not like my son to be involved in something like this' (G2). One G3 participant commented, 'if you think about it rationally (*zdravo*) then it's not bad'. Overall, the cadets' youth seemed to excuse their behaviour (G1, G3) together with the 'hormonal explosion' (G2, G3) and immaturity ('they will grow up and be wiser', G2, 'they are just [sexually] obsessed pupils' (G3); 'young guys can do it' (G3)).

The focus groups also revealed a lack of any shared societal hegemonic stance on regulations imposed from above (e.g. the 2013 law). Only two participants mentioned the media's influence on children—'they absorb everything subconsciously' (G2)—perhaps reproducing the imposed association between showing NS and its 'propagandistic' potential for minors ('otherwise a child would perceive this mode of behaviour… as a norm', G3). The respondents were more concerned with the (less regulated) issue of violence in the media than representations of NS and complained about TV reality shows promoting 'perverted relationships' (G1) to the youth. They also perceived themselves as being (made) responsible for the 'inappropriate' behaviour of minors (e.g. by not controlling their media habits).

Finally, the discussions were largely skewed towards a broader societal shift, a major rupture following the fall of the USSR ('from no freedom to too much freedom', G2). The participants did not frame the issue in terms of 'traditional values', although one respondent mentioned moral (religious) principles (G2). More often, they saw it as an intergenerational shift or divide: 'younger people should rely less on… the informational overload'(G3), 'as part of the Soviet legacy, maybe we look at it like that as we have a certain predisposition from being brought up in a certain [strict] way', asserting that the younger generation is more easy-going (G2):

R1: this is funny (*prikolno*) and that's all!

R2: this is where cruelty comes from… because no compassion is allowed.

R3: The other way round! They accept everything. Acceptance is calmness… understanding.

Remarkably, the ideas of freedom of expression and tolerance were prominent: 'if the civil public can do it, why can't the military?' (G1), 'everyone has the right to self-expression… without extremes… I don't see particular excess here' (G3). A high level of tolerance was displayed by people of both genders, such as, 'everyone is entitled to their own opinion, if you don't like it, don't watch it' (G3), 'if they like it, let them film it' and, 'if you don't like it turn it off' (G1).

Thus, the discussions revealed a divergence from the state agenda, mainly revolving around topics absent from tier-one media (corporeality, sexuality, humour). The 'immorality' argument was downplayed or explained through the cadets' hormones, humour, generational and societal shifts (the latter was adopted by the state media). However, the appropriateness (and normalisation) of these representations within Russian heteronormative matrix was questioned. Overall, the focus groups' interpretation of the video was (at times) naïve, rather than homoerotic. Occasional homophobic outbursts, linked to the perceived incongruence between the cadets' military affiliation and their highly suggestive dancing, were compensated for by the tolerance displayed. Further audience research is needed to clarify these trends.

Conclusion

Divergent understandings of the video became apparent in its circulation from the grassroots, via the semi-official to the state media levels and back. The official media's line of argumentation consisted of essentialisation and medicalisation of the issue. Even though the state media's dominant narrative was articulated by a narrow range of voices, it was still highly inconsistent and clumsily managed. Hastily adopted frames of immorality and homosexuality were mainstreamed and then suppressed. Instead, the discussion was redirected towards the system, asserting that it had 'failed' the cadets, and inviting the public to agree with that position. This dramatic shift in framing was (surprisingly) backed up by conservative establishment political and media figures, illustrating the imposed nature of consensus ('from above').

Incoherencies at the state media level were particularly apparent in the disparity between the officials' absolute rigidity in interpreting the state agenda of traditional values, evoking Soviet pathologising assumptions about homosexuality and the state media journalists, who were more flexible in interpreting the state agenda (Tolz and Teper, 2018) as they struggled to articulate a coherent stance. They were unsure themselves how to interpret this rapidly developing situation or which experts to involve, and their mediation efforts highlighted a lack of common understanding of the 'traditional' value system or the 2013 law. The journalists' inability to create a meta-narrative by bringing (at least some of) the viewpoints together and providing any satisfactory coherent explanation further demonstrated a lack of hegemonic consensus.

The semi-official media exposed a wider diversity of opinions, as in the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* picking up online viewpoints to situate the video's sensual dimension within comedic and popular culture trends. The role of Russia's semi-official media needs to be foregrounded in future research, as it can constitute a suitable interface for consensus building. Bearing in mind the ongoing two-tiered division of media in Russia, the growing role of regional and hyperlocal media (Ratilainen, 2019) might provide a platform where state and grassroots opinions could successfully be combined and re-modulated in less extreme and more organic ways. Predictably, online comments fluctuated between dismay or appreciation for the video, foregrounding its affective component.

The subsequent flash mobs challenged officials, trigged a shift in media coverage and became a symbolic resistance to the system. This point is also supported by the focus groups' diverse responses re-articulating both the state media's and online viewpoints. The establishment's rhetoric of traditional values was largely disparaged, as the public appealed to different notions (humour, parental responsibility, corporeality, etc.) and agreed (in line with the online views) that these representations might be acceptable as part of the entertainment trends or freedom of expression.

Both off- and online responses highlighted 'people's roles in producing meaning and creating their own identities through localised cultural processes that operate in spite of, or in resistance to, attempts at cultural domination through communication' (Richardson, 1994). Publicity or expression in public had both a disciplining propensity (conforming to norms) and reshaping capacity (launching new beginnings, rearticulating values) (Roudakova, 2017, p. 27). It is precisely this plurality of voices and publicity of expression that is important for contesting meanings, which leads to their clarification, the development of new vocabulary and literacy. Conversely, the exposed diversity of viewpoints complicates the consensus-building and the formation of a more robust civic society.

This study showed that the interaction of mass and popular culture is complex, and the struggle for 'dominant meanings' involves simultaneous covert and overt resistance, subversion and hybridisation at various levels. In this case, the grassroots mediation corrected, rather than authenticated, the establishment's discourse, as the implication that the cadets were homosexual was not supported. Although the flash mobs and the focus groups did not directly

back the LGBT agenda, they challenged the state media homophobic stance. Likewise, the 2013 legislation mainstreamed, and 'normalised' terminology related to NS (Mole, 2018), by prohibiting it, thereby 'cultivating' more tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality (Levada Centre, 2019). Further research, however, is needed to examine changing attitudes towards sexuality and the challenges this might pose to the country's sexual governmentality regimes.

Finally, the limited interaction within Russia's rigid two-tiered mediascape creates a paradox where communication hinders mediation and consensus building. On the one hand, the state media monitors the (second-tier) online sphere but responds to it via first-tier media, which is unlikely to reach the second-tier audience. Indeed, the editor of state-owned *Russia Today* recently claimed that the younger generation does not watch TV and only knows Putin from memes (Simonyan, 2019). On the other hand, this communication strategy confuses and potentially alienates the first-tier media audience, who might be unaccustomed to the language, cultural codes and other elements circulating online, as seen in the focus groups. Thus, Russia's first-tier media's overt and subversive strategies actually create a further separation between societal groups, instead of building some sort of common language and shared viewpoints between them.

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