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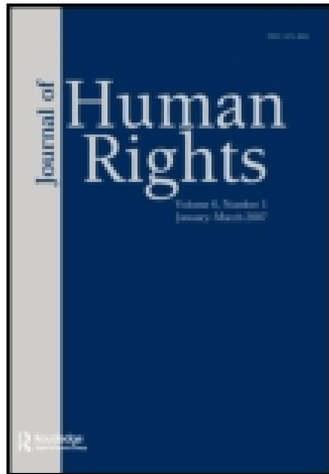

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Putting "Traditional Values" Into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia

CAI WILKINSON

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This article explores how "traditional values" are being used by the Russian government to refute the claim that "LGBT rights are human rights" and justify the introduction of anti-homopropaganda laws, and how members of the Russian LGBT community have sought to contest it. Centrally, it traces the development of a discourse that refutes the essentialization of sexual identity and, in doing so, seeks to challenge the focus on individual identity-based rights of contemporary human rights norms. This discursive shift has meant that opponents of the legislation have had to develop contestation strategies that collectively seek to present an alternative interpretation of "traditional values." The article concludes by considering the implications of the Russian case for human rights norms and for the notion of universal human rights more widely, arguing that it represents a serious challenge to the viability of identity-based LGBT rights claims as a basis on which to advance observance of fundamental human rights due to their homonormativity.

Introduction: Russia and "Traditional Values" at Home and Abroad

In October 2009, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolved that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was to "convene, in 2010, a workshop for an exchange of views on how a better understanding of traditional values of humankind underpinning international human rights norms and standards can contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms" (UNHRC 2009: 2). This resolution, adopted by 26 to 15 votes with six abstentions, marked the formal beginning of a Russian-led campaign at the UNHRC to gain recognition of "traditional values" as a legitimate consideration in the formation and implementation of human rights norms, despite concerns voiced at the workshop in October 2010 that "the term 'traditional values' has not been clearly defined and understood, and was therefore so vague and open-ended that it could be used to legitimize human rights abuses," and that "traditional values" were being narrowly interpreted as religious traditions (UNHRC 2010: 10).

Undeterred by these reservations or the relative lack of support the first resolution enjoyed, Russia sponsored two further resolutions under the headline "promoting human

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rights and fundamental freedoms though a better understanding of traditional values of humankind" during its UNHRC term.[1] The second resolution, adopted in April 2011 with a similar level of support to the first,[2] affirmed that "dignity, freedom and responsibility are traditional values, shared by all humanity and embodied in universal rights instruments" and requested that a study on "how a better understanding and appreciation of traditional values of dignity, freedom and responsibility can contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights" be prepared and presented to the Council before its twenty-first session (UNHRC 2011: 2). The study, drafted by the Russian nominee Professor Vladimir Kartashkin (UNHRC Advisory Committee 2011), was not finalized in time for the twenty-first session, yet Russia nonetheless pushed ahead with a third resolution that formally confirmed the legitimacy of traditional values in relation to human rights protection and promotion.[3] Specifically, the resolution asserts that

> [A] better understanding and appreciation of traditional values shared by all humanity and embodied in universal human rights instruments contribute to promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms worldwide; [. . .] traditional values, especially those shared by all humanity, can be practically applied in the promotion and protection of human rights and upholding human dignity, in particular in the process of human rights education. (UNHRC 2012: 2)

In addition to affirming the status of traditional values in relation to human rights protection and promotion, Resolution 21/3 seeks to advance the traditional values agenda by shifting the focus to examples of how traditional values can be employed. The resolution's penultimate point requests that "information from States Members of the United Nations and other relevant stakeholders on best practices in the application of traditional values while promoting and protecting human rights and upholding human dignity" be collected by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and a summary submitted to the UNHRC in advance of its twenty-fourth session (UNHRC Advisory Committee 2012: 2).

Several states, including Belarus, Indonesia, and Uzbekistan, as well as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, did submit examples of best practice.[4] However, many submissions focused instead on the problematic nature of the concept of "traditional values" both in theory and practice. Critiques focused on two main points. Firstly, as the European Union's (EU) submission noted, linking traditional values to established and codified human rights norms "can result in a misleading interpretation of existing human rights norms, and undermine their universality" (EU Permanent Delegation to the United Nations Office 2013: 1). Secondly, regardless of rhetorical reaffirmations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the start of the three resolutions, in practice "[t]raditional values, in particular those surrounding gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, age and disability have led to the marginalisation—and sometimes silencing—of numerous individuals and groups of persons throughout history" (EU Permanent Delegation to the United Nations Office 2013: 1).

The salience of this observation was starkly highlighted in the Russian LGBT Network's submission, which opened with a direct statement about the impact of the Russian-led initiative to introduce "traditional values" into the human rights realm:

> "Traditional values" in Russia are not just discourse. They are part of the political and social reality. The use of traditional values rhetoric has served to

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> justify a crackdown on dissent and the imposition of severe restrictions on the LGBT community. An alliance of ultra nationalists, conservatives, Christian Orthodox and Protestant fundamentalists are seeking to impose an ideological monopoly. (2012: 1)

In other words, in addition to leading efforts for recognition of traditional values at the UNHRC, Russia has been increasingly aggressively putting them into practice domestically. The rise of so-called "anti-gay" laws in Russia has been one of the most notable manifestations of this trend, clearly illustrating the serious challenge that "traditional values" poses for international human rights norms.

The following section, through an overview of how these laws developed, examines how political homophobia has become central to an increasingly nationalist and populist regime of moral regulation that I call moral sovereignty. The logic of moral sovereignty that underpins the promotion of traditional values in Russia is then analyzed. Moral sovereignty, I argue, represents a direct refutation of existing international human rights norms, and especially the fundamental right of nondiscrimination that is based on "a logic of full and equal humanity" (Donnelly 2003: 228). Instead, moral sovereignty argues that human rights are contingent on the observation, especially in public spaces, of local traditional values, which are seen to represent the values of the majority. Under moral sovereignty's logic, direct challenges to Russia's antigay laws are likely to fail, since they are seen as evidence of Western cultural imperialism, as dangerous moral depravity, and as being undemocratic and hypocritical. Consequently, as the penultimate section explores, the laws' opponents have had to try to develop strategies that not only seek to uphold existing human rights norms but that also engage in local contestation of the meanings and significance of "traditional values" despite the hostile sociopolitical environment.

The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of "traditional values" for existing international human rights norms and their protection. It is argued that the Russian-led traditional values agenda that has been promoted at the UNHRC and which is being implemented domestically represents a serious challenge to the viability of identity-based human rights claims in two ways. Firstly, the logic underpinning "traditional values" reveals the homonormative nature of mainstream LGBT rights activism (Duggan 2003), which has sought to normalize LGBT people but in the process become part of a regime of moral regulation that polices LGBT identities and distinguishes between "good gays" and "bad queers" (Warner 1999). The exposure of this dynamic in turn reveals the nonuniversality of identity-based LGBT rights claims, which risks undermining the principle of universal human rights. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, Russia's antigay laws have, within the logic of moral sovereignty, provided a practical solution to tensions between universal human rights and local values. The principles of equality and nondiscrimination are thereby replaced with a relativistic moral conditionality that sets a precedent for refusing to recognize the fundamental human rights of individuals or groups who do not comply with prevailing moral values and state interests, further undermining prevailing international norms.

Anti-Homopropaganda Laws: Practicing "Traditional Values"

Anti-homopropaganda laws, commonly called "antigay" laws in the media, are a spate of laws that have been enacted in Russia, initially at the regional level and more recently at the federal level, with the aim of preventing the "propagandizing" of nonheterosexuality and/or gender-variance to minors. The first anti-homopropaganda law was passed in May 2006

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by the Duma of Ryazan Oblast as an amendment to local legislation, Article 3.10, entitled "Public acts aimed at the propaganda of homosexualism (sodomy and lesbianism) amongst minors."[5] Individuals found to have engaged in such activities are subject to administrative fines of 1,500–2,000 roubles. The law's adoption received limited international publicity in April 2009 when LGBT activists Irina Fedotova and Nikolai Baev were arrested in Ryazan and fined for displaying banners with slogans including "homosexuality is normal" and "I'm proud of my homosexuality—ask me about it" (Interfax 2009). However, although the Arkhangelsk and Kostroma Oblast legislatures followed Ryazan in 2011, it was only in 2012 that legislation against so-called homopropaganda began gaining significant traction in Russia. The St. Petersburg Duma's passing of a law prohibiting "[p]ublic acts aimed at the propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexualism and transgenderism amongst minors" (Elder 2012: para. 3) in March 2012 despite an international outcry was the catalyst for the issue moving from local to national level. A further seven regional or municipal administrations have subsequently adopted similar laws.[6] On June 11, 2013, despite international condemnation and fierce opposition from local activists and their supporters, a federal bill outlawing the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors" was passed (Federal Law of the Russian Federation 2013).

Problematically, none of the laws clearly define what constitutes homosexual "propaganda." Backers of the federal law such as Elena Mizulina have attempted to distinguish clearly between "information" and "propaganda" and have been keen to stress that only "actions aimed at popularising non-traditional sexual relations amongst minors" have been outlawed, not holding a Pride parade (provided there are no minors present), being in a same-sex relationship or even distributing "neutral" information about nontraditional sexual relations (RIA Novosti 2013a). In practice, however, any public representation of nontraditional sexual relations that is not explicitly negative could be considered "homopropaganda," as demonstrated by convictions for displaying slogans such as the following: "Homosexuality is not a perversion. Perversions are field hockey or ice ballet"; "gay propaganda does not exist, people do not become gay, they are born gay"; "homosexuality is normal. This should be known by adults and children"; and "Being gay and loving gays is normal. Beating gays and killing gays is criminal" (Dolgov 2013: paras. 2, 6; Ring 2013: para. 2). Moreover, as the Venice Commission (2013: 11) notes, there have been "divergent decisions on the application of provisions concerning 'homosexual propaganda' in different regions," with the same slogan being deemed acceptable in one location but propaganda in another.

The justification for introducing these laws is the protection of young people's health and spiritual and moral development, which it is asserted can be harmed by being subjected to unregulated information about sexual and gender diversity. In addition, the laws are designed to ensure that "nontraditional" (that is, nonheterosexual and nonheteronormative) sexual relationships are understood to be socially inferior (Venice Commission 2013: 3), reflecting the state's increasingly active support for pronatalist and paternalist policies to promote "traditional family values" since 2006 (Pecherskaya 2013: 94–96). As such, the adoption and enforcement of anti-homopropaganda laws has become a key feature of the traditional values agenda in Russia. Along with the prosecution of three Pussy Riot members for inciting religious hatred (Fagan 2012), the campaign to identify "foreign agents" amongst no-governmental organizations (Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2013) and restrictions on access to abortions that were introduced in 2012 (Erofeeva 2013), it is amongst the most tangible manifestations of the recently formalized regime of national moral regulation that Valery Sozayev (2012: 7) calls "traditionalist revanchism"; a situation in which "conservative, traditionalist guardian forces [. . .] become key political actors enjoying the

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support and patronage of the government, with their messages becoming the message of the government" (2012: 7). In Russia's case, aggressive political homophobia has recently become central to this revanchism and an effective vehicle to promote "traditional values" at home and abroad.

While Sozayev (2012: 14) traces the beginnings of traditionalist revanchism back to 1991, as a domestic political discourse "traditional values" began emerging in 2006 following President Putin designating Russia's demographic crisis a key threat to national security in his address to the Federal Assembly (Erofeeva 2013: 1931). However, "tradition" remained implicit and undefined until 2012, when Putin's pre-election articles and speeches "directly linked the rebirth of Russian society's 'spiritual bonds' to the preservation of Russia's collective identity" (Pecherskaya 2013: 96). As a result, maintaining "traditional values" was now a politicized imperative for the survival of the Russian nation. This provided the Kremlin and its allies with "a powerful level for political mobilization" domestically (Pecherskaya 2013: 96) that, whether by accident or design, builds on the conceptual and political groundwork laid by Russia's UNHRC activities in 2009–2012.

The development of "traditional values" as a concept broadly parallels the rise of the anti-homopropaganda laws. Arguably the first concrete indication that official attitudes towards homosexuality were again becoming less tolerant came in 2002, when four Duma deputies attempted to amend the Criminal Code to recriminalize sodomy (O'Flynn 2002). Although the bill failed and even lawmakers viewed it as blatantly populist, hostility towards the apparent normalization of homosexuality continued to build amongst officials. Active opposition was evident from 2006, including the Ryazan Oblast's antigay law and the denial of an application to hold a Pride march in Moscow "on the grounds of public order, for the prevention of riots, and the protection of health, morals and the rights and freedoms of others" (Johnson 2011: 579). This refusal was not unexpected, given earlier statements by Moscow Mayor Yurii Luzhkov that he considered homosexuality unnatural and would not permit any parade while he was mayor (Interfax 2006a, 2006b). Local and foreign activists nonetheless attempted to hold the first ever Moscow Pride parade on May 28, 2006—an event marked by confrontations between participants and Orthodox Christians, skinheads, and extreme nationalists who opposed the event, with around 120 arrests in total (Finn 2006). Luzhkov has indeed continued to refuse applications for Pride parades and went considerably further in 2012, when Moscow City Council banned gay pride marches for the next 100 years (BBC News 2012). Local LGBT activists have continued to hold unsanctioned pride parades in Moscow each year, clashing with Russian Orthodox Church supporters and police with such regularity that LGBT activist and journalist Masha Gessen (2013) has described Moscow Pride as the city's "gay-bashing ritual."

Given this background, as well as a long tradition of regulating homosexual behavior in Russia that dates back to Ivan the Terrible's reign (Kondakov 2013a: 405),[7] it was entirely logical for the Kremlin to support antigay laws. Firstly, they not only enjoy strong public approval—68 percent as of November 2013 (Glikin 2013)—but have also further cemented the Church's loyalty to Putin's regime, which until early 2012 was not necessarily guaranteed, despite impressions to the contrary (Fagan 2013). Secondly, the antigay laws have operationalized "traditional values" by providing practices to accompany rhetoric, turning homophobia into a convenient proxy for "traditional values." This has depended on stimulating moral panic over homosexuality as a source of societal corruption, which has capitalized on the Russian population's wider fears about the future in the face of perceived demographic decline, concerns about living standards, and Russia's post-Cold

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War loss of international status. Within this narrative, the normalization of homosexuality has been portrayed as the antithesis of Russia's traditional values as an Orthodox Christian and non-Western civilization.

Homophobia thus functions as a Slavophile political shorthand for national identity and traditional values. This discourse has frequently been evident in justifications of the need for antigay laws put forward by their proponents. The initiator of the St. Petersburg law, Vitaly Milonov, for example, explained in an interview that he objected to gay parades because he is "an Orthodox Christian and the demonstration of the sin of Sodom is repellent to me," and he went on to illustrate the need to protect Russian children from depraved homosexuals with a vivid anecdote about seeing "photographs where men with all sorts of dildos are running around semi-naked" in Berlin (Chernov 2012: para. 19). In case this vision of public debauchery was insufficient to persuade people of the righteousness of his cause, Milonov went on to dismiss international criticism of the law as the work of an international gay lobby that has infiltrated the UN and the European Council, arguing that "this is Europe's problem; why should we copy European laws? Not everything that they have in Europe is acceptable for Russia" (Chernov 2013: para. 31). The implicit message is clear: to be properly Russian is to be Orthodox Christian and against homosexuality.

This presentation of the issue functions very well domestically as populist nation-building and is entirely in keeping with the vision of traditional family values laid out in the "State Concept of Family Policy until 2025."[8] However, it also ignores the fact that the Russian Federation is party to not only the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Ratification of the latter is particularly pertinent in relation to LGBT people's human rights, since the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that sexual orientation is protected by Article 8 of the ECHR (the right to private life, family life, home, and correspondence) and is included in the prohibition of discrimination in Article 14 (Venice Commission 2013: 12). The Kremlin's solution to this, as seen at the UNHRC, is to assert a claim to moral sovereignty in the domestic interpretation of international human rights norms via a discourse of traditional values.

Moral Sovereignty and Prohibiting Sins, Not Sinners

I use the term "moral sovereignty" to describe the idea that states have the right to decide and actively enforce society's moral norms, or traditional values, and that this right takes precedence over international norms and obligations.[9] In Russia's case, Orthodox Christianity is seen to be the primary source of these norms and values, and Putin has made adroit use of his alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church since the start of his third term to cement the Church's loyalty and to capitalize on its societal influence as the country's preeminent moral authority (Jarzyńska 2012; Pomerantsev 2012). Putin has been extremely clear about his belief that it is the state's responsibility to protect and uphold traditional values and their principal institutions (that is, the Russian Orthodox Church and the family) for the survival of the nation-state. Speaking at the Valdai International Discussion Club on September 19, 2013, Putin warned about the dangers of ignoring traditional values and made an emphatic argument for maintaining them:

> We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies

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> that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.
>
> The excesses of political correctness have reached the point where people are seriously talking about registering political parties whose aim is to promote paedophilia. People in many European countries are embarrassed or afraid to talk about their religious affiliations. Holidays are abolished or even called something different; their essence is hidden away, as is their moral foundation. And people are aggressively trying to export this model all over the world. I am convinced that this opens a direct path to degradation and primitivism, resulting in a profound demographic and moral crisis.
>
> What else but the loss of the ability to self-reproduce could act as the greatest testimony of the moral crisis facing a human society? Today almost all developed nations are no longer able to reproduce themselves, even with the help of migration. Without the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions, without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity. We consider it natural and right to defend these values. One must respect every minority's right to be different, but the rights of the majority must not be put into question.
>
> At the same time we see attempts to somehow revive a standardised model of a unipolar world and to blur the institutions of international law and national sovereignty. Such a unipolar, standardised world does not require sovereign states; it requires vassals. In a historical sense this amounts to a rejection of one's own identity, of the God-given diversity of the world. (President of Russia 2013a: paras. 19–22)

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Putin's State of the Union address in December 2013 echoed these sentiments and in addition claimed that the "destruction of traditional values [. . .] is fundamentally undemocratic," further legitimating his argument by hinting at the West's hypocrisy for criticizing Russia as being undemocratic (President of Russia 2013b: para. 140).

The logic of moral sovereignty in Putin's statements is the foundation for Russia's promoting of traditional values internationally and the legitimation of moral regulation of society by the state domestically. Inherent in this logic, as Putin notes, is that the majority's rights take precedence over those of minority groups. The state's role as sovereign, therefore, as Putin explained during a press conference, is to protect its citizens and key institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church "from the quite aggressive behaviour of certain social groups, who, in my view, don't just live as they wish to, but quite aggressively try to impose their point of view on other people and on other countries" (President of Russia 2013c: para. 130). Such protection is, it can be inferred, achieved by enforcing appropriate (i.e., locally defined) traditional values.

Moral sovereignty also opens up space for Russia to redefine what counts as a legitimate claim to human rights and thus to contest current international human rights norms. Since the early 1990s, LGBT activists have increasingly based their claims to human rights on the idea that sexual orientation and gender identity are innate characteristics of an individual just like one's race or ethnicity, with considerable success, especially at the EU (Kollman and Waites 2009; Swiebel 2009). In other words, being homosexual or gender variant is due to being "born this way" and therefore a natural phenomenon that constitutes an identity, rather than just meaning that someone engages in "unnatural" sexual practices. However, this notion is rejected by the promoters of anti-homopropaganda laws, who, in common with most of the Russian population, view deviations from heterosexuality either as

immorality or illness (Kondakov 2013b). In both cases, homosexuality is firmly understood as dangerous behavior that threatens Russia's future as a nation, as Elena Mizulina, Chair of the Duma Committee on Family, Women's and Children's Affairs, has explained on multiple occasions, citing the need to address Russia's demographic crisis and her belief that the revival of the traditional family and traditional values are "the solution to many problems of our society" (Queerussia 2013: para. 5).

Under the logic of moral sovereignty, antigay laws are not only logically possible but are arguably an obligation of the state for the protection of society. Furthermore, because of the shift in focus from individual to collective and from identity to behavior, it is possible to claim that no human rights have been violated, as senior Russian officials have done (RIA Novosti 2013b). After all, the sin not the sinner is being regulated in the interests of children's rights and the nation's well-being, with LGBT people continuing in principle to enjoy all the same rights and protections as heterosexual and cisgender citizens, provided they do not transgress societal norms in public.

Regardless of the fact that moral sovereignty arguably provides grounds on which to justify anti-homopropaganda laws, it has nonetheless placed Russia at odds with prevailing international human rights norms and support for the idea that "LGBT rights are human rights." International outrage and condemnation has been intensified by perceptions that official homophobia has been accompanied by a rise in homophobic violence in Russia. In addition to clashes at pride parades and demonstrations against the federal law that have frequently left LGBT people bloodied, there have been a number of brutal attacks on gay men, including the vicious murder of Vladislav Tornovoi in May 2013 that drew comparisons with the killing of Matthew Shephard (Cavaliere 2013) and the rise of the far right movements Occupy Pedophilia and Occupy Gerontophilia that hunt for gay teenagers and men online and then kidnap and abuse them in order to "cure" them, posting videos and photos of their victims' ordeals online as a deterrent to others (Luhn 2013).

Officials deny that the anti-homopropaganda laws are the reason for the increase in open hostility and violence against LGBT people, with Mizulina recently stating that she "cannot be responsible for the criminal behavior of some of our citizens who by the force [*sic*] demonstrate their opposition to this phenomenon" (Queerussia 2013: para. 3). However, it is difficult not to see a relationship between official homophobia and growing popular moral vigilantism that seeks to police observance of traditional values with threats and violence. Faced with the reality that homophobia has for many become a shorthand for traditional values, Russian LGBT activists are increasingly actively challenging the meaning of traditional values in the Russian context as well as continuing to draw attention to violations of the rights of LGBT people and their allies.

Contesting "Traditional Values": Morality Politics and Democratic Values

As noted earlier, since the early 1990s, LGBT activists have used an identity-based discourse to argue for recognition of LGBT people's human rights on the grounds of nondiscrimination. The different strategies for pursuing this in different countries reflect the local contexts and resultant opportunities and limitations to which local LGBT activism is subject. Writing about Western and Eastern Europe, Holzhacker (2012: 25–26) identifies three modes of interaction between LGBT civil society organizations and the local political environment: "morality politics," "incremental change," and "high-profile politics" (that is, using "external strategies to reach out to the broader public, insider strategies to build coalitions and lobby government in the national arena, and transnational action at the European and global levels to bring about change").

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Since the mid-2000s, Russian LGBT activists and their supporters have actively engaged in internationally orientated "high-profile politics," as demonstrated by the efforts from 2006 onwards to hold pride parades and the pursuit of cases against Russian municipal and regional authorities in the European Court of Human Rights (Johnson 2011) and UNHRC (Quinn 2013).[10] This approach is in keeping with the notion of norm diffusion with the assumption being that gradually states will be socialized to behave in ways congruent with international norms (Risse and Sikkink 1999), in this case meaning that the Russian government would recognize the human rights claim and provide legal protection against discrimination. In practice, however, these efforts have faced growing domestic resistance. In particular, the federal law against propagandizing "nontraditional sexual relations" forced activists to intensify their attempts to leverage international support via direct appeals for support or help to the international community (Queer Nation 2013; Signorile 2013) and the holding of numerous—and frequently unsanctioned—demonstrations against the antigay laws, with participants' arrests and injuries intensifying the protests' international impact (Alekseyev 2013).

Engagement in high-profile politics remains arguably the most visible—and from an international perspective, newsworthy—manifestation of activism against the antigay laws. However, in the domestic sphere engagement in morality politics has become a growing feature of the ongoing contestation of LGBT human rights norms. Reflecting the limited impact of international pressure to date, LGBT activists and their allies have attempted to publicly contest the Kremlin's meaning of traditional values in order to weaken public support for the antigay laws and to build tolerance towards LGBT people. In principle, this should be a viable strategy, since, as Pecherskaya (2013: 98) observes, there is considerable variation in how "tradition" is understood within Russia. Nonetheless, given the strength of opposition not only to recognition of LGBT rights but socially progressive movements in general—feminism, for example, has been publicly branded "very dangerous" by Patriarch Kirill (Elder 2013)—it would be unrealistic to expect gains to be seen quickly.

One of the central strategies has been to try to "rehumanize" public perceptions of LGBT people in the face of their demonization by conservative politicians and the Russian Orthodox Church—no small task given a 2012 Public Opinion Foundation poll indicated that 86 percent of Russians believe they do not know anyone who is gay or lesbian (Fond Obshchestvennoe Mnenie (FOM) 2012) and the frequent conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia, as with the original St. Petersburg anti-homopropaganda law, which lumped together homosexuality, "transgenderism," and pedophilia. Individually, some people have chosen to "come out" about being gay, lesbian, or transgender, aiming to dispel perceptions about the abnormality of LGBT people and to increase the community's visibility. One of the most high-profile instances was TV journalist Anton Krasovsky, whose pronouncement while presenting on the pro-Kremlin Kontr TV Channel in January 2013 that he is gay and is "a person just like you, like president Putin" led to his immediate sacking (Sokolova 2013: para. 10). Others have "come out" as allies of LGBT people and their rights, despite being of "traditional" orientation and/or relationship status and despite the risk of being targeted by association, forming a public presence as "Straights for Equality" on social networks and at demonstrations.[11] Liberal media outlets have similarly demonstrated their opposition to the antigay laws by publishing not only coverage of LGBT issues but also gay and lesbian individuals' personal stories and experiences (see, for example, *Afisha* 2013), by providing space for criticism of the antigay laws and the logic behind them (see, for example, TV Rain's coverage),[12] or holding online projects such as OutLoud's "I'm Human, Not Propaganda" photo-campaign (OutLoud 2012).

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Campaigners have also sought to demonstrate the laws' negative impact on the very people they are supposed to protect: children. The implementation of the antigay laws has to all intents and purposes erased lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) children and teenagers. Studies in countries such as the United States indicate that LGBTQ youth are particularly vulnerable to victimization and abuse (Berlan et al. 2010; Friedman et al. 2011). Russia's legislation has further marginalized and isolated them not only by sanctioning their stigmatization but also by putting any adults willing to support them at risk of prosecution. The online project "Children 404" (a play on the 404 error message often displayed when an Internet page isn't found) on Facebook and VKontakte provides an outlet for LGBTQ youth to share their stories, providing solidarity and a visible and often defiant rebuttal to those who believe that forbidding talk of so-called nontraditional sexual relations will ensure young people's heterosexuality. As one recent contributor to the project put it, "I exist, I'm not a mistake" (Deti-404 2013). In addition, it is not only LGBTQ minors who are affected by the strongly homophobic climate in Russia. The children of LGBTQ parents are often placed under considerable stress given the potential social consequences of their mother or father's sexual orientation becoming known, and the risks of homophobic violence or bullying (Pashinskii 2013).

These strategies have begun to destigmatize LGBT people by dispelling popular myths about homosexuality and shifting the focus onto LGBT people as people with lives and loves, rather than letting them be defined by certain sexual behaviors. In effect, Russians are being asked to accept that "love conquers hate," to borrow the slogan of the Human Rights Council's campaign,[13] and therefore is the ultimate traditional value that should be protected and promoted. This message has been reinforced by linking the adoption of antigay laws to wider concerns about violations of other fundamental freedoms in Russia and growing authoritarianism under the guise of traditional values, as Graeme Reid of Human Rights Watch argues:

> [Traditional values mean] intimidating non-government organizations, labeling them "foreign agents" and by implication enemies of the state. It means clamping down on political opposition. It means stifling a free press. And it means riding roughshod over the rights of migrants for political ends. (Reid 2013: para. 6)

Others have taken the argument further and drawn parallels between the Kremlin's homophobia and the actions of the Third Reich. Most strikingly, in St. Petersburg unknown persons pasted up several posters featuring a quote from Heinrich Himmler blaming "those who practice homosexualism" for a German demographic decline. Underneath was the question "Does this remind you of anything?" (Rosbalt 2013: paras. 2–3). In addition to being confronting in their own right given the history of the Second World War, such comparisons implicitly remind Russians that failure to speak up for the rights of LGBT people will make everyone more vulnerable, since, in practice, the antigay laws may set a precedent for other groups to be denied citizenship rights if the Kremlin sees them to be at odds with the state-sanctioned interpretation of traditional values. At stake, therefore, are not just the human rights of LGBT people but also the political future of Russian society, which is currently caught in the ideological crossfire between international norms and efforts to rebuild and assert Russia's national identity. To many people, Russian or otherwise, traditional values appear to be a logical and eminently sensible compromise solution to the "clash of cultures" they are experiencing. However, as opponents have warned, the shelter provided by traditional values is too often only temporary, with universal human

rights an early victim of the shifting sands of political populism on which traditional values stand.

Conclusion: Traditional Values and the Limits of Human Rights

The observation that human rights are only "relatively universal" is not new (Donnelly 2007), and the tensions that surround human rights norms in relation to sociocultural norms deserve to be taken seriously. However, rather than providing an example of "best practice" in how traditional values can be used to protect and promote human rights norms, the experience of LGBTQ people in Russia suggests that "traditional values" are being employed to promote an agenda that actively aims to limit the human rights of groups who do not comply with such values via the same pronatalist, paternalistic regime of moral regulation that has restricted access to abortions, "in practice turn[ing] women's bodies and lives into an instrument of state demographic ambitions" (Pecherskaya 2013: 103).

The adoption of anti-homopropaganda laws in Russia is, by the logic of moral sovereignty, internally coherent and necessary. Moreover, it reflects deep-seated and long-standing Russian skepticism about contemporary human rights discourses and norms linked, Namli (2012: 134) argues, to "the expectation that human rights will serve as a rational paradigm for morality," with rationalism "strongly connected to Western liberalism as a dominant cultural and ideological tradition." By contrast, in Russia, debates over human rights are marked by a focus on the moral responsibility of the individual that ignores the fact that human rights norms often serve to limit the utilization of political power and sees rights claims as the abdication of moral responsibility (Namli 2012: 142–143). Moral sovereignty gives this latter understanding of the relationship between morality and human rights an effective platform from which to challenge contemporary international human rights norms, buoyed up by longstanding discontent over the West's perceived domination of the international system and imposition of culturally alien norms on sovereign states.

Russia's success in promoting "traditional values" at the UNHCR and its success in implementing anti-homopropaganda laws domestically despite significant international condemnation indicate the potential power of the "traditional values" agenda, both as a threat to continued recognition of LGBT rights and the concept of universal human rights more widely. For LGBT rights, the logic underpinning the Russian anti-homopropaganda laws reveals the inherent limits of the "born this way" discourse of LGBT rights that has been employed—often to great effect—by activists since the early 1990s and hence the limits of identity-based rights claims. This homonormative discourse has actively sought to position LGBT people on the side of "good," "normal," or "natural" sexuality (Rubin 1984) by emphasizing the normalcy of their lives and loves, as seen in debates over gay marriage (Zivi this issue). Rather than advocating for intimate and sexual liberation, mainstream LGBT activism has instead become complicit in the moral regulation of intimate practices and promoting an image of the nonthreatening "good gay" (in a committed, stable, loving, and monogamous relationship) who engages in normal professional and recreational activities and whose sexual activities occur in private. This complicity in moral regulation within the LGBT rights movement creates an opening for challenges such as the current Russian one by disarming the supposedly universalist claim that "LGBT rights are human rights" as the dependence of identity-based rights claims on the presence of an undesirable and morally inferior "other," in this case the nonhomonormative queer, is revealed, making the concept of LGBT rights look decidedly relativistic and contingent on being the "right sort" of gay or transgender person.

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More widely, the "traditional values" concept threatens to limit both the scope and meaning of human rights norms. Universalism is replaced by moral relativism and conditionality, while sexual orientation and gender variance are explicitly placed beyond the scope of human rights norms due to being in conflict with moral norms and the responsibility of the individual to society. Especially when wrapped in the logic of moral sovereignty, the notion of "traditional values" forming the basis of human rights is extremely seductive for countries struggling to reconcile international obligations with domestic political dynamics, especially in the wake of the Sochi Winter Olympics, where vocal international criticism failed to transform into significant protests. Yet, it is precisely this susceptibility to populism and the inability of homonormative LGBT activism to launch a sustained defense of sexual and gender diversity that makes traditional values so dangerous for both current international human rights norms and the very notion of universal human rights, with Russia's anti-homopropaganda laws providing a timely warning about how traditional values can be used to legitimate regimes of moral regulation that are fundamentally incompatible with human rights.

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Notes

1. Russia's most recent term on the UNHRC ran from June 2009 until December 2012. The Russian Federation was re-elected to the UNHRC on November 12, 2013 for another three-year term beginning on January 1, 2014.
2. The resolution was adopted by a recorded vote of 24 to 14, with seven abstentions.
3. As with the previous two resolutions, the recorded vote of 25 to 15, with seven abstentions, is indicative of the divisiveness of the matter amongst UNHRC members.
4. A full list of submissions is available at http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/TraditionalValues.aspx
5. Article 3.10 is available at http://docs.cntd.ru/document/819077396 [12 December 2013].
6. Kostroma Oblast, Magadan Oblast, Novosibirsk Oblast, Krasnodar Krai, Samara Oblast, and Bashkortostan passed laws in 2012, with Kaliningrad Oblast following suit in February 2013).
7. Kondakov notes that under Ivan the Terrible the prohibition on homosexual relations applied only to the clergy. Some 164 years later, Peter the Great criminalized sexual relations between men in the army.
8. http://www.komitet2-6.km.duma.gov.ru/site.xp/050049124053056052.html [11 March 2014]. The concept's development was led by Elena Mizulina, one of the main sponsors of the federal law against the propagandizing of nontraditional sexual relations, in her role as Chair of the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children's Affairs.
9. I am by far not the first to use the term "moral sovereignty," and this definition may not accord with its use by other scholars in other contexts. My use of the term broadly corresponds with Gille's (2011) usage of the concept to describe the concern of the state to be able to resolve ethical questions in a way that is satisfactory to the state's population and does not undermine the legitimacy of the state and national identity.
10. Holzhacker (2013: 23) asserts that this mode of interaction is possible "where there is a high degree of public support for equality and minimal partisan or religious opposition to the goals of

the movement." However, in the Russian case the approach functioned somewhat differently in that it was an attempt by local actors to use international support and pressure (especially from the EU) to introduce external norms to Russia despite a lack of public support that gradually developed into direct resistance.

11. See https://www.facebook.com/groups/378474945543273/, https://www.facebook.com/straights.for.equality, and http://vk.com/straights_for_equality [28 December 2013].
12. http://tvrain.ru/tag/890/ [18 December 2013].
13. http://www.hrc.org/campaigns/Russias-anti-LGBT-Agenda [6 December 2013].

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